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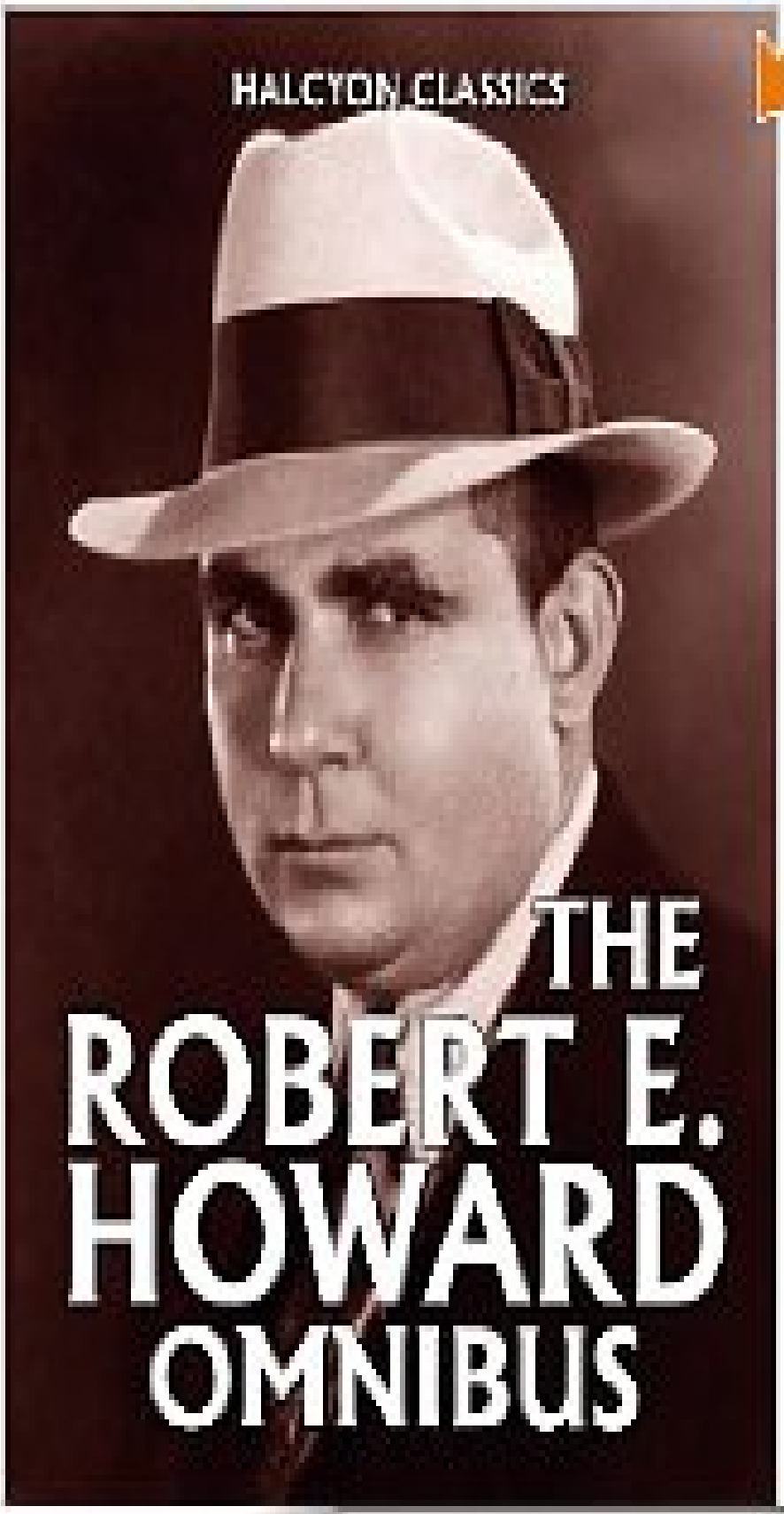

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By Robert E. Howard

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THE GODS OF THE NORTH
(also published as THE FROST GIANT'S DAUGHTER)
By Robert E. Howard

Across the red drifts and mail-clad forms, two figures glared at each other. In that utter desolation only they moved. The frosty sky was over them, the white illimitable plain around them, the dead men at their feet. Slowly through the corpses they came, as ghosts might come to a tryst through the shambles of a dead world. In the brooding silence they stood face to face.

Both were tall men, built like tigers. Their shields were gone, their corselets battered and dinted. Blood dried on their mail; their swords were stained red. Their horned helmets showed the marks of fierce strokes. One was beardless and blackmaned. The locks and beard of the other were red as the blood on the sunlit snow.

"Man," said he, "tell me your name, so that my brothers in Vanaheim may know who was the last of Wulfhere's band to fall before the sword of Heimdul."

"Not in Vanaheim," growled the black-haired warrior, "but in Valhalla will you tell your brothers that you met Conan of Cimmeria."

Heimdul roared and leaped, and his sword flashed in deathly arc. Conan staggered and his vision was filled with red sparks as the singing blade crashed on his helmet, shivering into bits of blue fire. But as he reeled he thrust with all the power of his broad shoulders behind the humming blade. The sharp point tore through brass scales and bones and heart, and the red-haired warrior died at Conan's feet.

The Cimmerian stood upright, trailing his sword, a sudden sick weariness assailing him. The glare of the sun on the snow cut his eyes like a knife and the sky seemed shrunken and strangely apart. He turned away from the trampled expanse where yellow-bearded warriors lay locked with red-haired slayers in the embrace of death. A few steps he took, and the glare of the snow fields was suddenly dimmed. A rushing wave of blindness engulfed him and he sank down into the snow, supporting himself on one mailed arm, seeking to shake the blindness out of his eyes as a lion might shake his mane.

A silvery laugh cut through his dizziness, and his sight cleared slowly. He looked up; there was a strangeness about all the landscape that he could not place or define--an unfamiliar tinge to earth and sky. But he did not think long of this. Before him, swaying like a sapling in the wind, stood a woman. Her body was like ivory to his dazed gaze, and save for a light veil of gossamer, she was naked as the day. Her slender bare feet were whiter than the snow they spurned. She laughed down at the bewildered warrior. Her laughter was sweeter than the rippling of silvery fountains, and poisonous with cruel mockery.

"Who are you?" asked the Cimmerian. "Whence come you?"

"What matter?" Her voice was more musical than a silver-stringed harp, but it was edged with cruelty.

"Call up your men," said he, grasping his sword. "Yet though my strength fail me, they shall not take me alive. I see that you are of the Vanir."

"Have I said so?"

His gaze went again to her unruly locks, which at first glance he had thought to be red. Now he saw that they were neither red nor yellow but a glorious compound of both colors. He gazed spell-bound. Her hair was like elfin-gold; the sun struck it so dazzlingly that he could scarcely bear to look upon it. Her eyes were likewise neither wholly blue nor wholly grey, but of shifting colors and dancing lights and clouds of colors he could not define. Her full red lips smiled, and from her slender feet to the blinding crown of her billowy hair, her ivory body was as perfect as the dream of a god. Conan's pulse hammered in his temples.

"I can not tell," said he, "whether you are of Vanaheim and mine enemy, or of Asgard and my friend. Far have I wandered, but a woman like you I have never seen. Your locks blind me with their brightness. Never have I seen such hair, not even among the fairest daughters of the Ã†sir. By Ymir--"

"Who are you to swear by Ymir?" she mocked. "What know you of the gods of ice and snow, you who have come up from the south to adventure among an alien people?"

"By the dark gods of my own race!" he cried in anger. "Though I am not of the golden haired Ã†sir, none has been more forward in sword-play! This day I have seen four score men fall, and I alone have survived the field where Wulfhere's reavers met the wolves of Bragi. Tell me, woman, have you seen the flash of mail out across the snow-plains, or seen armed men moving upon the ice?"

"I have seen the hoar-frost glittering in the sun," she answered. "I have heard the wind whispering across the everlasting snows."

He shook his head with a sigh.

"Niord should have come up with us before the battle joined. I fear he and his fighting-men have been ambushed. Wulfhere and his warriors lie dead.

"I had thought there was no village within many leagues of this spot, for the war carried us far, but you can not have come a great distance over these snows, naked as you are. Lead me to your tribe, if you are of Asgard, for I am faint with blows and the weariness of strife."

"My village is further than you can walk, Conan of Cimmeria," she laughed. Spreading her arms wide, she swayed before him, her golden head lolling sensuously, her scintillant eyes half shadowed beneath their long silken lashes. "Am I not beautiful, oh man?"

"Like Dawn running naked on the snows," he muttered, his eyes burning like those of a wolf.

"Then why do you not rise and follow me? Who is the strong warrior who falls down before me?" she chanted in maddening mockery. "Lie down and die in the snow with the other fools, Conan of the black hair. You can not follow where I would lead."

With an oath the Cimmerian heaved himself up on his feet, his blue eyes blazing, his dark scarred face contorted. Rage shook his soul, but desire for the taunting figure before him hammered at his temples and drove his wild blood fiercely through his veins. Passion fierce as physical agony flooded his whole being, so that earth and sky swam red to his dizzy gaze. In the madness that swept upon him, weariness and faintness were swept away.

He spoke no word as he drove at her, fingers spread to grip her soft flesh. With a shriek of laughter she leaped back and ran, laughing at him over her white shoulder. With a low growl Conan followed. He had forgotten the fight, forgotten the mailed warriors who lay in their blood, forgotten Niord and the reavers who had failed to reach the fight. He had thought only for the slender white shape which seemed to float rather than run before him.

Out across the white blinding plain the chase led. The trampled red field fell out of sight behind him, but still Conan kept on with the silent tenacity of his race. His mailed feet broke through the frozen crust; he sank deep in the drifts and forged through them by sheer strength. But the girl danced across the snow light as a feather floating across a pool; her naked feet barely left their imprint on the hoarÂfrost that overlaid the crust. In spite of the fire in his veins, the cold bit through warrior's mail and fur-lined tunic; but the girl in her gossamer veil ran as lightly: as gaily as if she danced through the palm and rose gardens of Poitain.

On and on she led, and Conan followed. Black curses drooled through the Cimmerian's parched lips. The great veins in his temples swelled and throbbed and his teeth gnashed.

"You can not escape me!" he roared. "Lead me into a trap and I'll pile the heads of your kinsmen at your feet! Hide from me and I'll tear apart the mountains to find you! I'll follow you to hell!"

Her maddening laughter floated back to him, and foam flew from the barbarian's lips. Further and further into the wastes she led him. The land changed; the wide plains gave way to low hills, marching upward in broken ranges. Far to the north he caught a glimpse of towering mountains, blue with the distance, or white with the eternal snows. Above these mountains shone the flaring rays of the borealis. They spread fan-wise into the sky, frosty blades of cold flaming light, changing in color, growing and brightening.

Above him the skies glowed and crackled with strange lights and gleams. The snow shone weirdly, now frosty blue, now icy crimson, now cold silver. Through a shimmering icy realm of enchantment Conan plunged doggedly onward, in a crystalline maze where the only reality was the white body dancing across the glittering snow beyond his reach--ever beyond his reach.

He did not wonder at the strangeness of it all, not even when two gigantic figures rose up to bar his way. The scales of their mail were white with hoar-frost; their helmets and their axes were covered with ice. Snow sprinkled their locks; in their beards were spikes of icicles; their eyes were cold as the lights that streamed above them.

"Brothers!" cried the girl, dancing between them. "Look who follows! I have brought you a man to slay! Take his heart that we may lay it smoking on our father' board!"

The giants answered with roars like the grinding of ice-bergs on a frozen shore and heaved up their shining axes as the maddened Cimmerian hurled himself upon them. A frosty blade flashed before his eyes, blinding him with its brightness, and he gave back a terrible stroke that sheared through his foe's thigh. With a groan the victim fell, and at the instant Conan was dashed into the snow, his left shoulder numb from the blow of the survivor, from which the Cimmerian's mail had barely saved his life. Conan saw the remaining giant looming high above him like a colossus carved of ice, etched against the cold glowing sky. The axe fell, to sink through the snow and deep into the frozen earth as Conan hurled himself aside and leaped to his feet. The giant roared and wrenched his axe free, but even as he did, Conan's sword sang down. The giant's knees bent and he sank slowly into the snow, which turned crimson with the blood that gushed from his half-severed neck.

Conan wheeled, to see the girl standing a short distance away, staring at him in wide-eyed horror, all the mockery gone from her face. He cried out fiercely and the blood-drops flew from his sword as his hand shook in the intensity of his passion.

"Call the rest of your brothers!" he cried. "I'll give their hearts to the wolves! You can not escape me--"

With a cry of fright she turned and ran fleetly. She did not laugh now, nor mock him over her white shoulder. She ran as for her life, and though he strained every nerve and thew, until his temples were like to burst and the snow swam red to his gaze, she drew away from him, dwindling in the witch-fire of the skies, until she was a figure no bigger than a child, then a dancing white flame on the snow, then a dim blur in the distance. But grinding his teeth until the blood started from his gums, he reeled on, and he saw the blur grow to a dancing white flame, and the flame to a figure big as a child; and then she was running less than a hundred paces ahead of him, and slowly the space narrowed, foot by foot.

She was running with effort now, her golden locks blowing free; he heard the quick panting of her breath, and saw a flash of fear in the look she cast over her white shoulder. The grim endurance of the barbarian had served him well. The speed ebbed from her flashing white legs; she reeled in her gait. In his untamed soul leaped up the fires of hell she had fanned so well. With an inhuman roar he closed in on her, just as she wheeled with a haunting cry and flung out her arms to fend him off.

His sword fell into the snow as he crushed her to him. Her lithe body bent backward as she fought with desperate frenzy in his iron arms. Her golden hair blew about his face, blinding him with its sheen; the feel of her slender body twisting in his mailed arms drove him to blinder madness. His strong fingers sank deep into her smooth flesh; and that flesh was cold as ice. It was as if he embraced not a woman of human flesh and blood, but a woman of flaming ice. She writhed her golden head aside, striving to avoid the fierce kisses that bruised her red lips.

"You are cold as the snows," he mumbled dazedly. "I will warm you with the fire in my own blood--"

With a scream and a desperate wrench she slipped from his arms, leaving her single gossamer garment in his grasp. She sprang back and faced him, her golden locks in wild disarray, her white bosom heaving, her beautiful eyes blazing with terror. For an instant he stood frozen, awed by her terrible beauty as she posed naked against the snows.

And in that instant she flung her arms toward the lights that glowed in the skies above her and cried out in a voice that rang in Conan's ears for ever after: "Ymir! Oh, my father, save me!"

Conan was leaping forward, arms spread to seize her, when with a crack like the breaking of an ice mountain, the whole skies leaped into icy fire. The girl's ivory body was suddenly enveloped in a cold blue flame so blinding that the Cimmerian threw up his hands to shield his eyes from the intolerable blaze. A fleeting instant, skies and snowy hills were bathed in crackling white flames, blue darts of icy light, and frozen crimson fires. Then Conan staggered and cried out. The girl was gone. The glowing snow lay empty and bare; high above his head the witch-lights flashed and played in a frosty sky gone mad, and among the distant blue mountains there sounded a rolling thunder as of a gigantic war-chariot rushing behind steeds whose frantic hoofs struck lightning from the snows and echoes from the skies.

Then suddenly the borealis, the snow-clad hills and the blazing heavens reeled drunkenly to Conan's sight; thousands of fire-balls burst with showers of sparks, and the sky itself became a titanic wheel which rained stars as it spun. Under his feet the snowy hills heaved up like a wave, and the Cimmerian crumpled into the snows to lie motionless.

In a cold dark universe, whose sun was extinguished eons ago, Conan felt the movement of life, alien and unguessed. An earthquake had him in its grip and was shaking him to and fro, at the same time chafing his hands and feet until he yelled in pain and fury and groped for his sword.

"He's coming to, Horsa," said a voice. "Haste--we must rub the frost out of his limbs, if he's ever to wield sword again."

"He won't open his left hand," growled another. "He's clutching something--"

Conan opened his eyes and stared into the bearded faces that bent over him. He was surrounded by tall golden-haired warriors in mail and furs.

"Conan! You live!"

"By Crom, Niord," gasped the Cimmerian. 'Am I alive, or are we all dead and in Valhalla?"

"We live," grunted the Ã†sir, busy over Conan's half-frozen feet. "We had to fight our way through an ambush, or we had come up with you before the battle was joined. The corpses were scarce cold when we came upon the field. We did not find you among the dead, so we followed your spoor. In Ymir's name, Conan, why did you wander off into the wastes of the north? We have followed your tracks in the snow for hours. Had a blizzard come up and hidden them, we had never found you, by Ymir!"

"Swear not so often by Ymir," uneasily muttered a warrior, glancing at the distant mountains. "This is his land and the god bides among yonder mountains, the legends say."

"I saw a woman," Conan answered hazily. "We met Bragi's men in the plains. I know not how long we fought. I alone lived. I was dizzy and faint. The land lay like a dream before me. Only now do all things seem natural and familiar. The woman came and taunted me. She was beautiful as a frozen flame from hell. A strange madness fell upon me when I looked at her, so I forgot all else in the world. I followed her. Did you not find her tracks? Or the giants in icy mail I slew?"

Niord shook his head.

"We found only your tracks in the snow, Conan."

"Then it may be I am mad," said Conan dazedly. "Yet you yourself are no more real to me than was the golden-locked witch who fled naked across the snows before me. Yet from under my very hands she vanished in icy flame."

"He is delirious," whispered a warrior.

"Not so!" cried an older man, whose eyes were wild and weird. "It was Atali, the daughter of Ymir, the frost-giant! To fields of the dead she comes, and shows herself to the dying! Myself when a boy I saw her, when I lay half-slain on the bloody field of Wolraven. I saw her walk among the dead in the snows, her naked body gleaming like ivory and her golden hair unbearably bright in the moonlight. I lay and howled like a dying dog because I could not crawl after her. She lures men from stricken fields into the wastelands to be slain by her brothers, the ice-giants, who lay men's red hearts smoking on Ymir's board. The Cimmerian has seen Atali, the frost-giant's daughter!"

"Bah!" grunted Horsa. "Old Gorm's mind was touched in his youth by a sword cut on the head. Conan was delirious from the fury of battle--look how his helmet is dinted. Any of those blows might have addled his brain. It was an hallucination he followed into the wastes. He is from the south; what does he know of Atali?"

"You speak truth, perhaps," muttered Conan. "It was all strange and weird Â by Crom!"

He broke off, glaring at the object that still dangled from his clenched left fist; the others gaped silently at the veil he held up--a wisp of gossamer that was never spun by human distaff.

THE END

Contents

QUEEN OF THE BLACK COAST

by Robert E. Howard

Believe green buds awaken in the spring,
That autumn paints the leaves with somber fire;
Believe I held my heart inviolate
To lavish on one man my hot desire.
The Song of Belit

Chapter I
: Conan Joins the Pirates

Hoofs drummed down the street that sloped to the wharfs. The folk that yelled and scattered had only a fleeting glimpse of a mailed figure on a black stallion, a wide scarlet cloak flowing out on the wind. Far up the street came the shout and clatter of pursuit, but the horseman did not look back. He swept out onto the wharfs and jerked the plunging stallion back on its haunches at the very lip of the pier. Seamen gaped up at him, as they stood to the sweep and striped sail of a high-prowed, broadwaisted galley. The master, sturdy and black-bearded, stood in the bows, easing her away from the piles with a boat-hook. He yelled angrily as the horseman sprang from the saddle and with a long leap landed squarely on the mid-deck.

"Who invited you aboard?"

"Get under way!" roared the intruder with a fierce gesture that spattered red drops from his broadsword.

"But we're bound for the coasts of Kush!" expostulated the master.

"Then I'm for Kush! Push off, I tell you!" The other cast a quick glance up the street, along which a squad of horsemen were galloping; far behind them toiled a group of archers, crossbows on their shoulders.

"Can you pay for your passage?" demanded the master.

"I pay my way with steel!" roared the man in armor, brandishing the great sword that glittered bluely in the sun. "By Crom, yin, if you don't get under way, I'll drench this galley in the blood of its crew!"

The shipmaster was a good judge of men. One glance at the irk scarred face of the swordsman, hardened with passion, and he shouted a quick order, thrusting strongly against the piles. The galley wallowed out into clear water, the oars began to clack rhythmically; then a puff of wind filled the shimmering sail, the light ship heeled to the gust, then took her course like a swan, gathering headway as she skimmed along.

On the wharfs the riders were shaking their swords and shouting threats and commands that the ship put about, and yelling for the bowmen to hasten before the craft was out of arbalest range.

"Let them rave," grinned the swordsman hardily. "Do you keep her on her course, master steersman."

The master descended from the small deck between the bows, made his way between the rows of oarsmen, and mounted the mid-deck. The stranger stood there with his back to the mast, eyes narrowed alertly, sword ready. The shipman eyed him steadily, careful not to make any move toward the long knife in his belt. He saw a tall powerfully built figure in a black scalemail hauberk, burnished greaves and a blue-steel helmet from which jutted bull's horns highly polished. From the mailed shoulders fell the scarlet cloak, blowing in the sea-wind. A broad shagreen belt with a golden buckle held the scabbard of the broadsword he bore. Under the horned helmet a square-cut black mane contrasted with smoldering blue eyes.

"If we must travel together," said the master, "we may as well be at peace with each other. My name is Tito, licensed mastershipman of the ports of Argos. I am bound for Kush, to trade beads and silks and sugar and brass-hilted swords to the black kings for ivory, copra, copper ore, slaves and pearls."

The swordsman glanced back at the rapidly receding docks, where the figures still gesticulated helplessly, evidently having trouble in finding a boat swift enough to overhaul the fast-sailing galley.

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian," he answered. "I came into Argos seeking employment, but with no wars forward, there was nothing to which I might turn my hand."

"Why do the guardsman pursue you?" asked Tito. "Not that it's any of my business, but I thought perhaps--"

"I've nothing to conceal," replied the Cimmerian. "By Crom, though I've spent considerable time among you civilized peoples, your ways are still beyond my comprehension.

"Well, last night in a tavern, a captain in the king's guard offered violence to the sweetheart of a young soldier, who naturally ran him through. But it seems there is some cursed law against killing guardsmen, and the boy and his girl fled away. It was bruited about that I was seen with them, and so today I was haled into court, and a judge asked me where the lad had gone. I replied that since he was a friend of mine, I could not betray him. Then the court waxed wrath, and the judge talked a great deal about my duty to the state, and society, and other things I did not understand, and bade me tell where my friend had flown. By this time I was becoming wrathful myself, for I had explained my position.

"But I choked my ire and held my peace, and the judge squalled that I had shown contempt for the court, and that I should be hurled into a dungeon to rot until I betrayed my friend. So then, seeing they were all mad, I drew my sword and cleft the judge's skull; then I cut my way out of the court, and seeing the high constable's stallion tied near by, I rode for the wharfs, where I thought to find a ship bound for foreign parts."

"Well," said Tito hardily, "the courts have fleeced me too often in suits with rich merchants for me to owe them any love. I'll have questions to answer if I ever anchor in that port again, but I can prove I acted under compulsion. You may as well put up your sword. We're peaceable sailors, and have nothing against you. Besides, it's as well to have a fighting-man like yourself on board. Come up to the poop-deck and we'll have a tankard of ale."

"Good enough," readily responded the Cimmerian, sheathing his sword.

The Argus was a small sturdy ship, typical of those trading-craft which ply between the ports of Zingara and Argos and the southern coasts, hugging the shoreline and seldom venturing far into the open ocean. It was high of stern, with a tall curving prow; broad in the waist, sloping beautifully to stem and stern. It was guided by the long sweep from the poop, and propulsion was furnished mainly by the broad striped silk sail, aided by a jibsail. The oars were for use in tacking out of creeks and bays, and during calms. There were ten to the side, five fore and five aft of the small mid-deck. The most precious part of the cargo was lashed under this deck, and under the fore-deck. The men slept on deck or between the rowers' benches, protected in bad weather by canopies. With twenty men at the oars, three at the sweep, and the shipmaster, the crew was complete.

So the Argus pushed steadily southward, with consistently fair weather. The sun beat down from day to day with fiercer heat, and the canopies were run up--striped silken cloths that matched the shimmering sail and the shining goldwork on the prow and along the gunwales.

They sighted the coast of Shem--long rolling meadowlands with the white crowns of the towers of cities in the distance, and horsemen with blue-black beards and hooked noses, who sat their steeds along the shore and eyed the galley with suspicion. She did not put in; there was scant profit in trade with the sons of Shem.

Nor did master Tito pull into the broad bay where the Styx river emptied its gigantic flood into the ocean, and the massive black castles of Khemi loomed over the blue waters. Ships did not put unasked into this port, where dusky sorcerers wove awful spells in the murk of sacrificial smoke mounting eternally from blood-stained altars where naked women screamed, and where Set, the Old Serpent, arch-demon of the Hyborians but god of the Stygians, was said to writhe his shining coils among his worshippers.

Master Tito gave that dreamy glass-floored bay a wide berth, even when a serpent-prowed gondola shot from behind a castellated point of land, and naked dusky women, with great red blossoms in their hair, stood and called to his sailors, and posed and postured brazenly.

Now no more shining towers rose inland. They had passed the southern borders of Stygia and were cruising along the coasts of Kush. The sea and the ways of the sea were neverending mysteries to Conan, whose homeland was among the high hills of the northern uplands. The wanderer was no less of interest to the sturdy seamen, few of whom had ever seen one of his race.

They were characteristic Argosean sailors, short and stockily built. Conan towered above them, and no two of them could match his strength. They were hardy and robust, but his was the endurance and vitality of a wolf, his thews steeled and his nerves whetted by the hardness of his life in the world's wastelands. He was quick to laugh, quick and terrible in his wrath. He was a valiant trencherman, and strong drink was a passion and a weakness with him. Naive as a child in many ways, unfamiliar with the sophistry of civilization, he was naturally intelligent, jealous of his rights, and dangerous as a hungry tiger. Young in years, he was hardened in warfare and wandering, and his sojourns in many lands were evident in his apparel. His horned helmet was such as was worn by the golden-haired AEsir of Nordheim; his hauberk and greaves were of the finest workmanship of Koth; the fine ring-mail which sheathed his arms and legs was of Nemedia; the blade at his girdle was a great Aquilonian broadsword; and his gorgeous scarlet cloak could have been spun nowhere but in Ophir.

So they beat southward, and master Tito began to look for the high-walled villages of the black people. But they found only smoking ruins on the shore of a bay, littered with naked black bodies. Tito swore.

"I had good trade here, aforetime. This is the work of pirates."

"And if we meet them?" Conan loosened his great blade in its scabbard.

"Mine is no warship. We run, not fight. Yet if it came to a pinch, we have beaten off reavers before, and might do it again; unless it were Belit's Tigress."

"Who is Belit?"

"The wildest she-devil unhanged. Unless I read the signs awrong, it was her butchers who destroyed that village on the bay. May I some day see her dangling from the yard-arm! She is called the queen of the black coast. She is a Shemite woman, who leads black raiders. They harry the shipping and have sent many a good tradesman to the bottom."

From under the poop-deck Tito brought out quilted jerkins, steel caps, bows and arrows.

"Little use to resist if we're run down," he grunted. "But it rasps the soul to give up life without a struggle."

It was just at sunrise when the lookout shouted a warning. Around the long point of an island off the starboard bow glided a long lethal shape, a slender serpentine galley, with a raised deck that ran from stem to stern. Forty oars on each side drove her swiftly through the water, and the low rail swarmed with naked blacks that chanted and clashed spears on oval shields. From the masthead floated a long crimson pennon.

"Belit!" yelled Tito, paling. "Yare! Put her about! Into that creek-mouth! If we can beach her before they run us down, we have a chance to escape with our lives!"

So, veering sharply, the Argus ran for the line of surf that boomed along the palm-fringed shore, Tito striding back and forth, exhorting the panting rowers to greater efforts. The master's black beard bristled, his eyes glared.

"Give me a bow," requested Conan. "It's not my idea of a manly weapon, but I learned archery among the Hyrkanians, and it will go hard if I can't feather a man or so on yonder deck."

Standing on the poop, he watched the serpent-like ship skimming lightly over the waters, and landsman though he was, it was evident to him that the Argus would never win that race. Already arrows, arching from the pirate's deck, were falling with a hiss into the sea, not twenty paces astern.

"We'd best stand to it," growled the Cimmerian; "else we'll all die with shafts in our backs, and not a blow dealt."

"Bend to it, dogs!" roared Tito with a passionate gesture of his brawny fist. The bearded rowers grunted, heaved at the oars, while their muscles coiled and knotted, and sweat started out on their hides. The timbers of the stout little galley creaked and groaned as the men fairly ripped her through the water. The wind had fallen; the sail hung limp. Nearer crept the inexorable raiders, and they were still a good mile from the surf when one of the steersmen fell gagging across a sweep, a long arrow through his neck. Tito sprang to take his place, and Conan, bracing his feet wide on the heaving poop-deck, lifted his bow. He could see the details of the pirate plainly now. The rowers were protected by a line of raised mantelets along the sides, but the warriors dancing on the narrow deck were in full view. These were painted and plumed, and mostly naked, brandishing spears and spotted shields.

On the raised platform in the bows stood a slim figure whose white skin glistened in dazzling contrast to the glossy ebon hides about it. Belit, without a doubt. Conan drew the shaft to his ear--then some whim or qualm stayed his hand and sent the arrow through the body of a tall plumed spearman beside her.

Hand over hand the pirate galley was overhauling the lighter ship. Arrows fell in a rain about the Argus, and men cried out. All the steersmen were down, pincushioned, and Tito was handling the massive sweep alone, gasping black curses, his braced legs knots of straining thews. Then with a sob he sank down, a long shaft quivering in his sturdy heart. The Argus lost headway and rolled in the swell. The men shouted in confusion, and Conan took command in characteristic fashion.

"Up, lads!" he roared, loosing with a vicious twang of cord. "Grab your steel and give these dogs a few knocks before they cut our throats! Useless to bend your backs any more: they'll board us ere we can row another fifty paces!"

In desperation the sailors abandoned their oars and snatched up their weapons. It was valiant, but useless. They had time for one flight of arrows before the pirate was upon them. With no one at the sweep, the Argus rolled broadside, and the steel-baked prow of the raider crashed into her amidships. Grappling-irons crunched into the side. From the lofty gunwales, the black pirates drove down a volley of shafts that tore through the quilted jackets of the doomed sailormen, then sprang down spear in hand to complete the slaughter. On the deck of the pirate lay half a dozen bodies, an earnest of Conan's archery.

The fight on the Argus was short and bloody. The stocky sailors, no match for the tall barbarians, were cut down to a man. Elsewhere the battle had taken a peculiar turn. Conan, on the high-pitched poop, was on a level with the pirate's deck. As the steel prow slashed into the Argus, he braced himself and kept his feet under the shock, casting away his bow. A tall corsair, bounding over the rail, was met in midair by the Cimmerian's great sword, which sheared him cleanly through the torso, so that his body fell one way and his legs another. Then, with a burst of fury that left a heap of mangled corpses along the gunwales, Conan was over the rail and on the deck of the Tigress.

In an instant he was the center of a hurricane of stabbing spears and lashing clubs. But he moved in a blinding blur of steel. Spears bent on his armor or swished empty air, and his sword sang its death-song. The fighting-madness of his race was upon him, and with a red mist of unreasoning fury wavering before his blazing eyes, he cleft skulls, smashed breasts, severed limbs, ripped out entrails, and littered the deck like a shambles with a ghastly harvest of brains and blood.

Invulnerable in his armor, his back against the mast, he heaped mangled corpses at his feet until his enemies gave back panting in rage and fear. Then as they lifted their spears to cast them, and he tensed himself to leap and die in the midst of them, a shrill cry froze the lifted arms. They stood like statues, the black giants poised for the spearcasts, the mailed swordsman with his dripping blade.

Belit sprang before the blacks, beating down their spears. She turned toward Conan, her bosom heaving, her eyes flashing. Fierce fingers of wonder caught at his heart. She was slender, yet formed like a goddess: at once lithe and voluptuous. Her only garment was a broad silken girdle. Her white ivory limbs and the ivory globes of her breasts drove a beat of fierce passion through the Cimmerian's pulse, even in the panting fury of battle. Her rich black hair, black as a Stygian night, fell in rippling burnished clusters down her supple back. Her dark eyes burned on the Cimmerian.

She was untamed as a desert wind, supple and dangerous as a she-panther. She came close to him, heedless of his great blade, dripping with blood of her warriors. Her supple thigh brushed against it, so close she came to the tall warrior. Her red lips parted as she stared up into his somber menacing eyes.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "By Ishtar, I have never seen your like, though I have ranged the sea from the coasts of Zingara to the fires of the ultimate south. Whence come you?"

"From Argos," he answered shortly, alert for treachery. Let her slim hand move toward the jeweled dagger in her girdle, and a buffet of his open hand would stretch her senseless on the deck. Yet in his heart he did not fear; he had held too many women, civilized or barbaric, in his iron-Chewed arms, not to recognize the light that burned in the eyes of this one.

"You are no soft Hyborian!" she exclaimed. "You are fierce and hard as a gray wolf. Those eyes were never dimmed by city lights; those thews were never softened by life amid marble walls."

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian," he answered.

To the people of the exotic climes, the north was a mazy half-mythical realm, peopled with ferocious blue-eyed giants who occasionally descended from their icy fastnesses with torch and sword. Their raids had never taken them as far south as Shem, and this daughter of Shem made no distinction between AEsir, Vanir or Cimmerian. With the unerring instinct of the elemental feminine, she knew she had found her lover, and his race meant naught, save as it invested him with the glamor of far lands.

"And I am Belit," she cried, as one might say, "I am queen."

"Look at me, Conan!" She threw wide her arms. "I am Belit, queen of the black coast. Oh, tiger of the North, you are cold as the snowy mountains which bred you. Take me and crush me with your fierce love! Go with me to the ends of the earth and the ends of the sea! I am a queen by fire and steel and slaughter--be thou my king!"

His eyes swept the blood-stained ranks, seeking expressions of wrath or jealousy. He saw none. The fury was gone from the ebon faces. He realized that to these men Belit was more than a woman: a goddess whose will was unquestioned. He glanced at the Argus, wallowing in the crimson sea-wash, heeling far over, her decks awash, held up by the grappling-irons. He glanced at the blue-fringed shore, at the far green hazes of the ocean, at the vibrant figure which stood before him; and his barbaric soul stirred within him. To quest these shining blue realms with that white-skinned young tiger-cat--to love, laugh, wander and pillage--"I'll sail with you," he grunted, shaking the red drops from his blade.

"Ho, N'Yaga!" her voice twanged like a bowstring. "Fetch herbs and dress your master's wounds! The rest of you bring aboard the plunder and cast off."

As Conan sat with his back against the poop-rail, while the old shaman attended to the cuts on his hands and limbs, the cargo of the ill-fated Argus was quickly shifted aboard the Tigress and stored in small cabins below deck. Bodies of the crew and of fallen pirates were cast overboard to the swarming sharks, while wounded blacks were laid in the waist to be bandaged. Then the grappling-irons were cast off, and as the Argus sank silently into the blood-flecked waters, the Tigress moved off southward to the rhythmic clack of the oars.

As they moved out over the glassy blue deep, Belit came to the poop. Her eyes were burning like those of a she-panther in the dark as she tore off her ornaments, her sandals and her silken girdle and cast them at his feet. Rising on tiptoe, arms stretched upward, a quivering line of naked white, she cried to the desperate horde: "Wolves of the blue sea, behold ye now the dance--the mating-dance of Belit, whose fathers were kings of Askalon!"

And she danced, like the spin of a desert whirlwind, like the leaping of a quenchless flame, like the urge of creation and the urge of death. Her white feet spurned the blood-stained deck and dying men forgot death as they gazed frozen at her. Then, as the white stars glimmered through the blue velvet dusk, making her whirling body a blur of ivory fire, with a wild cry she threw herself at Conan's feet, and the blind flood of the Cimmerian's desire swept all else away as he crushed her panting form against the black plates of his corseleted breast.

Chapter II

: The Black Lotus

In that dead citadel of crumbling stone.
Her eyes were snared by that unholy sheen,
-And curious madness took me by the throat,

As of a rival lover thrust between.

The Song of Belit

The Tigress ranged the sea, and the black villages shuddered. Tomtoms beat in the night, with a tale that the she-devil of the sea had found a mate, an iron man whose wrath was as that of a wounded lion. And survivors of butchered Stygian ships named Belit with curses, and a white warrior with fierce blue eyes; so the Stygian princes remembered this man long and long, and their memory was a bitter tree which bore crimson fruit in the years to come.

But heedless as a vagrant wind, the Tigress cruised the southern coasts, until she anchored at the mouth of a broad sullen river, whose banks were jungle-clouded walls of mystery.

"This is the river Zarkheba, which is Death," said Belit. "Its waters are poisonous. See how dark and murky they run? Only venomous reptiles live in that river. The black people shun it. Once a Stygian galley, fleeing from me, fled up the river and vanished. I anchored in this very spot, and days later, the galley came floating down the dark waters, its decks blood-stained and deserted. Only one man was on board, and he was mad and died gibbering. The cargo was intact, but the crew had vanished into silence and mystery.

"My lover, I believe there is a city somewhere on that river. I have heard tales of giant towers and walls glimpsed afar off by sailors who dared go part-way up the river. We fear nothing: Conan, let us go and sack that city."

Conan agreed. He generally agreed to her plans. Hers was the mind that directed their raids, his the arm that carried out her ideas. It mattered little to him where they sailed or whom they fought, so long as they sailed and fought. He found the life good.

Battle and raid had thinned their crew; only some eighty spear-men remained, scarcely enough to work the long galley. But Belit would not take the time to make the long cruise southward to the island kingdoms where she recruited her buccaneers. She was afire with eagerness for her latest venture; so the Tigress swung into the river mouth, the oarsmen pulling strongly as she breasted the broad current.

They rounded the mysterious bend that shut out the sight of the sea, and sunset found them forging steadily against the sluggish flow, avoiding sandbars where strange reptiles coiled. Not even a crocodile did they see, nor any fourlegged beast or winged bird coming down to the water's edge to drink. On through the blackness that preceded moonrise they drove, between banks that were solid palisades of darkness, whence came mysterious rustlings and stealthy footfalls, and the gleam of grim eyes. And once an inhuman voice was lifted in awful mockery the cry of an ape, Belit said, adding that the souls of evil men were imprisoned in these man-like animals as punishment for past crimes. But Conan doubted, for once, in a gold-barred cage in an Hyrkanian city, he had seen an abysmal sad-eyed beast which men told him was an ape, and there had been about it naught of the demoniac malevolence which vibrated in the shrieking laughter that echoed from the black jungle.

Then the moon rose, a splash of blood, ebony-barred, and the jungle awoke in horrific bedlam to greet it. Roars and howls and yells set the black warriors to trembling, but all this noise, Conan noted, came from farther back in the jungle, as if the beasts no less than men shunned the black waters of Zarkheba.

Rising above the black denseness of the trees and above the waving fronds, the moon silvered the river, and their wake became a rippling scintillation of phosphorescent bubbles that widened like a shining road of bursting jewels. The oars dipped into the shining water and came up sheathed in frosty silver. The plumes on the warrior's head-piece nodded in the wind, and the gems on sword-hilts and harness sparkled frostily.

The cold light struck icy fire from the jewels in Belit's clustered black locks as she stretched her lithe figure on a leopardskin thrown on the deck. Supported on her elbows, her chin resting on her slim hands, she gazed up into the face of Conan, who lounged beside her, his black mane stirring in the faint breeze. Belit's eyes were dark jewels burning in the moonlight.

"Mystery and terror are about us, Conan, and we glide into the realm of horror and death," she said. "Are you afraid?"

A shrug of his mailed shoulders was his only answer.

"I am not afraid either," she said meditatively. "I was never afraid. I have looked into the naked fangs of Death too often. Conan, do you fear the gods?"

"I would not tread on their shadow," answered the barbarian conservatively. "Some gods are strong to harm, others, to aid; at least so say their priests. Mitra of the Hyborians must be a strong god, because his people have builded their cities over the world. But even the Hyborians fear Set. And Bel, god of thieves, is a good god. When I was a thief in Zamora I learned of him."

"What of your own gods? I have never heard you call on them."

"Their chief is Crom. He dwells on a great mountain. What use to call on him? Little he cares if men live or die. Better to be silent than to call his attention to you; he will send you dooms, not fortune! He is grim and loveless, but at birth he breathes power to strive and slay into a man's soul. What else shall men ask of the gods?"

"But what of the worlds beyond the river of death?" she persisted.

"There is no hope here or hereafter in the cult of my people," answered Conan. "In this world men struggle and suffer vainly, finding pleasure only in the bright madness of battle; dying, their souls enter a gray misty realm of clouds and icy winds, to wander cheerlessly throughout eternity."

Belit shuddered. "Life, bad as it is, is better than such a destiny. What do you believe, Conan?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I have known many gods. He who denies them is as blind as he who trusts them too deeply. I seek not beyond death. It may be the blackness averred by the Nemedian skeptics, or Crom's realm of ice and cloud, or the snowy plains and vaulted halls of the Nordheimer's Valhalla. I know not, nor do I care. Let me live deep while I live; let me know the rich juices of red meat and stinging wine on my palate, the hot embrace of white arms, the mad exultation of battle when the blue blades flame and crimson, and I am content. Let teachers and priests and philosophers brood over questions of reality and illusion. I know this: if life is illusion, then I am no less an illusion, and being thus, the illusion is real to me. I live, I burn with life, I love, I slay, and am content."

"But the gods are real," she said, pursuing her own line of thought. "And above all are the gods of the Shemites--Ishtar and Ashtoreth and Derketo and Adonis. Bel, too, is Shemitish, for he was born in ancient Shumir, long, long ago and went forth laughing, with curled beard and impish wise eyes, to steal the gems of the kings of old times."

"There is life beyond death, I know, and I know this, too, Conan of Cimmeria--" she rose lithely to her knees and caught him in a pantherish embrace--"my love is stronger than any death! I have lain in your arms, panting with the violence of our love; you have held and crushed and conquered me, drawing my soul to your lips with the fierceness of your bruising kisses. My heart is welded to your heart, my soul is part of your soul! Were I still in death and you fighting for life, I would come back from the abyss to aid you--aye, whether my spirit floated with the purple sails on the crystal sea of paradise, or writhed in the molten flames of hell! I am yours, and all the gods and all their eternities shall not sever us!"

A scream rang from the lookout in the bows. Thrusting Belit aside, Conan bounded up, his sword a long silver glitter in the moonlight, his hair bristling at what he saw. The black warrior dangled above the deck, supported by what seemed a dark pliant tree trunk arching over the rail. Then he realized that it was a gigantic serpent which had writhed its glistening length up the side of the bow and gripped the luckless warrior in its jaws. Its dripping scales shone leprously in the moonlight as it reared its form high above the deck, while the stricken man screamed and writhed like a mouse in the fangs of a python. Conan rushed into the bows, and swinging his great sword, hewed nearly through the giant trunk, which was thicker than a man's body. Blood drenched the rails as the dying monster swayed far out, still gripping its victim, and sank into the river, coil by coil, lashing the water to bloody foam, in which man and reptile vanished together.

Thereafter Conan kept the lookout watch himself, but no other horror came crawling up from the murky depths, and as dawn whitened over the jungle, he sighted the black fangs of towers jutting up among the trees. He called Belit, who slept on the deck, wrapped in his scarlet cloak; and she sprang to his side, eyes blazing. Her lips were parted to call orders to her warriors to take up bow and spears; then her lovely eyes widened.

It was but the ghost of a city on which they looked when they cleared a jutting jungle-clad point and swung in toward the incurving shore. Weeds and rank river grass grew between the stones of broken piers and shattered paves that had once been streets and spacious plazas and broad courts. From all sides except that toward the river, the jungle crept in, masking fallen columns and crumbling mounds with poisonous green. Here and there buckling towers reeled drunkenly against the morning sky, and broken pillars jutted up among the decaying walls. In the center space a marble pyramid was spired by a slim column, and on its pinnacle sat or squatted something that Conan supposed to be an image until his keen eyes detected life in it.

"It is a great bird," said one of the warriors, standing in the bows.

"It is a monster bat," insisted another.

"It is an ape," said Belit.

Just then the creature spread broad wings and flapped off into the jungle.

"A winged ape," said old N'Yaga uneasily. "Better we had cut our throats than come to this place. It is haunted."

Belit mocked at his superstitions and ordered the galley run inshore and tied to the crumbling wharfs. She was the first to spring ashore, closely followed by Conan, and after them trooped the ebon-skinned pirates, white plumes waving in the morning wind, spears ready, eyes rolling dubiously at the surrounding jungle.

Over all brooded a silence as sinister as that of a sleeping serpent. Belit posed picturesquely among the ruins, the vibrant life in her lithe figure contrasting strangely with the desolation and decay about her. The sun flamed up slowly, sullenly, above the jungle, flooding the towers with a dull gold that left shadows lurking beneath the tottering walls. Belit pointed to a slim round tower that reeled on its rotting base. A broad expanse of cracked, grass-grown slabs led up to it, flanked by fallen columns, and before it stood a massive altar. Belit went swiftly along the ancient floor and stood before it.

"This was the temple of the old ones," she said. "Look--you can see the channels for the blood along the sides of the altar, and the rains of ten thousand years have not washed the dark stains from them. The walls have all fallen away, but this stone block defies time and the elements."

"But who were these old ones?" demanded Conan.

She spread her slim hands helplessly. "Not even in legendary is this city mentioned. But look at the handholes at either end of the altar! Priests often conceal their treasures beneath their altars. Four of you lay hold and see if you can lift it."

She stepped back to make room for them, glancing up at the tower which loomed drunkenly above them. Three of the strongest blacks had gripped the handholes cut into the stone curiously unsuited to human hands--when Belit sprang back with a sharp cry. They froze in their places, and Conan, bending to aid them, wheeled with a startled curse.

"A snake in the grass," she said, backing away. "Come and slay it; the rest of you bend your backs to the stone."

Conan came quickly toward her, another taking his place. As he impatiently scanned the grass for the reptile, the giant blacks braced their feet, grunted and heaved with their huge muscles coiling and straining under their ebon skin. The altar did not come off the ground, but it revolved suddenly on its side. And simultaneously there was a grinding rumble above and the tower came crashing down, covering the four black men with broken masonry.

A cry of horror rose from their comrades. Belit's slim fingers dug into Conan's arm-muscles. "There was no serpent," she whispered. "It was but a ruse to call you away. I feared; the old ones guarded their treasure well. Let us clear away the stones."

With herculean labor they did so, and lifted out the mangled bodies of the four men. And under them, stained with their blood, the pirates found a crypt carved in the solid stone. The altar, hinged curiously with stone rods and sockets on one side, had served as its lid. And at first glance the crypt seemed brimming with liquid fire, catching the early light with a million blazing facets. Undreamable wealth lay before the eyes of the gaping pirates; diamonds, rubies, bloodstones, sapphires, turquoises, moonstones, opals, emeralds, amethysts, unknown gems that shone like the eyes of evil women. The crypt was filled to the brim with bright stones that the morning sun struck into lambent flame.

With a cry Wit dropped to her knees among the bloodstained rubble on the brink and thrust her white arms shoulder-deep into that pool of splendor. She withdrew them, clutching something that brought another cry to her lips--a long string of crimson stones that were like clots of frozen blood strung on a thick gold wire. In their glow the golden sunlight changed to bloody haze.

Belit's eyes were like a woman's in a trance. The Shemite soul finds a bright drunkenness in riches and material splendor, and the sight of this treasure might have shaken the soul of a sated emperor of Shushan.

"Take up the jewels, dogs!" her voice was shrill with her emotions.

"Look!" a muscular black arm stabbed toward the Tigress, and Belit wheeled, her crimson lips a-snarl, as if she expected to see a rival corsair sweeping in to despoil her of her plunder. But from the gunwales of the ship a dark shape rose, soaring away over the jungle.

"The devil-ape has been investigating the ship," muttered the blacks uneasily.

"What matter?" cried Belit with a curse, raking back a rebellious lock with an impatient hand. "Make a litter of spears and mantles to bear these jewels--where the devil are you going?"

"To look to the galley," grunted Conan. "That bat-thing might have knocked a hole in the bottom, for all we know."

He ran swiftly down the cracked wharf and sprang aboard. A moment's swift examination below decks, and he swore heartily, casting a clouded glance in the direction the bat-being had vanished. He returned hastily to Belit, superintending the plundering of the crypt. She had looped the necklace about her neck, and on her naked white bosom the red clots glimmered darkly. A huge naked black stood crotch-deep in the jewel-brimming crypt, scooping up great handfuls of splendor to pass them to eager hands above. Strings of frozen iridescence hung between his dusky fingers; drops of red fire dripped from his hands, piled high with starlight and rainbow. It was as if a black titan stood straddle-legged in the bright pits of hell, his lifted hands full of stars.

"That flying devil has staved in the water-casks," said Conan. "If we hadn't been so dazed by these stones we'd have heard the noise. We were fools not to have left a man on guard. We can't drink this river water. I'll take twenty men and search for fresh water in the jungle."

She looked at him vaguely, in her eyes the blank blaze of her strange passion, her fingers working at the gems on her breast.

"Very well," she said absently, hardly heeding him. "I'll get the loot aboard."

The jungle closed quickly about them, changing the light from gold to gray. From the arching green branches creepers dangled like pythons. The warriors fell into single file, creeping through the primordial twilights like black phantoms following a white ghost.

Underbrush was not so thick as Conan had anticipated. The ground was spongy but not slushy. Away from the river, it sloped gradually upward. Deeper and deeper they plunged into the green waving depths, and still there was no sign of water, either running stream or stagnant pool. Conan halted suddenly, his warriors freezing into basaltic statues. In the tense silence that followed, the Cimmerian shook his head irritably.

"Go ahead," he grunted to a sub-chief, N'Gora. "March straight on until you can no longer see me; then stop and wait for me. I believe we're being followed. I heard something."

The blacks shuffled their feet uneasily, but did as they were told. As they swung onward, Conan stepped quickly behind a great tree, glaring back along the way they had come. From that leafy fastness anything might emerge. Nothing occurred; the faint sounds of the marching spearmen faded in the distance. Conan suddenly realized that the air was impregnated with an alien and exotic scent. Something gently brushed his temple. He turned quickly. From a cluster of green, curiously leafed stalks, great black blossoms nodded at him. One of these had touched him. They seemed to beckon him, to arch their pliant stems toward him. They spread and rustled, though no wind blew.

He recoiled, recognizing the black lotus, whose juice was death, and whose scent brought dream-haunted slumber. But already he felt a subtle lethargy stealing over him. He sought to lift his sword, to hew down the serpentine stalks, but his arm hung lifeless at his side. He opened his mouth to shout to his warriors, but only a faint rattle issued. The next instant, with appalling suddenness, the jungle waved and dimmed out before his eyes; he did not hear the screams that burst out awfully not far away, as his knees collapsed, letting him pitch limply to the earth. Above his prostrate form the great black blossoms nodded in the windless air.

Chapter III

: The Horror in the Jungle

Was it a dream the nighted lotus brought?
Then curst the dream that bought my sluggish life;
And curst each laggard hour that does not see
Hot blood drip blackly from the crimsoned knife.
The Song of Belit

First there was the blackness of an utter void, with the cold winds of cosmic space blowing through it. Then shapes, vague, monstrous and evanescent, rolled in dim panorama through the expanse of nothingness, as if the darkness were taking material form. The winds blew and a vortex formed, a whirling pyramid of roaring blackness. From it grew Shape and Dimension; then suddenly, like clouds dispersing, the darkness rolled away on either hand and a huge city of dark green stone rose on the bank of a wide river, flowing through an illimitable plain. Through this city moved beings of alien configuration.

Cast in the mold of humanity, they were distinctly not men. They were winged and of heroic proportions; not a branch on the mysterious stalk of evolution that culminated in man, but the ripe blossom on an alien tree, separate and apart from that stalk. Aside from their wings, in physical appearance they resembled man only as man in his highest form resembles the great apes. In spiritual, esthetic and intellectual development they were superior to man as man is superior to the gorilla. But when they reared their colossal city, man's primal ancestors had not yet risen from the slime of the primordial seas.

These beings were mortal, as are all things built of flesh and blood. They lived, loved and died, though the individual span of life was enormous. Then, after uncounted millions of years, the Change began. The vista shimmered and wavered, like a picture thrown on a windblown curtain. Over the city and the land the ages flowed as waves flow over a beach, and each wave brought alterations. Somewhere on the planet the magnetic centers were shifting; the great glaciers and ice-fields were withdrawing toward the new poles.

The littoral of the great river altered. Plains turned into swamps that stank with reptilian life. Where fertile meadows had rolled, forests reared up, growing into dank jungles. The changing ages wrought on the inhabitants of the city as well. They did not migrate to fresher lands. Reasons inexplicable to humanity held them to the ancient city and their doom. And as that once rich and mighty land sank deeper and deeper into the black mire of the sunless jungle, so into the chaos of squalling jungle life sank the people of the city. Terrific convulsions shook the earth; the nights were lurid with spouting volcanoes that fringed the dark horizons with red pillars.

After an earthquake that shook down the outer walls and highest towers of the city, and caused the river to run black for days with some lethal substance spewed up from the subterranean depths, a frightful chemical change became apparent in the waters the folk had drunk for millenniums uncountable.

Many died who drank of it; and in those who lived, the drinking wrought change, subtle, gradual and grisly. In adapting themselves to the changing conditions, they had sunk far below their original level. But the lethal waters altered them even more horribly, from generation to more bestial generation. They who had been winged gods became pinioned demons, with all that remained of their ancestors' vast knowledge distorted and perverted and twisted into ghastly paths. As they had risen higher than mankind might dream, so they sank lower than man's maddest nightmares reach. They died fast, by cannibalism, and horrible feuds fought out in the murk of the midnight jungle. And at last among the lichen-grown ruins of their city only a single shape lurked, a stunted abhorrent perversion of nature.

Then for the first time humans appeared: dark-skinned, hawkfaced men in copper and leather harness, bearing bows--the warriors of pre-historic Stygia. There were only fifty of them, and they were haggard and gaunt with starvation and prolonged effort, stained and scratched with jungle-wandering, with bloodcrusted bandages that told of fierce fighting. In their minds was a tale of warfare and defeat, and flight before a stronger tribe which drove them ever southward, until they lost themselves in the green ocean of jungle and river.

Exhausted they lay down among the ruins where red blossoms that bloom but once in a century waved in the full moon, and sleep fell upon them. And as they slept, a hideous shape crept red-eyed from the shadows and performed weird and awful rites about and above each sleeper. The moon hung in the shadowy sky, painting the jungle red and black; above the sleepers glimmered the crimson blossoms, like splashes of blood. Then the moon went down and the eyes of the necromancer were red jewels set in the ebony of night.

When dawn spread its white veil over the river, there were no men to be seen: only a hairy winged horror that squatted in the center of a ring of fifty great spotted hyenas that pointed quivering muzzles to the ghastly sky and howled like souls in hell.

Then scene followed scene so swiftly that each tripped over the heels of its predecessor. There was a confusion of movement, a writhing and melting of lights and shadows, against a background of black jungle, green stone ruins and murky river. Black men came up the river in long boats with skulls grinning on the prows, or stole stooping through the trees, spear in hand. They fled screaming through the dark from red eyes and slavering fangs. Howls of dying men shook the shadows; stealthy feet padded through the gloom, vampire eyes blazed redly. There were grisly feasts beneath the moon, across whose red disk a batlike shadow incessantly swept.

Then abruptly, etched clearly in contrast to these impressionistic glimpses, around the jungled point in the whitening dawn swept a long galley, thronged with shining ebon figures, and in the bows stood a white-skinned ghost in blue steel.

It was at this point that Conan first realized that he was dreaming. Until that instant he had had no consciousness of individual existence. But as he saw himself treading the boards of the Tigress, he recognized both the existence and the dream, although he did not awaken.

Even as he wondered, the scene shifted abruptly to a jungle glade where N'Gora and nineteen black spearmen stood, as if awaiting someone. Even as he realized that it was he for whom they waited, a horror swooped down from the skies and their stolidity was broken by yells of fear. Like men maddened by terror, they threw away their weapons and raced wildly through the jungle, pressed close by the slavering monstrosity that flapped its wings above them.

Chaos and confusion followed this vision, during which Conan feebly struggled to awake. Dimly he seemed to see himself lying under a nodding cluster of black blossoms, while from the bushes a hideous shape crept toward him. With a savage effort he broke the unseen bonds which held him to his dreams, and started upright.

Bewilderment was in the glare he cast about him. Near him swayed the dusky lotus, and he hastened to draw away from it.

In the spongy soil near by there was a track as if an animal had put out a foot, preparatory to emerging from the bushes, then had withdrawn it. It looked like the spoor of an unbelievably large hyena.

He yelled for N'Gora. Primordial silence brooded over the jungle, in which his yells sounded brittle and hollow as mockery. He could not see the sun, but his wilderness-trained instinct told him the day was near its end. A panic rose in him at the thought that he had lain senseless for hours. He hastily followed the tracks of the spearmen, which lay plain in the damp loam before him. They ran in single file, and he soon emerged into a glade--to stop short, the skin crawling between his shoulders as he recognized it as the glade he had seen in his lotus-drugged dream. Shields and spears lay scattered about as if dropped in headlong flight.

And from the tracks which led out of the glade and deeper into the fastnesses, Conan knew that the spearmen had fled, wildly. The footprints overlay one another; they weaved blindly among the trees. And with startling suddenness the hastening Cimmerian came out of the jungle onto a hill-like rock which sloped steeply, to break off abruptly in a sheer precipice forty feet high. And something crouched on the brink.

At first Conan thought it to be a great black gorilla. Then he saw that it was a giant black man that crouched ape-like, long arms dangling, froth dripping from the loose lips. It was not until, with a sobbing cry, the creature lifted huge hands and rushed towards him, that Conan recognized N'Gora. The black man gave no heed to Conan's shout as he charged, eyes rolled up to display the whites, teeth gleaming, face an inhuman mask.

With his skin crawling with the horror that madness always instils in the sane, Conan passed his sword through the black man's body; then, avoiding the hooked hands that clawed at him as N'Gora sank down, he strode to the edge of the cliff.

For an instant he stood looking down into the jagged rocks below, where lay N'Gora's spearmen, in limp, distorted attitudes that told of crushed limbs and splintered bones. Not one moved. A cloud of huge black flies buzzed loudly above the bloods-plashed stones; the ants had already begun to gnaw at the corpses. On the trees about sat birds of prey, and a jackal, looking up and seeing the man on the cliff, slunk furtively away.

For a little space Conan stood motionless. Then he wheeled and ran back the way he had come, flinging himself with reckless haste through the tall grass and bushes, hurdling creepers that sprawled snake-like across his path. His sword swung low in his right hand, and an unaccustomed pallor tinged his dark face.

The silence that reigned in the jungle was not broken. The sun had set and great shadows rushed upward from the slime of the black earth. Through the gigantic shades of lurking death and grim desolation Conan was a speeding glimmer of scarlet and blue steel. No sound in all the solitude was heard except his own quick panting as he burst from the shadows into the dim twilight of the river-shore.

He saw the galley shouldering the rotten wharf, the ruins reeling drunkenly in the gray half-light.

And here and there among the stones were spots of raw bright color, as if a careless hand had splashed with a crimson brush.

Again Conan looked on death and destruction. Before him lay his spearmen, nor did they rise to salute him. From the jungle edge to the riverbank, among the rotting pillars and along the broken piers they lay, torn and mangled and half devoured, chewed travesties of men.

All about the bodies and pieces of bodies were swarms of huge footprints, like those of hyenas.

Conan came silently upon the pier, approaching the galley above whose deck was suspended something that glimmered ivory-white in the faint twilight. Speechless, the Cimmerian looked on the Queen of the Black Coast as she hung from the yard-arm of her own galley. Between the yard and her white throat stretched a line of crimson clots that shone like blood in the gray light.

Chapter IV

: The Attack From the Air

The shadows were black around him,
The dripping jaws gaped wide,
Thicker than rain the red drops fell;
But my love was fiercer than Death's black spell,
Nor all the iron walls of hell
Could keep me from his side.
The Song of Belit

The jungle was a black colossus that locked the ruin-littered glade in ebon arms. The moon had not risen; the stars were flecks of hot amber in a breathless sky that reeked of death. On the pyramid among the fallen towers sat Conan the Cimmerian like an iron statue, chin propped on massive fists. Out in the black shadows stealthy feet padded and red eyes glimmered. The dead lay as they had fallen. But on the deck of the Tigress, on a pyre of broken benches, spear-shafts and leopardskins, lay the Queen of the Black Coast in her last sleep, wrapped in Conan's scarlet cloak. Like a true queen she lay, with her plunder heaped high about her: silks, cloth-of-gold, silver braid, casks of gems and golden coins, silver ingots, jeweled daggers and teocallis of gold wedges.

But of the plunder of the accursed city, only the sullen waters of Zarkheba could tell where Conan had thrown it with a heathen curse. Now he sat grimly on the pyramid, waiting for his unseen foes. The black fury in his soul drove out all fear. What shapes would emerge from the blackness he knew not, nor did he care.

He no longer doubted the visions of the black lotus. He understood that while waiting for him in the glade, N'Gora and his comrades had been terror-stricken by the winged monster swooping upon them from the sky, and fleeing in blind panic, had fallen over the cliff, all except their chief, who had somehow escaped their fate, though not madness. Meanwhile, or immediately after, or perhaps before, the destruction of those on the riverbank had been accomplished. Conan did not doubt that the slaughter along the river had been massacre rather than battle. Already unmanned by their superstitious fears, the blacks might well have died without striking a blow in their own defense when attacked by their inhuman foes.

Why he had been spared so long, he did not understand, unless the malign entity which ruled the river meant to keep him alive to torture him with grief and fear. All pointed to a human or superhuman intelligence--the breaking of the watercasks to divide the forces, the driving of the blacks over the cliff, and last and greatest, the grim jest of the crimson necklace knotted like a hangman's noose about Belit's white neck.

Having apparently saved the Cimmerian for the choicest victim, and extracted the last ounce of exquisite mental torture, it was likely that the unknown enemy would conclude the drama by sending him after the other victims. No smile bent Conan's grim lips at the thought, but his eyes were lit with iron laughter.

The moon rose, striking fire from the Cimmerian's horned helmet. No call awoke the echoes; yet suddenly the night grew tense and the jungle held its breath. Instinctively Conan loosened the great sword in its sheath. The pyramid on which he rested was four-sided, one--the side toward the jungle carved in broad steps. In his hand was a Shemite bow, such as Belit had taught her pirates to use. A heap of arrows lay at his feet, feathered ends towards him, as he rested on one knee.

Something moved in the blackness under the trees. Etched abruptly in the rising moon, Conan saw a darkly blocked-out head and shoulders, brutish in outline. And now from the shadows dark shapes came silently, swiftly, running low--twenty great spotted hyenas. Their slavering fangs flashed in the moonlight, their eyes blazed as no true beast's eyes ever blazed.

Twenty: then the spears of the pirates had taken toll of the pack, after all. Even as he thought this, Conan drew nock to ear, and at the twang of the string a flame-eyed shadow bounded high and fell writhing. The rest did not falter; on they came, and like a rain of death among them fell the arrows of the Cimmerian, driven with all the force and accuracy of steely thews backed by a hate hot as the slag-heaps of hell.

In his berserk fury he did not miss; the air was filled with feathered destruction. The havoc wrought among the onrushing pack was breathtaking. Less than half of them reached the foot of the pyramid. Others dropped upon the broad steps. Glaring down into the blazing eyes, Conan knew these creatures were not beasts; it was not merely in their unnatural size that he sensed a blasphemous difference. They exuded an aura tangible as the black mist rising from a corpse-littered swamp. By what godless alchemy these beings had been brought into existence, he could not guess; but he knew he faced diabolism blacker than the Well of Skelos.

Springing to his feet, he bent his bow powerfully and drove his last shaft point blank at a great hairy shape that soared up at his throat. The arrow was a flying beam of moonlight that flashed onward with but a blur in its course, but the were-beast plunged convulsively in midair and crashed headlong, shot through and through.

Then the rest were on him, in a nightmare rush of blazing eyes and dripping fangs. His fiercely driven sword shore the first asunder; then the desperate impact of the others bore him down. He crushed a narrow skull with the pommel of his hilt, feeling the bone splinter and blood and brains gush over his hand; then, dropping the sword, useless at such deadly close quarters, he caught at the throats of the two horrors which were ripping and tearing at him in silent fury. A foul acrid scent almost stifled him, his own sweat blinded him. Only his mail saved him from being ripped to ribbons in an instant. The next, his naked right hand locked on a hairy throat and tore it open. His left hand, missing the throat of the other beast, caught and broke its foreleg. A short yelp, the only cry in that grim battle, and hideously human-like, burst from the maimed beast. At the sick horror of that cry from a bestial throat, Conan involuntarily relaxed his grip.

One, blood gushing from its torn jugular, lunged at him in a last spasm of ferocity, and fastened its fangs on his throat--to fall back dead, even as Conan felt the tearing agony of its grip.

The other, springing forward on three legs, was slashing at his belly as a wolf slashes, actually rending the links of his mail. Flinging aside the dying beast, Conan grappled the crippled horror and, with a muscular effort that brought a groan from his blood-flecked lips, he heaved upright, gripping the struggling, bearing fiend in his arms. An instant he reeled off balance, its fetid breath hot on his nostrils; its jaws snapping at his neck; then he hurled it from him, to crash with bone-splintering force down the marble steps.

As he reeled on wide-braced legs, sobbing for breath, the jungle and the moon swimming bloodily to his sight, the thrash of bat-wings was loud in his ears. Stooping, he groped for his sword, and swaying upright, braced his feet drunkenly and heaved the great blade above his head with both hands, shaking the blood from his eyes as he sought the air above him for his foe.

Instead of attack from the air, the pyramid staggered suddenly and awfully beneath his feet. He heard a rumbling crackle and saw the tall column above him wave like a wand. Stung to galvanized life, he bounded far out; his feet hit a step, halfway down, which rocked beneath him, and his next desperate leap carried him clear. But even as his heels hit the earth, with a shattering crash like a breaking mountain the pyramid crumpled, the column came thundering down in bursting fragments. For a blind cataclysmic instant the sky seemed to rain shards of marble. Then a rubble of shattered stone lay whitely under the moon.

Conan stirred, throwing off the splinters that half covered him. A glancing blow had knocked off his helmet and momentarily stunned him. Across his legs lay a great piece of the column, pinning him down. He was not sure that his legs were unbroken. His black locks were plastered with sweat; blood trickled from the wounds in his throat and hands. He hitched up on one arm, struggling with the debris that prisoned him.

Then something swept down across the stars and struck the sward near him. Twisting about, he saw it--the winged one!

With fearful speed it was rushing upon him, and in that instant Conan had only a confused impression of a gigantic manlike shape hurtling along on bowed and stunted legs; of huge hairy arms outstretching misshapen black-nailed paws; of a malformed head, in whose broad face the only features recognizable as such were a pair of blood-red eyes. It was a thing neither man, beast, nor devil, imbued with characteristics subhuman as well as characteristics superhuman.

But Conan had no time for conscious consecutive thought. He threw himself toward his fallen sword, and his clawing fingers missed it by inches. Desperately he grasped the shard which pinned his legs, and the veins swelled in his temples as he strove to thrust it off him. It gave slowly, but he knew that before he could free himself the monster would be upon him, and he knew that those black-taloned hands were death.

The headlong rush of the winged one had not wavered. It towered over the prostrate Cimmerian like a black shadow, arms thrown wide--a glimmer of white flashed between it and its victim.

In one mad instant she was there--a tense white shape, vibrant with love fierce as a she-panther's. The dazed Cimmerian saw between him and the onrushing death, her lithe figure, shimmering like ivory beneath the moon; he saw the blaze of her dark eyes, the thick cluster of her burnished hair; her bosom heaved, her red lips were parted, she cried out sharp and ringing at the ring of steel as she thrust at the winged monster's breast.

"Belit!" screamed Conan. She flashed a quick glance at him, and in her dark eyes he saw her love flaming, a naked elemental thing of raw fire and molten lava. Then she was gone, and the Cimmerian saw only the winged fiend which had staggered back in unwonted fear, arms lifted as if to fend off attack. And he knew that Belit in truth lay on her pyre on the Tigress's deck. In his ears rang her passionate cry: "Were I still in death and you fighting for life I would come back from the abyss--"

With a terrible cry he heaved upward hurling the stone aside. The winged one came on again, and Conan sprang to meet it, his veins on fire with madness. The thews started out like cords on his forearms as he swung his great sword, pivoting on his heel with the force of the sweeping arc. Just above the hips it caught the hurtling shape, and the knotted legs fell one way, the torso another as the blade sheared clear through its hairy body.

Conan stood in the moonlit silence, the dripping sword sagging in his hand, staring down at the remnants of his enemy. The red eyes glared up at him with awful life, then glazed and set; the great hands knotted spasmodically and stiffened. And the oldest race in the world was extinct.

Conan lifted his head, mechanically searching for the beast-things that had been its slaves and executioners. None met his gaze. The bodies he saw littering the moon-splashed grass were of men, not beasts: hawk-faced, dark skinned men, naked, transfixed by arrows or mangled by sword-strokes. And they were crumbling into dust before his eyes.

Why had not the winged master come to the aid of its slaves when he struggled with them? Had it feared to come within reach of fangs that might turn and rend it? Craft and caution had lurked in that misshapen skull, but had not availed in the end.

Turning on his heel, the Cimmerian strode down the rotting wharfs and stepped aboard the galley. A few strokes of his sword cut her adrift, and he went to the sweep-head. The Tigress rocked slowly in the sullen water, sliding out sluggishly toward the middle of the river, until the broad current caught her. Conan leaned on the sweep, his somber gaze fixed on the cloak-wrapped shape that lay in state on the pyre the richness of which was equal to the ransom of an empress.

Chapter V

: The Funeral Pyre

Now we are done with roaming, evermore;
No more the oars, the windy harp's refrain;
Nor crimson pennon frights the dusky shore;
Blue girdle of the world, receive again
Her whom thou gavest me.

The Song of Belit

Again dawn tinged the ocean. A redder glow lit the river-mouth. Conan of Cimmeria leaned on his great sword upon the white beach, watching the Tigress swinging out on her last voyage. There was no light in his eyes that contemplated the glassy swells. Out of the rolling blue wastes all glory and wonder had gone. A fierce revulsion shook him as he gazed at the green surges that deepened into purple hazes of mystery.

Belit had been of the sea; she had lent it splendor and allure. Without her it rolled a barren, dreary and desolate waste from pole to pole. She belonged to the sea; to its everlasting mystery he returned her. He could do no more. For himself, its glittering blue splendor was more repellent than the leafy fronds which rustled and whispered behind him of vast mysterious wilds beyond them, and into which he must plunge.

No hand was at the sweep of the Tigress, no oars drove her through the green water. But a clean tanging wind bellied her silken sail, and as a wild swan cleaves the sky to her nest, she sped seaward, flames mounting higher and higher from her deck to lick at the mast and envelop the figure that lay lapped in scarlet on the shining pyre.

So passed the Queen of the Black Coast, and leaning on his red-stained sword, Conan stood silently until the red glow had faded far out in the blue hazes and dawn splashed its rose and gold over the ocean.

THE END

Contents

SHADOWS IN THE MOONLIGHT

By Robert E. Howard

Chapter 1

A swift crashing of horses through the tall reeds; a heavy fall, a despairing cry. From the dying steed there staggered up its rider, a slender girl in sandals and girdled tunic. Her dark hair fell over her white shoulders, her eyes were those of a trapped animal. She did not look at the jungle of reeds that hemmed in the little clearing, nor at the blue waters that lapped the low shore behind her. Her wide-eyed gaze was fixed in agonized intensity on the horseman who pushed through the reedy screen and dismounted before her.

He was a tall man, slender, but hard as steel. From head to heel he was clad in light silvered mesh-mail that fitted his supple form like a glove. From under the dome-shaped, gold-chased helmet his brown eyes regarded her mockingly.

"Stand back!" her voice shrilled with terror. "Touch me not, Shah Amurath, or I will throw myself into the water and drown!"

He laughed, and his laughter was like the purr of a sword sliding from a silken sheath.

"No, you will not drown, Olivia, daughter of confusion, for the marge is too shallow, and I can catch you before you can reach the deeps. You gave me a merry chase, by the gods, and all my men are far behind us. But there is no horse west of Vilayet that can distance Item for long." He nodded at the tall, slender-legged desert stallion behind him.

"Let me go!" begged the girl, tears of despair staining her face. "Have I not suffered enough? Is there any humiliation, pain or degradation you have not heaped on me? How long must my torment last?"

"As long as I find pleasure in your whimperings, your pleas, tears and writhings," he answered with a smile that would have seemed gentle to a stranger. "You are strangely virile, Olivia. I wonder if I shall ever weary of you, as I have always wearied of women before. You are ever fresh and unsullied, in spite of me. Each new day with you brings a new delight.

"But come--let us return to Akif, where the people are still feting the conqueror of the miserable kozaki; while he, the conqueror, is engaged in recapturing a wretched fugitive, a foolish, lovely, idiotic runaway!"

"No!" She recoiled, turning toward the waters lapping bluely among the reeds.

"Yes!" His flash of open anger was like a spark struck from flint. With a quickness her tender limbs could not approximate, he caught her wrist, twisting it in pure wanton cruelty until she screamed and sank to her knees.

"Slut! I should drag you back to Akif at my horse's tail, but I will be merciful and carry you on my saddle-bow, for which favor you shall humbly thank me, while--"

He released her with a startled oath and sprang back, his saber flashing out, as a terrible apparition burst from the reedy jungle sounding an inarticulate cry of hate.

Olivia, staring up from the ground, saw what she took to be either a savage or a madman advancing on Shah Amurath in an attitude of deadly menace. He was powerfully built, naked but for a girdled loin-cloth, which was stained with blood and crusted with dried mire. His black mane was matted with mud and clotted blood; there were streaks of dried blood on his chest and limbs, dried blood on the long straight sword he gripped in his right hand. From under the tangle of his locks, bloodshot eyes glared like coals of blue fire.

"You Hyrkanian dog!" mouthed this apparition in a barbarous accent. "The devils of vengeance have brought you here!"

"Kozak!" ejaculated Shah Amurath, recoiling. "I did not know a dog of you escaped! I thought you all lay stiff on the steppe, by Ilbars River."

"All but me, damn you!" cried the other. "Oh, I've dreamed of such a meeting as this, while I crawled on my belly through the brambles, or lay under rocks while the ants gnawed my flesh, or crouched in the mire up to my mouth--I dreamed, but never hoped it would come to pass. Oh, gods of Hell, how I have yearned for this!"

The stranger's bloodthirsty joy was terrible to behold. His jaws champed spasmodically, froth appeared on his blackened lips.

"Keep back!" ordered Shah Amurath, watching him narrowly.

"Ha!" It was like the bark of a timber wolf. "Shah Amurath, the great Lord of Akif! Oh, damn you, how I love the sight of you--you, who fed my comrades to the vultures, who tore them between wild horses, blinded and maimed and mutilated them all, you dog, you filthy dog!" His voice rose to a maddened scream, and he charged.

In spite of the terror of his wild appearance, Olivia looked to see him fall at the first crossing of the blades. Madman or savage, what could he do, naked, against the mailed chief of Akif?

There was an instant when the blades flamed and licked, seeming barely to touch each other and leap apart; then the broadsword flashed past the saber and descended terrifically on Shah Amurath's shoulder. Olivia cried out at the fury of that stroke. Above the crunch of the rending mail, she distinctly heard the snap of the shoulder-bone. The Hyrkanian reeled back, suddenly ashen, blood spurting over the links of his hauberk; his saber slipped from his nerveless fingers.

"Quarter!" he gasped.

"Quarter?" There was a quiver of frenzy in the stranger's voice. "Quarter such as you gave us, you swine!"

Olivia closed her eyes. This was no longer battle, but butchery, frantic, bloody, impelled by an hysteria of fury and hate, in which culminated the sufferings of battle, massacre, torture, and fear-ridden, thirst-maddened, hunger-haunted flight. Though Olivia knew that Shah Amurath deserved no mercy or pity from any living creature, yet she closed her eyes and pressed her hands over her ears, to shut out the sight of that dripping sword that rose and fell with the sound of a butcher's cleaver, and the gurgling cries that dwindled away and ceased.

She opened her eyes, to see the stranger turning away from a gory travesty that only vaguely resembled a human being. The man's breast heaved with exhaustion or passion; his brow was beaded with sweat; his right hand was splashed with blood.

He did not speak to her, or even glance toward her. She saw him stride through the reeds that grew at the water's edge, stoop, and tug at something. A boat wallowed out of its hiding place among the stalks. Then she divined his intention, and was galvanized into action.

"Oh, wait!" she wailed, staggering up and running toward him. "Do not leave me! Take me with you!"

He wheeled and stared at her. There was a difference in his bearing. His bloodshot eyes were sane. It was as if the blood he had just shed had quenched the fire of his frenzy.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am called Olivia. I was his captive. I ran away. He followed me. That's why he came here. Oh, do not leave me here! His warriors are not far behind him. They will find his corpse--they will find me near it--oh!" She moaned in her terror and wrung her white hands.

He stared at her in perplexity.

"Would you be better off with me?" he demanded. "I am a barbarian, and I know from your looks that you fear me."

"Yes, I fear you," she replied, too distracted to dissemble. "My flesh crawls at the horror of your aspect. But I fear the Hyrkanians more. Oh, let me go with you! They will put me to the torture if they find me beside their dead lord."

"Come, then." He drew aside, and she stepped quickly into the boat, shrinking from contact with him. She seated herself in the bow, and he stepped into the boat, pushed off with an oar, and using it as a paddle, worked his way tortuously among the tall stalks until they glided out into open water. Then he set to work with both oars, rowing with great, smooth, even strokes, the heavy muscles of arms and shoulders and back rippling in rhythm to his exertions.

There was silence for some time, the girl crouching in the bows, the man tugging at the oars. She watched him with timorous fascination. It was evident that he was not an Hyrkanian, and he did not resemble the Hyborian races. There was a wolfish hardness about him that marked the barbarian. His features, allowing for the strains and stains of battle and his hiding in the marshes, reflected that same untamed wildness, but they were neither evil nor degenerate.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Shah Amurath called you a kozak; were you of that band?"

"I am Conan, of Cimmeria," he grunted. "I was with the kozaki, as the Hyrkanian dogs called us."

She knew vaguely that the land he named lay far to the northwest, beyond the farthest boundaries of the different kingdoms of her race.

"I am a daughter of the king of Ophir," she said. "My father sold me to a Shemite chief, because I would not marry a prince of Koth."

The Cimmerian grunted in surprize.

Her lips twisted in a bitter smile. "Aye, civilized men sell their children as slaves to savages, sometimes. They call your race barbaric, Conan of Cimmeria."

"We do not sell our children," he growled, his chin jutting truculently.

"Well--I was sold. But the desert man did not misuse me. He wished to buy the good will of Shah Amurath, and I was among the gifts he brought to Akif of the purple gardens. Then--" She shuddered and hid her face in her hands.

"I should be lost to all shame," she said presently. "Yet each memory stings me like a slaver's whip. I abode in Shah Amurath's palace, until some weeks agone he rode out with his hosts to do battle with a band of invaders who were ravaging the borders of Turan. Yesterday he returned in triumph, and a great fete was made to honor him. In the drunkenness and rejoicing, I found an opportunity to steal out of the city on a stolen horse. I had thought to escape--but he followed, and about midday came up with me. I outran his vassals, but him I could not escape. Then you came."

"I was lying hid in the reeds," grunted the barbarian. "I was one of those dissolute rogues, the Free Companions, who burned and looted along the borders. There were five thousand of us, from a score of races and tribes. We had been serving as mercenaries for a rebel prince in eastern Korb, most of us, and when he made peace with his cursed sovereign, we were out of employment; so we took to plundering the outlying dominions of Koth, Zamora and Turan impartially. A week ago Shah Amurath trapped us near the banks of Ilbars with fifteen thousand men. Mitra! The skies were black with vultures. When the lines broke, after a whole day of fighting, some tried to break through to the north, some to the west. I doubt if any escaped. The steppes were covered with horsemen riding down the fugitives. I broke for the east, and finally reached the edge of the marshes that border this part of Vilayet.

"I've been hiding in the morasses ever since. Only the day before yesterday the riders ceased beating up the reed-brakes, searching for just such fugitives as I. I've squirmed and burrowed and hidden like a snake, feasting on muskrats I caught and ate raw, for lack of fire to cook them. This dawn I found this boat hidden among the reeds. I hadn't intended going out on the sea until night, but after I killed Shah Amurath, I knew his mailed dogs would be close at hand."

"And what now?"

"We shall doubtless be pursued. If they fail to see the marks left by the boat, which I covered as well as I could, they'll guess anyway that we took to sea, after they fail to find us among the marshes. But we have a start, and I'm going to haul at these oars until we reach a safe place."

"Where shall we find that?" she asked hopelessly. "Vilayet is an Hyrkanian pond."

"Some folk don't think so," grinned Conan grimly; "notably the slaves that have escaped from galleys and become pirates."

"But what are your plans?"

"The southwestern shore is held by the Hyrkanians for hundreds of miles. We still have a long way to go before we pass beyond their northern boundaries. I intend to go northward until I think we have passed them. Then we'll turn westward, and try to land on the shore bordered by the uninhabited steppes."

"Suppose we meet pirates, or a storm?" she asked. "And we shall starve on the steppes."

"Well," he reminded her, "I didn't ask you to come with me."

"I am sorry." She bowed her shapely dark head. "Pirates, storms, starvation--they are--all kinder than the people of Turan."

"Aye." His dark face grew somber. "I haven't done with them yet. Be at ease, girl. Storms are rare on Vilayet at this time of year. If we make the steppes, we shall not starve. I was reared in a naked land. It was those cursed marshes, with their stench and stinging flies, that nigh unmanned me. I am at home in the high lands. As for pirates--" He grinned enigmatically, and bent to the oars.

The sun sank like a dull-glowing copper ball into a lake of fire. The blue of the sea merged with the blue of the sky, and both turned to soft dark velvet, clustered with stars and the mirrors of stars. Olivia reclined in the bows of the gently rocking boat, in a state dreamy and unreal. She experienced an illusion that she was floating in midair, stars beneath her as well as above. Her silent companion was etched vaguely against the softer darkness. There was no break or falter in the rhythm of his oars; he might have been a fantasmal oarsman, rowing her across the dark lake of Death. But the edge of her fear was dulled, and, lulled by the monotony of motion, she passed into a quiet slumber.

Dawn was in her eyes when she awakened, aware of a ravenous hunger. It was a change in the motion of the boat that had roused her; Conan was resting on his oars, gazing beyond her. She realized that he had rowed all night without pause, and marvelled at his iron endurance. She twisted about to follow his stare, and saw a green wall of trees and shrubbery rising from the water's edge and sweeping away in a wide curve, enclosing a small bay whose waters lay still as blue glass.

"This is one of the many islands that dot this inland sea," said Conan. "They are supposed to be uninhabited. I've heard the Hyrkanians seldom visit them. Besides, they generally hug the shores in their galleys, and we have come a long way. Before sunset we were out of sight of the mainland."

With a few strokes he brought the boat in to shore and made the painter fast to the arching root of a tree which rose from the water's edge. Stepping ashore, he reached out a hand to help Olivia. She took it, wincing slightly at the bloodstains upon it, feeling a hint of the dynamic strength that lurked in the barbarian's thews.

A dreamy quiet lay over the woods that bordered the blue bay. Then somewhere, far back among the trees, a bird lifted its morning song. A breeze whispered through the leaves, and set them to murmuring. Olivia found herself listening intently for something, she knew not what. What might be lurking amid those nameless woodlands?

As she peered timidly into the shadows between the trees, something swept into the sunlight with a swift whirl of wings: a great parrot which dropped on to a leafy branch and swayed there, a gleaming image of jade and crimson. It turned its crested head sidewise and regarded the invaders with glittering eyes of jet.

"Crom!" muttered the Cimmerian. "Here is the grandfather of all parrots. He must be a thousand years old! Look at the evil wisdom of his eyes. What mysteries do you guard, Wise Devil?"

Abruptly the bird spread its flaming wings and, soaring from its perch, cried out harshly: "Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!" and with a wild screech of horribly human laughter, rushed away through the trees to vanish in the opalescent shadows.

Olivia stared after it, feeling the cold hand of nameless foreboding touch her supple spine.

"What did it say?" she whispered.

"Human words, I'll swear," answered Conan; "but in what tongue I can't say."

"Nor I," returned the girl. "Yet it must have learned them from human lips. Human, or--" she gazed into the leafy fastness and shuddered slightly, without knowing why.

"Crom, I'm hungry!" grunted the Cimmerian. "I could eat a whole buffalo. We'll look for fruit; but first I'm going to cleanse myself of this dried mud and blood. Hiding in marshes is foul business."

So saying, he laid aside his sword, and wading out shoulder-deep into the blue water, went about his ablutions. When he emerged, his clean-cut bronze limbs shone, his streaming black mane was no longer matted. His blue eyes, though they smoldered with unquenchable fire, were no longer murky or blood-shot. But the tigerish suppleness of limb and the dangerous aspect of feature were not altered.

Strapping on his sword once more, he motioned the girl to follow him, and they left the shore, passing under the leafy arches of the great branches. Underfoot lay a short green sward which cushioned their tread. Between the trunks of the trees they caught glimpses of faery-like vistas.

Presently Conan grunted in pleasure at the sight of golden and russet globes hanging in clusters among the leaves. Indicating that the girl should seat herself on a fallen tree, he filled her lap with the exotic delicacies, and then himself fell to with unconcealed gusto.

"Ishtar!" said he, between mouthfuls. "Since Ilbars I have lived on rats, and roots I dug out of the stinking mud. This is sweet to the palate, though not very filling. Still, it will serve if we eat enough."

Olivia was too busy to reply. The sharp edge of the Cimmerian's hunger blunted, he began to gaze at his fair companion with more interest than previously, noting the lustrous clusters of her dark hair, the peach-bloom tints of her dainty skin, and the rounded contours of her lithe figure which the scanty silk tunic displayed to full advantage.

Finishing her meal, the object of his scrutiny looked up, and meeting his burning, slit-eyed gaze, she changed color and the remnants of the fruit slipped from her fingers.

Without comment, he indicated with a gesture that they should continue their explorations, and rising, she followed him out of the trees and into a glade, the farther end of which was bounded by a dense thicket. As they stepped into the open there was a ripping crash in this thicket, and Conan, bounding aside and carrying the girl with him, narrowly saved them from something that rushed through the air and struck a tree-trunk with a thunderous impact.

Whipping out his sword, Conan bounded across the glade and plunged into the thicket. Silence ensued, while Olivia crouched on the sward, terrified and bewildered. Presently Conan emerged, a puzzled scowl on his face.

"Nothing in that thicket," he growled. "But there was something--"

He studied the missile that had so narrowly missed them, and grunted incredulously, as if unable to credit his own senses. It was a huge block of greenish stone which lay on the sward at the foot of the tree, whose wood its impact had splintered.

"A strange stone to find on an uninhabited island," growled Conan.

Olivia's lovely eyes dilated in wonder. The stone was a symmetrical block, indisputably cut and shaped by human hands. And it was astonishingly massive. The Cimmerian grasped it with both hands, and with legs braced and the muscles standing out on his arms and back in straining knots, he heaved it above his head and cast it from him, exerting every ounce of nerve and sinew. It fell a few feet in front of him. Conan swore.

"No man living could throw that rock across this glade. It's a task for siege engines. Yet here there are no mangonels or ballistas."

"Perhaps it was thrown by some such engine from afar," she suggested.

He shook his head. "It didn't fall from above. It came from yonder thicket. See how the twigs are broken? It was thrown as a man might throw a pebble. But who? What? Come!"

She hesitantly followed him into the thicket. Inside the outer ring of leafy brush, the undergrowth was less dense. Utter silence brooded over all. The springy sward gave no sign of footprint. Yet from this mysterious thicket had hurtled that boulder, swift and deadly. Conan bent closer to the sward, where the grass was crushed down here and there. He shook his head

angrily. Even to his keen eyes it gave no clue as to what had stood or trodden there. His gaze roved to the green roof above their heads, a solid ceiling of thick leaves and interwoven arches. And he froze suddenly.

Then rising, sword in hand, he began to back away, thrusting Olivia behind him.

"Out of here, quick!" he urged in a whisper that congealed the girl's blood.

"What is it? What do you see?"

"Nothing," he answered guardedly, not halting his wary retreat.

"But what is it, then? What lurks in this thicket?"

"Death!" he answered, his gaze still fixed on the brooding jade arches that shut out the sky.

Once out of the thicket, he took her hand and led her swiftly through the thinning trees, until they mounted a grassy slope, sparsely treed, and emerged upon a low plateau, where the grass grew taller and the trees were few and scattered. And in the midst of that plateau rose a long broad structure of crumbling greenish stone.

They gazed in wonder. No legends named such a building on any island of Vilayet. They approached it warily, seeing that moss and lichen crawled over the stones, and the broken roof gaped to the sky. On all sides lay bits and shards of masonry, half hidden in the waving grass, giving the impression that once many buildings rose there, perhaps a whole town. But now only the long hall-like structure rose against the sky, and its walls leaned drunkenly among the crawling vines.

Whatever doors had once guarded its portals had long rotted away. Conan and his companion stood in the broad entrance and stared inside. Sunlight streamed in through gaps in the walls and roof, making the interior a dim weave of light and shadow. Grasping his sword firmly, Conan entered, with the slouching gait of a hunting panther, sunken head and noiseless feet. Olivia tiptoed after him.

Once within, Conan grunted in surprize, and Olivia stifled a scream.

"Look! Oh, look!"

"I see," he answered. "Nothing to fear. They are statues."

"But how life-like--and how evil!" she whispered, drawing close to him.

They stood in a great hall, whose floor was of polished stone, littered with dust and broken stones, which had fallen from the ceiling. Vines, growing between the stones, masked the apertures. The lofty roof, flat and undomed, was upheld by thick columns, marching in rows down the sides of the walls. And in each space between these columns stood a strange figure.

They were statues, apparently of iron, black and shining as if continually polished. They were life-sized, depicting tall, lithely powerful men, with cruel hawk-like faces. They were naked, and every swell, depression and contour of joint and sinew was represented with incredible realism. But the most life-like feature was their proud, intolerant faces. These features were not cast in the same mold. Each face possessed its own individual characteristics, though there was a tribal likeness between them all. There was none of the monotonous uniformity of decorative art, in the faces at least.

"They seem to be listening--and waiting!" whispered the girl uneasily.

Conan rang his hilt against one of the images.

"Iron," he pronounced. "But Crom! In what molds were they cast?"

He shook his head and shrugged his massive shoulders in puzzlement.

Olivia glanced timidly about the great silent hall. Only the ivy-grown stones, the tendril-clasped pillars, with the dark figures brooding between them, met her gaze. She shifted uneasily and wished to be gone, but the images held a strange fascination for her companion. He examined them in detail, and barbarian-like, tried to break off their limbs. But their material resisted his best efforts. He could neither disfigure nor dislodge from its niche a single image. At last he desisted, swearing in his wonder.

"What manner of men were these copied from?" he inquired of the world at large. "These figures are black, yet they are not like negroes. I have never seen their like."

"Let us go into the sunlight," urged Olivia, and he nodded, with a baffled glance at the brooding shapes along the walls.

So they passed out of the dusky hall into the clear blaze of the summer sun. She was surprized to note its position in the sky; they had spent more time in the ruins than she had guessed.

"Let us take to the boat again," she suggested. "I am afraid here. It is a strange evil place. We do not know when we may be attacked by whatever cast the rock."

"I think we're safe as long as we're not under the trees," he answered. "Come."

The plateau, whose sides fell away toward the wooded shores on the east, west and south, sloped upward toward the north to abut on a tangle of rocky cliffs, the highest point of the island. Thither Conan took his way, suiting his long stride to his companion's gait. From time to time his glance rested inscrutably upon her, and she was aware of it.

They reached the northern extremity of the plateau, and stood gazing up the steep pitch of the cliffs. Trees grew thickly along the rim of the plateau east and west of the cliffs, and clung to the precipitous incline. Conan glanced at these trees suspiciously, but he began the ascent, helping his companion on the climb. The slope was not sheer, and was broken by ledges and boulders. The Cimmerian, born in a hill country, could have run up it like a cat, but Olivia found the going difficult. Again and again she felt herself lifted lightly off her feet and over some obstacle that would have taxed her strength to surmount, and her wonder grew at the sheer physical power of the man. She no longer found his touch repugnant. There was a promise of protection in his iron clasp.

At last they stood on the ultimate pinnacle, their hair stirring in the sea wind. From their feet the cliffs fell away sheerly three or four hundred feet to a narrow tangle of woodlands bordering the beach. Looking southward they saw the whole island lying like a great oval mirror, its bevelled edges sloping down swiftly into a rim of green, except where it broke in the pitch of the cliffs. As far as they could see, on all sides stretched the blue waters, still, placid, fading into dreamy hazes of distance.

"The sea is still," sighed Olivia. "Why should we not take up our journey again?"

Conan, poised like a bronze statue on the cliffs, pointed northward. Straining her eyes, Olivia saw a white fleck that seemed to hang suspended in the aching haze.

"What is it?"

"A sail."

"Hyrkanians?"

"Who can tell, at this distance?"

"They will anchor here--search the island for us!" she cried in quick panic.

"I doubt it. They come from the north, so they can not be searching for us. They may stop for some other reason, in which case we'll have to hide as best we can. But I believe it's either pirate, or an Hyrkanian galley returning from some northern raid. In the latter case they are not likely to anchor here. But we can't put to sea until they've gone out of sight, for they're coming from the direction in which we must go. Doubtless they'll pass the island tonight, and at dawn we can go on our way."

"Then we must spend the night here?" she shivered.

"It's safest."

"Then let us sleep here, on the crags," she urged.

He shook his head, glancing at the stunted trees, at the marching woods below, a green mass which seemed to send out tendrils straggling up the sides of the cliffs.

"Here are too many trees. We'll sleep in the ruins."

She cried out in protest.

"Nothing will harm you there," he soothed. "Whatever threw the stone at us did not follow us out of the woods. There was nothing to show that any wild thing lairs in the ruins. Besides, you are soft-skinned, and used to shelter and dainties. I could sleep naked in the snow and feel no discomfort, but the dew would give you cramps, were we to sleep in the open."

Olivia helplessly acquiesced, and they descended the cliffs, crossed the plateau and once more approached the gloomy, age-haunted ruins. By this time the sun was sinking below the plateau rim. They had found fruit in the trees near the cliffs, and these formed their supper, both food and drink.

The southern night swept down quickly, littering the dark blue sky with great white stars, and Conan entered the shadowy ruins, drawing the reluctant Olivia after him. She shivered at the sight of those tense black shadows in their niches along the walls. In the darkness that the starlight only faintly touched, she could not make out their outlines; she could only sense their attitude of waiting--waiting as they had waited for untold centuries.

Conan had brought a great armful of tender branches, well leafed. These he heaped to make a couch for her, and she lay upon it, with a curious sensation as of one lying down to sleep in a serpent's lair.

Whatever her forebodings, Conan did not share them. The Cimmerian sat down near her, his back against a pillar, his sword across his knees. His eyes gleamed like a panther's in the dusk.

"Sleep, girl," said he. "My slumber is light as a wolf's. Nothing can enter this hall without awaking me."

Olivia did not reply. From her bed of leaves she watched the immobile figure, indistinct in the soft darkness. How strange, to move in fellowship with a barbarian, to be cared for and protected by one of a race, tales of which had frightened her as a child! He came of a people bloody, grim and ferocious. His kinship to the wild was apparent in his every action; it burned in his smoldering eyes. Yet he had not harmed her, and her worst oppressor had been a man the world called civilized. As a delicious languor stole over her relaxing limbs and she sank into foamy billows of slumber, her last waking thought was a drowsy recollection of the firm touch of Conan's fingers on her soft flesh.

Chapter 2

Olivia dreamed, and through her dreams crawled a suggestion of lurking evil, like a black serpent writhing through flower gardens. Her dreams were fragmentary and colorful, exotic shards of a broken, unknown pattern, until they crystalized into a scene of horror and madness, etched against a background of cyclopean stones and pillars.

She saw a great hall, whose lofty ceiling was upheld by stone columns marching in even rows along the massive walls. Among these pillars fluttered great green and scarlet parrots, and the hall was thronged with black-skinned, hawk-faced warriors. They were not negroes. Neither they nor their garments nor weapons resembled anything of the world the dreamer knew.

They were pressing about one bound to a pillar: a slender white-skinned youth, with a cluster of golden curls about his alabaster brow. His beauty was not altogether human--like the dream of a god, chiseled out of living marble.

The black warriors laughed at him, jeered and taunted in a strange tongue. The lithe naked form writhed beneath their cruel hands. Blood trickled down the ivory thighs to spatter on the polished floor. The screams of the victim echoed through the hall; then lifting his head toward the ceiling and the skies beyond, he cried out a name in an awful voice. A dagger in an ebon hand cut short his cry, and the golden head rolled on the ivory breast.

As if in answer to that desperate cry, there was a rolling thunder as of celestial chariot-wheels, and a figure stood before the slayers, as if materialized out of empty air. The form was of a man, but no mortal man ever wore such an aspect of inhuman beauty. There was an unmistakable resemblance between him and the youth who dropped lifeless in his chains, but the alloy of humanity that softened the godliness of the youth was lacking in the features of the stranger, awful and immobile in their beauty.

The blacks shrank back before him, their eyes slits of fire. Lifting a hand, he spoke, and his tones echoed through the silent halls in deep rich waves of sound. Like men in a trance the black warriors fell back until they were ranged along the walls in regular lines. Then from the stranger's chiseled lips rang a terrible invocation and command: "Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!"

At the blast of that awful cry, the black figures stiffened and froze. Over their limbs crept a curious rigidity, an unnatural petrification. The stranger touched the limp body of the youth, and the chains fell away from it. He lifted the corpse in his arms; then ere he turned away, his tranquil gaze swept again over the silent rows of ebony figures, and he pointed to the moon, which gleamed in through the casements. And they understood, those tense, waiting statues that had been men . . .

Olivia awoke, starting up on her couch of branches, a cold sweat beading her skin. Her heart pounded loud in the silence. She glanced wildly about. Conan slept against his pillar, his head fallen upon his massive breast. The silvery radiance of the late moon crept through the gaping roof, throwing long white lines along the dusty floor. She could see the images dimly, black, tense--waiting. Fighting down a rising hysteria, she saw the moonbeams rest lightly on the pillars and the shapes between.

What was that? A tremor among the shadows where the moonlight fell. A paralysis of horror gripped her, for where there should have been the immobility of death, there was movement: a slow twitching, a flexing and writhing of ebon limbs--an awful scream burst from her lips as she broke the bonds that held her mute and motionless. At her shriek Conan shot erect, teeth gleaming, sword lifted.

"The statues! The statues!--Oh my God, the statues are coming to life!"

And with the cry she sprang through a crevice in the wall, burst madly through the hindering vines, and ran, ran, ran blind, screaming, witless--until a grasp on her arm brought her up short and she shrieked and fought against the arms that caught her, until a familiar voice penetrated the mists of her terror, and she saw Conan's face, a mask of bewilderment in the moonlight.

"What in Crom's name, girl? Did you have a nightmare?" His voice sounded strange and far away. With a sobbing gasp she threw her arms about his thick neck and clung to him convulsively, crying in panting catches.

"Where are they? Did they follow us?"

"Nobody followed us," he answered.

She sat up, still clinging to him, and looked fearfully about. Her blind flight had carried her to the southern edge of the plateau. Just below them was the slope, its foot masked in the thick shadows of the woods. Behind them she saw the ruins looming in the high-swinging moon.

"Did you not see them?--The statues, moving, lifting their hands, their eyes glaring in the shadows?"

"I saw nothing," answered the barbarian uneasily. "I slept more soundly than usual, because it has been so long since I have slumbered the night through; yet I don't think anything could have entered the hall without waking me."

"Nothing entered," a laugh of hysteria escaped her. "It was something there already. Ah, Mitra, we lay down to sleep among them, like sheep making their bed in the shambles!"

"What are you talking about?" he demanded. "I woke at your cry, but before I had time to look about me, I saw you rush out through the crack in the wall. I pursued you, lest you come to harm. I thought you had a nightmare."

"So I did!" she shivered. "But the reality was more grisly than the dream. Listen!" And she narrated all that she had dreamed and thought to see.

Conan listened attentively. The natural skepticism of the sophisticated man was not his. His mythology contained ghouls, goblins, and necromancers. After she had finished, he sat silent, absently toying with his sword.

"The youth they tortured was like the tall man who came?" he asked at last.

"As like as son to father," she answered, and hesitantly: "If the mind could conceive of the offspring of a union of divinity with humanity, it would picture that youth. The gods of old times mated sometimes with mortal women, our legends tell us."

"What gods?" he muttered.

"The nameless, forgotten ones. Who knows? They have gone back into the still waters of the lakes, the quiet hearts of the hills, the gulfs beyond the stars. Gods are no more stable than men."

"But if these shapes were men, blasted into iron images by some god or devil, how can they come to life?"

"There is witchcraft in the moon," she shuddered. "He pointed at the moon; while the moon shines on them, they live. So I believe."

"But we were not pursued," muttered Conan, glancing toward the brooding ruins. "You might have dreamed they moved. I am of a mind to return and see."

"No, no!" she cried, clutching him desperately. "Perhaps the spell upon them holds them in the hall. Do not go back! They will rend you limb from limb! Oh, Conan, let us go into our boat and flee this awful island! Surely the Hyrkanian ship has passed us now! Let us go!"

So frantic was her pleading that Conan was impressed. His curiosity in regard to the images was balanced by his superstition. Foes of flesh and blood he did not fear, however great the odds, but any hint of the supernatural roused all the dim monstrous instincts of fear that are the heritage of the barbarian.

He took the girl's hand and they went down the slope and plunged into the dense woods, where the leaves whispered, and nameless night-birds murmured drowsily. Under the trees the shadows clustered thick, and Conan swerved to avoid the denser patches. His eyes roved continuously from side to side, and often flitted into the branches above them. He went quickly yet warily, his arm girdling the girl's waist so strongly that she felt as if she were being carried rather than guided. Neither spoke. The only sound was the girl's quick nervous panting, the rustle of her small feet in the grass. So they came through the trees to the edge of the water, shimmering like molten silver in the moonlight.

"We should have brought fruit for food," muttered Conan; "but doubtless we'll find other islands. As well leave now as later; it's but a few hours till dawn--"

His voice trailed away. The painter was still made fast to the looping root. But at the other end was only a smashed and shattered ruin, half submerged in the shallow water.

A stifled cry escaped Olivia. Conan wheeled and faced the dense shadows, a crouching image of menace. The noise of the night-birds was suddenly silent. A brooding stillness reigned over the woods. No breeze moved the branches, yet somewhere the leaves stirred faintly.

Quick as a great cat, Conan caught up Olivia and ran. Through the shadows he raced like a phantom, while somewhere above and behind them sounded a curious rushing among the leaves, that implacably drew closer and closer. Then the moonlight burst full upon their faces, and they were speeding up the slope of the plateau.

At the crest Conan laid Olivia down, and turned to glare back at the gulf of shadows they had just quitted. The leaves shook in a sudden breeze; that was all. He shook his mane with an angry growl. Olivia crept to his feet like a frightened child. Her eyes looked up at him, dark wells of horror.

"What are we to do, Conan?" she whispered.

He looked at the ruins, stared again into the woods below.

"We'll go to the cliffs," he declared, lifting her to her feet. "Tomorrow I'll make a raft, and we'll trust our luck to the sea again."

"It was not--not they that destroyed our boat?" It was half question, half assertion.

He shook his head, grimly taciturn.

Every step of the way across that moon-haunted plateau was a sweating terror for Olivia, but no black shapes stole subtly from the looming ruins, and at last they reached the foot of the crags, which rose stark and gloomily majestic above them. There Conan halted in some uncertainty, at last selecting a place sheltered by a broad ledge, nowhere near any trees.

"Lie down and sleep if you can, Olivia," he said. "I'll keep watch."

But no sleep came to Olivia, and she lay watching the distant ruins and the wooded rim until the stars paled, the east whitened, and dawn in rose and gold struck fire from the dew on the grassblades.

She rose stiffly, her mind reverting to all the happenings of the night. In the morning light some of its terrors seemed like figments of an overwrought imagination. Conan strode over to her, and his words electrified her.

"Just before dawn I heard the creak of timbers and the rasp and clack of cordage and oars. A ship has put in and anchored at the beach not far away--probably the ship whose sail we saw yesterday. We'll go up the cliffs and spy on her."

Up they went, and lying on their bellies among the boulders, saw a painted mast jutting up beyond the trees to the west.

"An Hyrkanian craft, from the cut of her rigging," muttered Conan. "I wonder if the crew--"

A distant medley of voices reached their ears, and creeping to the southern edge of the cliffs, they saw a molly horde emerge from the fringe of trees along the western rim of the plateau, and stand there a space in debate. There was much flourishing of arms, brandishing of swords, and loud rough argument. Then the whole band started across the plateau toward the ruins, at a slant that would take them close by the foot of the cliffs.

"Pirates!" whispered Conan, a grim smile on his thin lips. "It's an Hyrkanian galley they've captured. Here--crawl among these rocks.

"Don't show yourself unless I call to you," he instructed, having secreted her to his satisfaction among a tangle of boulders along the crest of the cliffs. "I'm going to meet these dogs. If I succeed in my plan, all will be well, and we'll sail away with them. If I don't succeed--well, hide yourself in the rocks until they're gone, for no devils on this island are as cruel as these sea-wolves."

And tearing himself from her reluctant grasp, he swung quickly down the cliffs.

Looking fearfully from her eyrie, Olivia saw the band had neared the foot of the cliffs. Even as she looked, Conan stepped out from among the boulders and faced them, sword in hand. They gave back with yells of menace and surprize; then halted uncertainly to glare at this figure which had appeared so suddenly from the rocks. There were some seventy of them, a wild horde made up of men from many nations: Kothians, Zamorians, Brythunians, Corinthians, Shemites. Their features reflected the wildness of their natures. Many bore the scars of the lash or the branding-iron. There were cropped ears, slit noses, gaping eye-sockets, stumps of wrists--marks of the hangman as well as scars of battle. Most of them were half naked, but the garments they wore were fine; gold-braided jackets, satin girdles, silken breeches, tattered, stained with tar and blood, vied with pieces of silver-chased armor. Jewels glittered in nose-rings and ear-rings, and in the hilts of their daggers.

Over against this bizarre mob stood the tall Cimmerian in strong contrast with his hard bronzed limbs and clean-cut vital features.

"Who are you?" they roared.

"Conan the Cimmerian!" His voice was like the deep challenge of a lion. "One of the Free Companions. I mean to try my luck with the Red Brotherhood. Who's your chief?"

"I, by Ishtar!" bellowed a bull-like voice, as a huge figure swaggered forward: a giant, naked to the waist, where his capacious belly was girdled by a wide sash that upheld voluminous silken pantaloons. His head was shaven except for a scalplock, his mustaches dropped over a rat-trap mouth. Green Shemitish slippers with upturned toes were on his feet, a long straight sword in his hand.

Conan stared and glared.

"Sergius of Khrosha, by Crom!"

"Aye, by Ishtar!" boomed the giant, his small black eyes glittering with hate. "Did you think I had forgot? Ha! Sergius never forgets an enemy. Now I'll hang you up by the heels and skin you alive. At him, lads!"

"Aye, send your dogs at me, big-belly," sneered Conan with bitter scorn, "You were always a coward, you Kothic cur."

"Coward! To me?" The broad face turned black with passion. "On guard, you northern dog! I'll cut out your heart!"

In an instant the pirates had formed a circle about the rivals, their eyes blazing, their breath sucking between their teeth in bloodthirsty enjoyment. High up among the crags Olivia watched, sinking her nails into her palms in her painful excitement.

Without formality the combatants engaged, Sergius coming in with a rush, quick on his feet as a giant cat, for all his bulk. Curses hissed between his clenched teeth as he lustily swung and parried. Conan fought in silence, his eyes slits of blue bale-fire.

The Kothian ceased his oaths to save his breath. The only sounds were the quick scuff of feet on the sward, the panting of the pirate, the ring and clash of steel. The swords flashed like white fire in the early sun, wheeling and circling. They seemed to recoil from each other's contact, then leap together again instantly. Sergius was giving back; only his superlative skill had saved him thus far from the blinding speed of the Cimmerian's onslaught. A louder clash of steel, a sliding rasp, a choking cry from the pirate horde, a fierce yell split the morning as Conan's sword plunged through their captain's massive body. The point quivered an instant from between Sergius's shoulders, a hand's breadth of white fire in the sunlight; then the Cimmerian wrenched back his steel and the pirate chief fell heavily, face down, and lay in a widening pool of blood, his broad hands twitching for an instant.

Conan wheeled toward the gaping corsairs.

"Well, you dogs!" he roared. "I've sent your chief to hell. What says the law of the Red Brotherhood?"

Before any could answer, a rat-faced Brythunian, standing behind his fellows, whirled a sling swiftly and deadly. Straight as an arrow sped the stone to its mark, and Conan reeled and fell as a tall tree falls to the woodsman's ax. Up on the cliff Olivia caught at the boulders for support. The scene swam dizzily before her eyes; all she could see was the Cimmerian lying limply on the sward, blood oozing from his head.

The rat-faced one yelped in triumph and ran to stab the prostrate man, but a lean Corinthian thrust him back.

"What, Aratus, would you break the law of the Brotherhood, you dog?"

"No law is broken," snarled the Brythunian.

"No law? Why, you dog, this man you have just struck down is by just rights our captain!"

"Nay!" shouted Aratus. "He was not of our band, but an outsider. He had not been admitted to fellowship. Slaying Sergius does not make him captain, as would have been the case had one of us killed him."

"But he wished to join us," retorted the Corinthian. "He said so."

At that a great clamor arose, some siding with Aratus, some with the Corinthian, whom they called Ivanos. Oaths flew thick, challenges were passed, hands fumbled at sword-hilts.

At last a Shemite spoke up above the clamor: "Why do you argue over a dead man?"

"He's not dead," answered the Corinthian, rising from beside the prostrate Cimmerian. "It was a glancing blow; he's only stunned."

At that the clamor rose anew, Aratus trying to get at the senseless man and Ivanos finally bestriding him, sword in hand, and defying all and sundry. Olivia sensed that it was not so much in defense of Conan that the Corinthian took his stand, but in opposition to Aratus. Evidently these men had been Sergius's lieutenants, and there was no love lost between them. After more arguments, it was decided to bind Conan and take him along with them, his fate to be voted on later.

The Cimmerian, who was beginning to regain consciousness, was bound with leather girdles, and then four pirates lifted him, and with many complaints and curses, carried him along with the band, which took up its journey across the plateau once more. The body of Sergius was left where it had fallen; a sprawling, unlovely shape on the sun-washed sward.

Up among the rocks, Olivia lay stunned by the disaster. She was incapable of speech or action, and could only lie there and stare with horrified eyes as the brutal horde dragged her protector away.

How long she lay there, she did not know. Across the plateau she saw the pirates reach the ruins and enter, dragging their captive. She saw them swarming in and out of the doors and crevices, prodding into the heaps of debris, and clambering about the walls. After awhile a score of them came back across the plateau and vanished among the trees on the western rim, dragging the body of Sergius after them, presumably to cast into the sea. About the ruins the others were cutting down trees and securing material for a fire. Olivia heard their shouts, unintelligible in the distance, and she heard the voices of those who had gone into the woods, echoing among the trees. Presently they came back into sight, bearing casks of liquor and leathern sacks of food. They headed for the ruins, cursing lustily under their burdens.

Of all this Olivia was but mechanically cognizant. Her overwrought brain was almost ready to collapse. Left alone and unprotected, she realized how much the protection of the Cimmerian had meant to her. There intruded vaguely a wonderment at the mad pranks of Fate, that could make the daughter of a king the companion of a red-handed barbarian. With it came a revulsion toward her own kind. Her father, and Shah Amurath, they were civilized men. And from them she had had only suffering. She had never encountered any civilized man who treated her with kindness unless there was an ulterior motive behind his actions. Conan had shielded her, protected her, and--so far--demanded nothing in return. Laying her head in her rounded arms she wept, until distant shouts of ribald revelry roused her to her own danger.

She glanced from the dark ruins about which the fantastic figures, small in the distance, weaved and staggered, to the dusky depths of the green forest. Even if her terrors in the ruins the night before had been only dreams, the menace that lurked in those green leafy depths below was no figment of nightmare. Were Conan slain or carried away captive, her only choice would lie between giving herself up to the human wolves of the sea, or remaining alone on that devil-haunted island.

As the full horror of her situation swept over her, she fell forward in a swoon.

Chapter 3

The sun was hanging low when Olivia regained her senses. A faint wind wafted to her ears distant shouts and snatches of ribald song. Rising cautiously, she looked out across the plateau. She saw the pirates clustered about a great fire outside the ruins, and her heart leaped as a group emerged from the interior dragging some object she knew was Conan. They propped him against the wall, still evidently bound fast, and there ensued a long discussion, with much brandishing of weapons. At last they dragged him back into the hall, and took up anew the business of ale-guzzling. Olivia sighed; at least she knew that the Cimmerian still lived. Fresh determination steeled her. As soon as night fell, she would steal to those grim ruins and free him or be taken herself in the attempt. And she knew it was not selfish interest alone which prompted her decision.

With this in mind she ventured to creep from her refuge to pluck and eat nuts which grew sparsely near at hand. She had not eaten since the day before. It was while so occupied that she was troubled by a sensation of being watched. She scanned the rocks nervously, then, with a shuddering suspicion, crept to the north edge of the cliff and gazed down into the waving green mass below, already dusky with the sunset. She saw nothing; it was impossible that she could be seen, when not on the cliff's edge, by anything lurking in those woods. Yet she distinctly felt the glare of hidden eyes, and felt that something animate and sentient was aware of her presence and her hiding-place.

Stealing back to her rocky eyrie, she lay watching the distant ruins until the dusk of night masked them, and she marked their position by the flickering flames about which black figures leaped and cavorted groggily.

Then she rose. It was time to make her attempt. But first she stole back to the northern edge of the cliffs, and looked down into the woods that bordered the beach. And as she strained her eyes in the dim starlight, she stiffened, and an icy hand touched her heart.

Far below her something moved. It was as if a black shadow detached itself from the gulf of shadows below her. It moved slowly up the sheer face of the cliff--a vague bulk, shapeless in the semi-darkness. Panic caught Olivia by the throat, and she struggled with the scream that tugged at her lips. Turning, she fled down the southern slope.

That flight down the shadowed cliffs was a nightmare in which she slid and scrambled, catching at jagged rocks with cold fingers. As she tore her tender skin and bruised her soft limbs on the rugged boulders over which Conan had so lightly lifted her, she realized again her dependence on the iron-thewed barbarian. But this thought was but one in a fluttering maelstrom of dizzy fright.

The descent seemed endless, but at last her feet struck the grassy levels, and in a very frenzy of eagerness she sped away toward the fire that burned like the red heart of night. Behind her, as she fled, she heard a shower of stones rattle down the steep slope, and the sound lent wings to her heels. What grisly climber dislodged those stones she dared not try to think.

Strenuous physical action dissipated her blind terror somewhat and before she had reached the ruin, her mind was clear, her reasoning faculties alert, though her limbs trembled from her efforts.

She dropped to the sward and wriggled along on her belly until, from behind a small tree that had escaped the axes of the pirates, she watched her enemies. They had completed their supper, but were still drinking, dipping pewter mugs or jewelled goblets into the broken heads of the wine-casks. Some were already snoring drunkenly on the grass, while others had staggered into the ruins. Of Conan she saw nothing. She lay there, while the dew formed on the grass about her and the leaves overhead, and the men about the fire cursed, gambled and argued. There were only a few about the fire; most of them had gone into the ruins to sleep.

She lay watching them, her nerves taut with the strain of waiting, the flesh crawling between her shoulders at the thought of what might be watching her in turn--of what might be stealing up behind her. Time dragged on leaden feet. One by one the revellers sank down in drunken slumber, until all were stretched senseless beside the dying fire.

Olivia hesitated--then was galvanized by a distant glow rising through the trees. The moon was rising!

With a gasp she rose and hurried toward the ruins. Her flesh crawled as she tiptoed among the drunken shapes that sprawled beside the gaping portal. Inside were many more; they shifted and mumbled in their besotted dreams, but none awakened as she glided among them. A sob of joy rose to her lips as she saw Conan. The Cimmerian was wide awake, bound upright to a pillar, his eyes gleaming in the faint reflection of the waning fire outside.

Picking her way among the sleepers, she approached him. Lightly as she had come, he had heard her; had seen her when first framed in the portal. A faint grin touched his hard lips.

She reached him and clung to him an instant. He felt the quick beating of her heart against his breast. Through a broad crevice in the wall stole a beam of moonlight, and the air was instantly supercharged with subtle tension. Conan felt it and stiffened. Olivia felt it and gasped. The sleepers snored on. Bending quickly, she drew a dagger from its senseless owner's belt, and set to work on Conan's bonds. They were sail cords, thick and heavy, and tied with the craft of a sailor. She toiled desperately, while the tide of moonlight crept slowly across the floor toward the feet of the crouching black figures between the pillars.

Her breath came in gasps; Conan's wrists were free, but his elbows and legs were still bound fast. She glanced fleetingly at the figures along the walls--waiting, waiting. They seemed to watch her with the awful patience of the undead. The drunkards beneath her feet began to stir and groan in their sleep. The moonlight crept down the hall, touching the black feet. The cords fell from Conan's arms, and taking the dagger from her, he ripped the bonds from his legs with a single quick slash. He stepped out from the pillar, flexing his limbs, stoically enduring the agony of returning circulation. Olivia crouched against him, shaking like a leaf. Was it some trick of the moonlight that touched the eyes of the black figures with fire, so that they glimmered redly in the shadows?

Conan moved with the abruptness of a jungle cat. Catching up his sword from where it lay in a stack of weapons near by, he lifted Olivia lightly from her feet and glided through an opening that gaped in the ivy-grown wall.

No word passed between them. Lifting her in his arms he set off swiftly across the moon-bathed sward. Her arms about his iron neck, the Ophirean closed her eyes, cradling her dark curly head against his massive shoulder. A delicious sense of security stole over her.

In spite of his burden, the Cimmerian crossed the plateau swiftly, and Olivia, opening her eyes, saw that they were passing under the shadow of the cliffs.

"Something climbed the cliffs," she whispered. "I heard it scrambling behind me as I came down."

"We'll have to chance it," he grunted.

"I am not afraid--now," she sighed.

"You were not afraid when you came to free me, either," he answered. "Crom, what a day it has been! Such haggling and wrangling I never heard. I'm nearly deaf. Aratus wished to cut out my heart, and Ivanos refused, to spite Aratus, whom he hates. All day long they snarled and spat at one another, and the crew quickly grew too drunk to vote either way--"

He halted suddenly, an image of bronze in the moonlight. With a quick gesture he tossed the girl lightly to one side and behind him. Rising to her knees on the soft sward, she screamed at what she saw.

Out of the shadows of the cliffs moved a monstrous shambling bulk--an anthropomorphic horror, a grotesque travesty of creation.

In general outline it was not unlike a man. But its face, limned in the bright moonlight, was bestial, with close-set ears, flaring nostrils, and a great flabby-lipped mouth in which gleamed white tusk-like fangs. It was covered with shaggy grayish hair, shot with silver which shone in the moonlight, and its great misshapen paws hung nearly to the earth. Its bulk was tremendous; as it stood on its short bowed legs, its bullet-head rose above that of the man who faced it; the sweep of the hairy breast and giant shoulders was breathtaking; the huge arms were like knotted trees.

The moonlight scene swam, to Olivia's sight. This, then, was the end of the trail--for what human being could withstand the fury of that hairy mountain of thews and ferocity? Yet as she stared in wide-eyed horror at the bronzed figure facing the monster, she sensed a kinship in the antagonists that was almost appalling. This was less a struggle between man and beast than a conflict between two creatures of the wild, equally merciless and ferocious. With a flash of white tusks, the monster charged.

The mighty arms spread wide as the beast plunged, stupefyingly quick for all his vast bulk and stunted legs.

Conan's action was a blur of speed Olivia's eye could not follow. She only saw that he evaded that deadly grasp, and his sword, flashing like a jet of white lightning, sheared through one of those massive arms between shoulder and elbow. A great spout of blood deluged the sward as the severed member fell, twitching horribly, but even as the sword bit through, the other malformed hand locked in Conan's black mane.

Only the iron neck muscles of the Cimmerian saved him from a broken neck that instant. His left hand darted out to clamp on the beast's squat throat, his left knee was jammed hard against the brute's hairy belly. Then began a terrific struggle, which lasted only seconds, but which seemed like ages to the paralyzed girl.

The ape maintained his grasp in Conan's hair, dragging him toward the tusks that glistened in the moonlight. The Cimmerian resisted this effort, with his left arm rigid as iron, while the sword in his right hand, wielded like a butcher-knife, sank again and again into the groin, breast and belly of his captor. The beast took its punishment in awful silence, apparently unweakened by the blood that gushed from its ghastly wounds. Swiftly the terrible strength of the anthropoid overcame the leverage of braced arm and knee. Inexorably Conan's arm bent under the strain; nearer and nearer he was drawn to the slavering jaws that gaped for his life. Now the blazing eyes of the barbarian glared into the bloodshot eyes of the ape. But as Conan tugged vainly at his sword, wedged deep in the hairy body, the frothing jaws snapped spasmodically shut, an inch from the Cimmerian's face, and he was hurled to the sward by the dying convulsions of the monster.

Olivia, half fainting, saw the ape heaving, thrashing and writhing, gripping, man-like, the hilt that jutted from its body. A sickening instant of this, then the great bulk quivered and lay still.

Conan rose and limped over to the corpse. The Cimmerian breathed heavily, and walked like a man whose joints and muscles have been wrenched and twisted almost to their limit of endurance. He felt his bloody scalp and swore at the sight of the long, black red-stained strands still grasped in the monster's shaggy hand.

"Crom!" he panted. "I feel as if I'd been racked! I'd rather fight a dozen men. Another instant and he'd have bitten off my head. Blast him, he's torn a handful of my hair out by the roots."

Gripping his hilt with both hands he tugged and worked it free. Olivia stole close to clasp his arm and stare down wide-eyed at the sprawling monster.

"What--what is it?" she whispered.

"A gray man-ape," he grunted. "Dumb, and man-eating. They dwell in the hills that border the eastern shore of this sea. How this one got to this island, I can't say. Maybe he floated here on driftwood, blown out from the mainland in a storm."

"And it was he that threw the stone?"

"Yes; I suspected what it was when we stood in the thicket and I saw the boughs bending over our heads. These creatures always lurk in the deepest woods they can find, and seldom emerge. What brought him into the open, I can't say, but it was lucky for us; I'd have had no chance with him among the trees."

"It followed me," she shivered. "I saw it climbing the cliffs."

"And following his instinct, he lurked in the shadow of the cliff, instead of following you out across the plateau. His kind are creatures of darkness and the silent places, haters of sun and moon."

"Do you suppose there are others?"

"No, else the pirates had been attacked when they went through the woods. The gray ape is wary, for all his strength, as shown by his hesitancy in falling upon us in the thicket. His lust for you must have been great, to have driven him to attack us finally in the open. What--"

He started and wheeled back toward the way they had come. The night had been split by an awful scream. It came from the ruins.

Instantly there followed a mad medley of yells, shrieks and cries of blasphemous agony. Though accompanied by a ringing of steel, the sounds were of massacre rather than battle.

Conan stood frozen, the girl clinging to him in a frenzy of terror. The clamor rose to a crescendo of madness, and then the Cimmerian turned and went swiftly toward the rim of the plateau, with its fringe of moon-limned trees. Olivia's legs were trembling so that she could not walk; so he carried her, and her heart calmed its frantic pounding as she nestled into his cradling arms.

They passed under the shadowy forest, but the clusters of blackness held no terrors, the rifts of silver discovered no grisly shape. Night-birds murmured slumberously. The yells of slaughter dwindled behind them, masked in the distance to a confused jumble of sound. Somewhere a parrot called, like an eery echo: "Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!" So they came to the tree-fringed water's edge and saw the galley lying at anchor, her sail shining white in the moonlight. Already the stars were paling for dawn.

4

In the ghastly whiteness of dawn a handful of tattered, bloodstained figures staggered through the trees and out on to the narrow beach. There were forty-four of them, and they were a cowed and demoralized band. With panting haste they plunged into the water and began to wade toward the galley, when a stern challenge brought them up standing.

Etched against the whitening sky they saw Conan the Cimmerian standing in the bows, sword in hand, his black mane tossing in the dawn wind.

"Stand!" he ordered. "Come no nearer. What would you have, dogs?"

"Let us come aboard!" croaked a hairy rogue fingering a bloody stump of ear. "We'd be gone from this devil's island."

"The first man who tries to climb over the side, I'll split his skull," promised Conan.

They were forty-four to one, but he held the whip-hand. The fight had been hammered out of them.

"Let us come aboard, good Conan," whined a red-sashed Zamorian, glancing fearfully over his shoulder at the silent woods. "We have been so mauled, bitten, scratched and rended, and are so weary from fighting and running, that not one of us can lift a sword."

"Where is that dog Aratus?" demanded Conan.

"Dead, with the others! It was devils fell upon us! They were rending us to pieces before we could awake--a dozen good rovers died in their sleep. The ruins were full of flame-eyed shadows, with tearing fangs and sharp talons."

"Aye!" put in another corsair. "They were the demons of the isle, which took the forms of molten images, to befool us. Ishtar! We lay down to sleep among them. We are no cowards. We fought them as long as mortal man may strive against the powers of darkness. Then we broke away and left them tearing at the corpses like jackals. But surely they'll pursue us."

"Aye, let us come aboard!" clamored a lean Shemite. "Let us come in peace, or we must come sword in hand, and though we be so weary you will doubtless slay many of us, yet you can not prevail against us many."

"Then I'll knock a hole in the planks and sink her," answered Conan grimly. A frantic chorus of expostulation rose, which Conan silenced with a lion-like roar.

"Dogs! Must I aid my enemies? Shall I let you come aboard and cut out my heart?"

"Nay, nay!" they cried eagerly. "Friends--friends, Conan. We are thy comrades! We be all lusty rogues together. We hate the king of Turan, not each other."

Their gaze hung on his brown, frowning face.

"Then if I am one of the Brotherhood," he grunted, "the laws of the Trade apply to me; and since I killed your chief in fair fight, then I am your captain!"

There was no dissent. The pirates were too cowed and battered to have any thought except a desire to get away from that island of fear. Conan's gaze sought out the blood-stained figure of the Corinthian.

"How, Ivanos!" he challenged. "You took my part, once. Will you uphold my claims again?"

"Aye, by Mitra!" The pirate, sensing the trend of feeling, was eager to ingratiate himself with the Cimmerian. "He is right, lads; he is our lawful captain!"

A medley of acquiescence rose, lacking enthusiasm perhaps, but with sincerity accentuated by the feel of the silent woods behind them which might mask creeping ebony devils with red eyes and dripping talons.

"Swear by the hilt," Conan demanded.

Forty-four sword-hilts were lifted toward him, and forty-four voices blended in the corsairs' oath of allegiance.

Conan grinned and sheathed his sword. "Come aboard, my bold swashbucklers, and take the oars."

He turned and lifted Olivia to her feet, from where she had crouched shielded by the gunwales.

"And what of me, sir?" she asked.

"What would you?" he countered, watching her narrowly.

"To go with you, wherever your path may lie!" she cried, throwing her white arms about his bronzed neck.

The pirates, clambering over the rail, gasped in amazement.

"To sail a road of blood and slaughter?" he questioned. "This keel will stain the blue waves crimson wherever it plows."

"Aye, to sail with you on blue seas or red," she answered passionately. "You are a barbarian, and I am an outcast, denied by my people. We are both pariahs, wanderers of earth. Oh, take me with you!"

With a gusty laugh he lifted her to his fierce lips.

"I'll make you Queen of the Blue Sea! Cast off there, dogs! We'll scorch King Yildiz's pantaloons yet, by Crom!"
THE END

Contents

A WITCH SHALL BE BORN
By Robert E. Howard

1 The Blood-Red Crescent

Taramis, Queen of Khauran, awakened from a dream-haunted slumber to a silence that seemed more like the stillness of nighted catacombs than the normal quiet of a sleeping place. She lay staring into the darkness, wondering why the candles in their golden candelabra had gone out. A flecking of stars marked a gold-barred casement that lent no illumination to the interior of the chamber. But as Taramis lay there, she became aware of a spot of radiance glowing in the darkness before her. She watched, puzzled. It grew and its intensity deepened as it expanded, a widening disk of lurid light hovering against the dark velvet hangings of the opposite wall. Taramis caught her breath, starting up to a sitting position. A dark object was visible in that circle of light--a human head.

In a sudden panic the queen opened her lips to cry out for her maids; then she checked herself. The glow was more lurid, the head more vividly limned. It was a woman's head, small, delicately molded, superbly poised, with a high-piled mass of lustrous black hair. The face grew distinct as she stared--and it was the sight of this face which froze the cry in Taramis's throat. The features were her own! She might have been looking into a mirror which subtly altered her reflection, lending it a tigerish gleam of eye, a vindictive curl of lip.

"Ishtar!" gasped Taramis. "I am bewitched!"

Appallingly, the apparition spoke, and its voice was like honeyed venom.

"Bewitched? No, sweet sister! Here is no sorcery."

"Sister?" stammered the bewildered girl. "I have no sister."

"You never had a sister?" came the sweet, poisonously mocking voice. "Never a twin sister whose flesh was as soft as yours to caress or hurt?"

"Why, once I had a sister," answered Taramis, still convinced that she was in the grip of some sort of nightmare. "But she died."

The beautiful face in the disk was convulsed with the aspect of a fury; so hellish became its expression that Taramis, cowering back, half expected to see snaky locks writhe hissing about the ivory brow.

"You lie!" The accusation was spat from between the snarling red lips. "She did not die! Fool! Oh, enough of this mummery! Look--and let your sight be blasted!"

Light ran suddenly along the hangings like flaming serpents, and incredibly the candles in the golden sticks flared up again. Taramis crouched on her velvet couch, her lithe legs flexed beneath her, staring wide-eyed at the pantherish figure which posed mockingly before her. It was as if she gazed upon another Taramis, identical with herself in every contour of feature and limb, yet animated by an alien and evil personality. The face of this stranger waif reflected the opposite of every characteristic the countenance of the queen denoted. Lust and mystery sparkled in her scintillant eyes, cruelty lurked in the curl of her full red lips. Each movement of her supple body was subtly suggestive. Her coiffure imitated that of the queen's, on her feet were gilded sandals such as Taramis wore in her boudoir. The sleeveless, low-necked silk tunic, girdled at the waist with a cloth-of-gold cincture, was a duplicate of the queen's night-garment.

"Who are you?" gasped Taramis, an icy chill she could not explain creeping along her spine. "Explain your presence before I call my ladies-in-waiting to summon the guard!"

"Scream until the roof beams crack," callously answered the stranger. "Your sluts will not wake till dawn, though the palace spring into flames about them. Your guardsmen will not hear your squeals; they have been sent out of this wing of the palace."

"What!" exclaimed Taramis, stiffening with outraged majesty. "Who dared give my guardsmen such a command?"

"I did, sweet sister," sneered the other girl. "A little while ago, before I entered. They thought it was their darling adored queen. Ha! How beautifully I acted the part! With what imperious dignity, softened by womanly sweetness, did I address the great louts who knelt in their armor and plumed helmets!"

Taramis felt as if a stifling net of bewilderment were being drawn about her.

"Who are you?" she cried desperately. "What madness is this? Why do you come here?"

"Who am I?" There was the spite of a she-cobra's hiss in the soft response. The girl stepped to the edge of the couch, grasped the queen's white shoulders with fierce fingers, and bent to glare full into the startled eyes of Taramis. And under the spell of that hypnotic glare, the queen forgot to resent the unprecedented outrage of violent hands laid on regal flesh.

"Fool!" gritted the girl between her teeth. "Can you ask? Can you wonder? I am Salome!"

"Salome!" Taramis breathed the word, and the hairs prickled on her scalp as she realized the incredible, numbing truth of the statement. "I thought you died within the hour of your birth," she said feebly.

"So thought many," answered the woman who called herself Salome. "They carried me into the desert to die, damn them! I, a mewing, puling babe whose life was so young it was scarcely the flicker of a candle. And do you know why they bore me forth to die?"

"I--I have heard the story--" faltered Taramis.

Salome laughed fiercely, and slapped her bosom. The low-necked tunic left the upper parts of her firm breasts bare, and between them there shone a curious mark--a crescent, red as blood.

"The mark of the witch!" cried Taramis, recoiling.

"Aye!" Salome's laughter was dagger-edged with hate. "The curse of the kings of Khauran! Aye, they tell the tale in the market-places, with wagging beards and rolling eyes, the pious fools! They tell how the first queen of our line had traffic with a fiend of darkness and bore him a daughter who lives in foul legendry to this day. And thereafter in each century a girl baby was born into the Askhaurian dynasty, with a scarlet half-moon between her breasts, that signified her destiny.

"'Every century a witch shall be born.' So ran the ancient curse. And so it has come to pass. Some were slain at birth, as they sought to slay me. Some walked the earth as witches, proud daughters of Khauran, with the moon of hell burning upon their ivory bosoms. Each was named Salome. I too am Salome. It was always Salome, the witch. It will always be Salome, the witch, even when the mountains of ice have roared down from the pole and ground the civilizations to ruin, and a new world has risen from the ashes and dust--even then there shall be Salomes to walk the earth, to trap men's hearts by their sorcery, to dance before the kings of the world, to see the heads of the wise men fall at their pleasure."

"But--but you--" stammered Taramis.

"I?" The scintillant eyes burned like dark fires of mystery. "They carried me into the desert far from the city, and laid me naked on the hot sand, under the flaming sun. And then they rode away and left me for the jackals and the vultures and the desert wolves.

"But the life in me was stronger than the life in common folk, for it partakes of the essence of the forces that seethe in the black gulfs beyond mortal ken. The hours passed, and the sun slashed down like the molten flames of hell, but I did not die aye, something of that torment I remember, faintly and far away, as one remembers a dim, formless dream. Then there were camels, and yellow-skinned men who wore silk robes and spoke in a weird tongue. Strayed from the caravan road, they passed close by, and their leader saw me, and recognized the scarlet crescent on my bosom. He took me up and gave me life.

"He was a magician from far Khitai, returning to his native kingdom after a journey to Stygia He took me with him to purple-towering Paikang, its minarets rising amid the vine-festooned jungles of bamboo, and there I grew to womanhood under his teaching. Age had steeped him deep in black wisdom, not weakened his powers of evil. Many things he taught me--"

She paused, smiling enigmatically, with wicked mystery gleaming in her dark eyes. Then she tossed her head.

"He drove me from him at last, saying that I was but a common witch in spite of his teachings, and not fit to command the mighty sorcery he would have taught me. He would have made me queen of the world and ruled the nations through me, he said, but I was only a harlot of darkness. But what of it? I could never endure to seclude myself in a golden tower, and spend the long hours staring into a crystal globe, mumbling over incantations written on serpent's skin in the blood of virgins, poring over musty volumes in forgotten languages.

"He said I was but an earthly sprite, knowing naught of the deeper gulfs of cosmic sorcery. Well, this world contains all I desire--power, and pomp, and glittering pageantry, handsome men and soft women for my paramours and my slaves. He had told me who I was, of the curse and my heritage. I have returned to take that to which I have as much right as you. Now it is mine by right of possession."

"What do you mean?" Taramis sprang up and faced her sister, stung out of her bewilderment and fright. "Do you imagine that by drugging a few of my maids and tricking a few of my guardsmen you have established a claim to the throne of Khauran? Do not forget that I am Queen of Khauran! I shall give you a place of honor, as my sister, but--"

Salome laughed hatefully.

"How generous of you, dear, sweet sister! But before you begin putting me in my place--perhaps you will tell me whose soldiers camp in the plain outside the city walls?"

"They are the Shemitish mercenaries of Constantius, the Kothic voivode of the Free Companies."

"And what do they in Khauran?" cooed Salome.

Taramis felt that she was being subtly mocked, but she answered with an assumption of dignity which she scarcely felt.

"Constantius asked permission to pass along the borders of Khauran on his way to Turan. He himself is hostage for their good behavior as long as they are within my domains."

"And Constantius," pursued Salome. "Did he not ask your hand today?"

Taramis shot her a clouded glance of suspicion.

"How did you know that?"

An insolent shrug of the slim naked shoulders was the only reply.

"You refused, dear sister?"

"Certainly I refused!" exclaimed Taramis angrily. "Do you, an Askhaurian princess yourself, suppose that the Queen of Khauran could treat such a proposal with anything but disdain? Wed a bloody-handed adventurer, a man exiled from his own kingdom because of his crimes, and the leader of organized plunderers and hired murderers?

"I should never have allowed him to bring his black-bearded slayers into Khauran. But he is virtually a prisoner in the south tower, guarded by my soldiers. Tomorrow I shall bid him order his troops to leave the kingdom. He himself shall be kept captive until they are over the border. Meantime, my soldiers man the walls of the city, and I have warned him that he will answer for any outrages perpetrated on the villagers or shepherds by his mercenaries."

"He is confined in the south tower?" asked Salome.

"That is what I said. Why do you ask?"

For answer Salome clapped her hands, and lifting her voice, with a gurgle of cruel mirth in it, called: "The queen grants you an audience, Falcon!"

A gold-arabesqued door opened and a tall figure entered the chamber, at the sight of which Taramis cried out in amazement and anger.

"Constantius! You dare enter my chamber!"

"As you see, Your Majesty!" He bent his dark, hawk-like head in mock humility.

Constantius, whom men called Falcon, was tall, broad-shouldered, slim-waisted, lithe and strong as pliant steel. He was handsome in an aquiline, ruthless way. His face was burnt dark by the sun, and his hair, which grew far back from his high, narrow forehead, was black as a raven. His dark eyes were penetrating and alert, the hardness of his thin lips not softened by his thin black mustache. His boots were of Kordavan leather, his hose and doublet of plain, dark silk, tarnished with the wear of the camps and the stains of armor rust.

Twisting his mustache, he let his gaze travel up and down the shrinking queen with an effrontery that made her wince.

"By Ishtar, Taramis," he said silkily, "I find you more alluring in your night-tunic than in your queenly robes. Truly, this is an auspicious night!"

Fear grew in the queen's dark eyes. She was no fool; she knew that Constantius would never dare this outrage unless he was sure of himself.

"You are mad!" she said. "If I am in your power in this chamber, you are no less in the power of my subjects, who will rend you to pieces if you touch me. Go at once, if you would live."

Both laughed mockingly, and Salome made an impatient gesture.

"Enough of this farce; let us on to the next act in the comedy. Listen, dear sister: it was I who sent Constantius here. When I decided to take the throne of Khauran, I cast about for a man to aid me, and chose the Falcon, because of his utter lack of all characteristics men call good."

"I am overwhelmed, princess," murmured Constantius sardonically, with a profound bow.

"I sent him to Khauran, and, once his men were camped in the plain outside, and he was in the palace, I entered the city by that small gate in the west wall--the fools guarding it thought it was you returning from some nocturnal adventure--"

"You hell-cat!" Taramis's cheeks flamed and her resentment got the better of her regal reserve.

Salome smiled hardly.

"They were properly surprised and shocked, but admitted me without question. I entered the palace the same way, and gave the order to the surprised guards that sent them marching away, as well as the men who guarded Constantius in the south tower. Then I came here, attending to the ladies-in-waiting on the way."

Taramis's fingers clenched and she paled.

"Well, what next?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"Listen!" Salome inclined her head. Faintly through the casement there came the clank of marching men in armor; gruff voices shouted in an alien tongue, and cries of alarm mingled with the shouts.

"The people awaken and grow fearful," said Constantius sardonically. "You had better go and reassure them, Salome!"

"Call me Taramis," answered Salome. "We must become accustomed to it."

"What have you done?" cried Taramis. "What have you done?"

"I have gone to the gates and ordered the soldiers to open them," answered Salome. "They were astounded, but they obeyed. That is the Falcon's army you hear, marching into the city."

"You devil!" cried Taramis. "You have betrayed my people, in my guise! You have made me seem a traitor! Oh, I shall go to them--"

With a cruel laugh Salome caught her wrist and jerked her back. The magnificent suppleness of the queen was helpless against the vindictive strength that steeled Salome's slender limbs.

"You know how to reach the dungeons from the palace, Constantius?" said the witch-girl. "Good. Take this spitfire and lock her into the strongest cell. The jailers are all sound in drugged sleep. I saw to that. Send a man to cut their throats before they can awaken. None must ever know what has occurred tonight. Thenceforward I am Taramis, and Taramis is a nameless prisoner in an unknown dungeon."

Constantius smiled with a glint of strong white teeth under his thin mustache.

"Very good; but you would not deny me a little--ah--amusement first?"

"Not I! Tame the scornful hussy as you will." With a wicked laugh Salome flung her sister into the Kothian's arms, and turned away through the door that opened into the outer corridor.

Fright widened Taramis's lovely eyes, her supple figure rigid and straining against Constantius's embrace. She forgot the men marching in the streets, forgot the outrage to her queenship, in the face of the menace to her womanhood. She forgot all sensations but terror and shame as she faced the complete cynicism of Constantius's burning, mocking eyes, felt his hard arms crushing her writhing body.

Salome, hurrying along the corridor outside, smiled spitefully as a scream of despair and agony rang shuddering through the palace.

2 The Tree of Death

The young soldier's hose and shirt were smeared with dried blood, wet with sweat and gray with dust. Blood oozed from the deep gash in his thigh, from the cuts on his breast and shoulder. Perspiration glistened on his livid face and his fingers were knotted in the cover of the divan on which he lay. Yet his words reflected mental suffering that outweighed physical pain.

"She must be mad!" he repeated again and again, like one still stunned by some monstrous and incredible happening. "It's like a nightmare! Taramis, whom all Khauran loves, betraying her people to that devil from Koth! Oh, Ishtar, why was I not slain? Better die than live to see our queen turn traitor and harlot!"

"Lie still, Valerius," begged the girl who was washing and bandaging his wounds with trembling hands. "Oh, please lie still, darling! You will make your wounds worse. I dared not summon a leech--"

"No," muttered the wounded youth. "Constantius's blue-bearded devils will be searching the quarters for wounded Khaurani; they'll hang every man who has wounds to show he fought against them. Oh, Taramis, how could you betray the people who worshipped you?" In his fierce agony he writhed, weeping in rage and shame, and the terrified girl caught him in her arms, straining his tossing head against her bosom, imploring him to be quiet.

"Better death than the black shame that has come upon Khauran this day," he groaned. "Did you see it, Ivga?"

"No, Valerius." Her soft, nimble fingers were again at work, gently cleansing and closing the gaping edges of his raw wounds. "I was awakened by the noise of fighting in the streets--I looked out a casement and saw the Shemites cutting down people; then presently I heard you calling me faintly from the alley door."

"I had reached the limits of my strength," he muttered. "I fell in the alley and could not rise. I knew they'd find me soon if I lay there--I killed three of the blue-bearded beasts, by Ishtar! They'll never swagger through Khauran's streets, by the gods! The fiends are tearing their hearts in hell!"

The trembling girl crooned soothingly to him, as to a wounded child, and closed his panting lips with her own cool sweet mouth. But the fire that raged in his soul would not allow him to lie silent.

"I was not on the wall when the Shemites entered," he burst out. "I was asleep in the barracks, with the others not on duty. It was just before dawn when our captain entered, and his face was pale under his helmet. 'The Shemites are in the city,' he said. 'The queen came to the southern gate and gave orders that they should be admitted. She made the men come down from the walls, where they've been on guard since Constantius entered the kingdom. I don't understand it, and neither does anyone else, but I heard her give the order, and we obeyed as we always do. We are ordered to assemble in the square before the palace. Form ranks outside the barracks and march--leave your arms and armor here. Ishtar knows what this means, but it is the queen's order.'

"Well, when we came to the square the Shemites were drawn up on foot opposite the palace, ten thousand of the blue-bearded devils, fully armed, and people's heads were thrust out of every window and door on the square. The streets leading into the square were thronged by bewildered folk. Taramis was standing on the steps of the palace, alone except for Constantius, who stood stroking his mustache like a great lean cat who has just devoured a sparrow. But fifty Shemites with bows in their hands were ranged below them.

"That's where the queen's guard should have been, but they were drawn up at the foot of the palace stair, as puzzled as we, though they had come fully armed, in spite of the queen's order.

"Taramis spoke to us then, and told us that she had reconsidered the proposal made her by Constantius--why, only yesterday she threw it in his teeth in open court--and that she had decided to make him her royal consort. She did not explain why she had brought the Shemites into the city so treacherously. But she said that, as Constantius had control of a body of professional fighting-men, the army of Khauran would no longer be needed, and therefore she disbanded it, and ordered us to go quietly to our homes.

"Why, obedience to our queen is second nature to us, but we were struck dumb and found no word to answer. We broke ranks almost before we knew what we were doing, like men in a daze.

"But when the palace guard was ordered to disarm likewise and disband, the captain of the guard, Conan, interrupted. Men said he was off duty the night before, and drunk. But he was wide awake now. He shouted to the guardsmen to stand as they were until they received an order from him--and such is his dominance of his men, that they obeyed in spite of the queen. He strode up to the palace steps and glared at Taramis--and then he roared: 'This is not the queen! This isn't Taramis! It's some devil in masquerade!'

"Then hell was to pay! I don't know just what happened. I think a Shemite struck Conan, and Conan killed him. The next instant the square was a battleground. The Shemites fell on the guardsmen, and their spears and arrows struck down many soldiers who had already disbanded.

"Some of us grabbed up such weapons as we could and fought back. We hardly knew what we were fighting for, but it was against Constantius and his devils--not against Taramis, I swear it! Constantius shouted to cut the traitors down. We were not traitors!" Despair and bewilderment shook his voice. The girl murmured pityingly, not understanding it all, but aching in sympathy with her lover's suffering.

"The people did not know which side to take. It was a madhouse of confusion and bewilderment. We who fought didn't have a chance, in no formation, without armor and only half armed. The guards were fully armed and drawn up in a square, but there were only five hundred of them. They took a heavy toll before they were cut down, but there could be only one conclusion to such a battle. And while her people were being slaughtered before her, Taramis stood on the palace steps, with Constantius's arm about her waist, and laughed like a heartless, beautiful fiend! Gods, it's all mad--mad!

"I never saw a man fight as Conan fought. He put his back to the courtyard wall, and before they overpowered him the dead men were strewn in heaps thigh-deep about him. But at last they dragged him down, a hundred against one. When I saw him fall I dragged myself away feeling as if the world had burst under my very fingers. I heard Constantius call to his dogs to take the captain alive--stroking his mustache, with that hateful smile on his lips!"

That smile was on the lips of Constantius at that very moment. He sat his horse among a cluster of his men--thick-bodied Shemites with curled blue-black beards and hooked noses; the low-swinging sun struck glints from their peaked helmets and the silvered scales of their corselets. Nearly a mile behind, the walls and towers of Khauran rose sheer out of the meadowlands.

By the side of the caravan road a heavy cross had been planted, and on this grim tree a man hung, nailed there by iron spikes through his hands and feet. Naked but for a loin-cloth, the man was almost a giant in stature, and his muscles stood out in thick corded ridges on limbs and body, which the sun had long ago burned brown. The perspiration of agony beaded his face and his mighty breast, but from under the tangled black mane that fell over his low, broad forehead, his blue eyes blazed with an unquenched fire. Blood oozed sluggishly from the lacerations in his hands and feet.

Constantius saluted him mockingly.

"I am sorry, captain," he said, "that I cannot remain to ease your last hours, but I have duties to perform in yonder city--I must not keep your delicious queen waiting!" He laughed softly. "So I leave you to your own devices--and those beauties!" He pointed meaningly at the black shadows which swept incessantly back and forth, high above.

"Were it not for them, I imagine that a powerful brute like yourself should live on the cross for days. Do not cherish any illusions of rescue because I am leaving you unguarded. I have had it proclaimed that anyone seeking to take your body, living or dead, from the cross, will be flayed alive together with all the members of his family, in the public square. I am so firmly established in Khauran that my order is as good as a regiment of guardsmen. I am leaving no guard, because the vultures will not approach as long as anyone is near, and I do not wish them to feel any constraint. That is also why I brought you so far from the city. These desert vultures approach the walls no closer than this spot.

"And so, brave captain, farewell! I will remember you when, in an hour, Taramis lies in my arms."

Blood started afresh from the pierced palms as the victim's mallet-like fists clenched convulsively on the spike-heads. Knots and bunches of muscle started out of the massive arms, and Conan beat his head forward and spat savagely at Constantius's face. The voivode laughed coolly, wiped the saliva from his gorget and reined his horse about.

"Remember me when the vultures are tearing at your living flesh," he called mockingly. "The desert scavengers are a particularly voracious breed. I have seen men hang for hours on a cross, eyeless, earless, and scalpless, before the sharp beaks had eaten their way into their vitals."

Without a backward glance he rode toward the city, a supple, erect figure, gleaming in his burnished armor, his stolid, bearded henchmen jogging beside him. A faint rising of dust from the worn trail marked their passing.

The man hanging on the cross was the one touch of sentient life in a landscape that seemed desolate and deserted in the late evening. Khauran, less than a mile away, might have been on the other side of the world, and existing in another age.

Shaking the sweat out of his eyes, Conan stared blankly at the familiar terrain. On either side of the city, and beyond it, stretched the fertile meadowlands, with cattle browsing in the distance where fields and vineyards checkered the plain. The western and northern horizons were dotted with villages, miniature in the distance. A lesser distance to the southeast a silvery gleam marked the course of a river, and beyond that river sandy desert began abruptly to stretch away and away beyond the horizon. Conan stared at that expanse of empty waste shimmering tawnily in the late sunlight as a trapped hawk stares at the open sky. A revulsion shook him when he glanced at the gleaming towers of Khauran. The city had betrayed him--trapped him into circumstances that left him hanging to a wooden cross like a hare nailed to a tree.

A red lust for vengeance swept away the thought. Curses ebbed fitfully from the man's lips. All his universe contracted, focused, became incorporated in the four iron spikes that held him from life and freedom. His great muscles quivered, knotting like iron cables. With the sweat starting out on his graying skin, he sought to gain leverage, to tear the nails from the wood. It was useless. They had been driven deep. Then he tried to tear his hands off the spikes, and it was not the knifing, abysmal agony that finally caused him to cease his efforts, but the futility of it. The spike-heads were broad and heavy; he could not drag them through the wounds. A surge of helplessness shook the giant, for the first time in his life. He hung motionless, his head resting on his breast, shutting his eyes against the aching glare of the sun.

A beat of wings caused him to look, just as a feathered shadow shot down out of the sky. A keen beak, stabbing at his eyes, cut his cheek, and he jerked his head aside, shutting his eyes involuntarily. He shouted, a croaking, desperate shout of menace, and the vultures swerved away and retreated, frightened by the sound. They resumed their wary circling above his head. Blood trickled over Conan's mouth, and he licked his lips involuntarily, spat at the salty taste.

Thirst assailed him savagely. He had drunk deeply of wine the night before, and no water had touched his lips since before the battle in the square, that dawn. And killing was thirsty, salt-sweaty work. He glared at the distant river as a man in hell glares through the opened grille. He thought of gushing freshets of white water he had breasted, laved to the shoulders in liquid jade. He remembered great horns of foaming ale, jacks of sparkling wine gulped carelessly or spilled on the tavern floor. He bit his lip to keep from bellowing in intolerable anguish as a tortured animal bellows.

The sun sank, a lurid ball in a fiery sea of blood. Against a crimson rampart that banded the horizon the towers of the city floated unreal as a dream. The very sky was tinged with blood to his misted glare. He licked his blackened lips and stared with bloodshot eyes at the distant river. It too seemed crimson with blood, and the shadows crawling up from the east seemed black as ebony.

In his dulled ears sounded the louder beat of wings. Lifting his head he watched with the burning glare of a wolf the shadows wheeling above him. He knew that his shouts would frighten them away no longer. One dipped--dipped--lower and lower. Conan drew his head back as far as he could, waiting with terrible patience. The vulture swept in with a swift roar of wings. Its beak flashed down, ripping the skin on Conan's chin as he jerked his head aside; then before the bird could flash away, Conan's head lunged forward on his mighty neck muscles, and his teeth, snapping like those of a wolf, locked on the bare, wattled neck.

Instantly the vulture exploded into squawking, flapping hysteria. Its thrashing wings blinded the man, and its talons ripped his chest. But grimly he hung on, the muscles starting out in lumps on his jaws. And the scavenger's neck bones crunched between those powerful teeth. With a spasmodic flutter the bird hung limp. Conan let go, spat blood from his mouth. The other vultures, terrified by the fate of their companion, were in full flight to a distant tree, where they perched like black demons in conclave.

Ferocious triumph surged through Conan's numbed brain. Life beat strongly and savagely through his veins. He could still deal death; he still lived. Every twinge of sensation, even of agony, was a negation of death.

"By Mitra!" Either a voice spoke, or he suffered from hallucination. "In all my life I have never seen such a thing!"

Shaking the sweat and blood from his eyes, Conan saw four horsemen sitting their steeds in the twilight and staring up at him. Three were lean, white-robed hawks, Zuagir tribesmen without a doubt, nomads from beyond the river. The other was dressed like them in a white, girdled khalat and a flowing head-dress which, banded about the temples with a triple circlet of braided camelhair, fell to his shoulders. But he was not a Shemite. The dust was not so thick, nor Conan's hawk-like sight so clouded, that he could not perceive the man's facial characteristics.

He was as tall as Conan, though not so heavy-limbed. His shoulders were broad and his supple figure was hard as steel and whalebone. A short black beard did not altogether mask the aggressive jut of his lean jaw, and gray eyes cold and piercing as a sword gleamed from the shadow of the kafieh. Quieting his restless steed with a quick, sure hand, this man spoke: "By Mitra, I should know this man!"

"Aye!" It was the guttural accents of a Zuagir. "It is the Cimmerian who was captain of the queen's guard!"

"She must be casting off all her old favorites," muttered the rider. "Who'd have ever thought it of Queen Taramis? I'd rather have had a long, bloody war. It would have given us desert folk a chance to plunder. As it is we've come this close to the walls and found only this nag"--he glanced at a fine gelding led by one of the nomads--"and this dying dog."

Conan lifted his bloody head.

"If I could come down from this beam I'd make a dying dog out of you, you Zaporoskan thief!" he rasped through blackened lips.

"Mitra, the knave knows me!" exclaimed the other. "How, knave, do you know me?"

"There's only one of your breed in these parts," muttered Conan. "You are Olgerd Vladislav, the outlaw chief."

"Aye! and once a hetman of the kozaki of the Zaporoskan River, as you have guessed. Would you like to live?"

"Only a fool would ask that question," panted Conan.

"I am a hard man," said Olgerd, "and toughness is the only quality I respect in a man. I shall judge if you are a man, or only a dog after all, fit only to lie here and die."

"If we cut him down we may be seen from the walls," objected one of the nomads.

Olgerd shook his head.

"The dusk is deep. Here, take this ax, Djebal, and cut down the cross at the base."

"If it falls forward it will crush him," objected Djebal. "I can cut it so it will fall backward, but then the shock of the fall may crack his skull and tear loose all his entrails."

"If he's worthy to ride with me he'll survive it," answered Olgerd imperturbably. "If not, then he doesn't deserve to live. Cut!"

The first impact of the battle-ax against the wood and its accompanying vibrations sent lances of agony through Conan's swollen feet and hands. Again and again the blade fell, and each stroke reverberated on his bruised brain, setting his tortured nerves aquiver. But he set his teeth and made no sound. The ax cut through, the cross reeled on its splintered base and toppled backward. Conan made his whole body a solid knot of iron-hard muscle, jammed his head back hard against the wood and held it rigid there. The beam struck the ground heavily and rebounded slightly. The impact tore his wounds and dazed him for an instant. He fought the rushing tide of blackness, sick and dizzy, but realized that the iron muscles that sheathed his vitals had saved him from permanent injury.

And he had made no sound, though blood oozed from his nostrils and his belly-muscles quivered with nausea. With a grunt of approval Djebal bent over him with a pair of pincers used to draw horse-shoe nails, and gripped the head of the spike in Conan's right hand, tearing the skin to get a grip on the deeply embedded head. The pincers were small for that work. Djebal sweated and tugged, swearing and wrestling with the stubborn iron, working it back and forth--in swollen flesh as well as in wood. Blood started, oozing over the Cimmerian's fingers. He lay so still he might have been dead, except for the spasmodic rise and fall of his great chest. The spike gave way, and Djebal held up the blood-stained thing with a grunt of satisfaction, then flung it away and bent over the other.

The process was repeated, and then Djebal turned his attention to Conan's skewered feet. But the Cimmerian, struggling up to a sitting posture, wrenched the pincers from his fingers and sent him staggering backward with a violent shove. Conan's hands were swollen to almost twice their normal size. His fingers felt like misshapen thumbs, and closing his hands was an agony that brought blood streaming from under his grinding teeth. But somehow, clutching the pincers clumsily with both hands, he managed to wrench out first one spike and then the other. They were not driven so deeply into the wood as the others had been.

He rose stiffly and stood upright on his swollen, lacerated feet, swaying drunkenly, the icy sweat dripping from his face and body. Cramps assailed him and he clamped his jaws against the desire to retch.

Olgerd, watching him impersonally, motioned him toward the stolen horse. Conan stumbled toward it, and every step was a stabbing, throbbing hell that flecked his lips with bloody foam. One misshapen, groping hand fell clumsily on the saddle-bow, a bloody foot somehow found the stirrup. Setting his teeth, he swung up, and he almost fainted in midair; but he came down in the saddle--and as he did so, Olgerd struck the horse sharply with his whip. The startled beast reared, and the man in the saddle swayed and slumped like a sack of sand, almost unseated. Conan had wrapped a rein about each hand, holding it in place with a clamping thumb. Drunkenly he exerted the strength of his knotted biceps, wrenching the horse down; it screamed, its jaw almost dislocated.

One of the Shemites lifted a water flask questioningly.

Olgerd shook his head.

"Let him wait until we get to camp. It's only ten miles. If he's fit to live in the desert he'll live that long without a drink."

The group rode like swift ghosts toward the river; among them Conan swayed like a drunken man in the saddle, bloodshot eyes glazed, foam drying on his blackened lips.

3 A Letter to Nemedia

The savant Astreas, traveling in the East in his never-tiring search for knowledge, wrote a letter to his friend and fellow philosopher Alcemides, in his native Nemedia, which constitutes the entire knowledge of the Western nations concerning the events of that period in the East, always a hazy, half-mythical region in the minds of the Western folk.

Astreas wrote, in part: "You can scarcely conceive, my dear old friend, of the conditions now existing in this tiny kingdom since Queen Taramis admitted Constantius and his mercenaries, an event which I briefly described in my last, hurried letter. Seven months have passed since then, during which time it seems as though the devil himself had been loosed in this unfortunate realm. Taramis seems to have gone quite mad; whereas formerly she was famed for her virtue, justice and tranquility, she is now notorious for qualities precisely opposite to those just enumerated. Her private life is a scandal--or perhaps 'private' is not the correct term, since the queen makes no attempt to conceal the debauchery of her court. She constantly indulges in the most infamous revelries, in which the unfortunate ladies of the court are forced to join, young married women as well as virgins."

"She herself has not bothered to marry her paramour, Constantius, who sits on the throne beside her and reigns as her royal consort, and his officers follow his example, and do not hesitate to debauch any woman they desire, regardless of her rank or station. The wretched kingdom groans under exorbitant taxation, the farms are stripped to the bone, and the merchants go in rags which are all that is left them by the tax-gatherers. Nay, they are lucky if they escape with a whole skin.

"I sense your incredulity, good Alcemides; you will fear that I exaggerate conditions in Khauran. Such conditions would be unthinkable in any of the Western countries, admittedly. But you must realize the vast difference that exists between West and East, especially this part of the East. In the first place, Khauran is a kingdom of no great size, one of the many principalities which at one time formed the eastern part of the empire of Koth, and which later regained the independence which was theirs at a still earlier age. This part of the world is made up of these tiny realms, diminutive in comparison with the great kingdoms of the West, or the great sultanates of the farther East, but important in their control of the caravan routes, and in the wealth concentrated in them."

"Khauran is the most southeasterly of these principalities, bordering on the very deserts of eastern Shem. The city of Khauran is the only city of any magnitude in the realm, and stands within sight of the river which separates the grasslands from the sandy desert, like a watchtower to guard the fertile meadows behind it. The land is so rich that it yields three and four crops a year, and the plains north and west of the city are dotted with villages. To one accustomed to the great plantations and stock-farms of the West, it is strange to see these tiny fields and vineyards; yet wealth in grain and fruit pours from them as from a horn of plenty. The villagers are agriculturists, nothing else. Of a mixed, aboriginal race, they are unwarlike, unable to protect themselves, and forbidden the possession of arms. Dependent wholly upon the soldiers of the city for protection, they are helpless under the present conditions. So the savage revolt of the rural sections, which would be a certainty in any Western nation, is here impossible.

"They toil supinely under the iron hand of Constantius, and his black-bearded Shemites ride incessantly through the fields, with whips in their hands, like the slave-drivers of the black serfs who toil in the plantations of southern Zingara."

"Nor do the people of the city fare any better. Their wealth is stripped from them, their fairest daughters taken to glut the insatiable lust of Constantius and his mercenaries. These men are utterly without mercy or compassion, possessed of all the characteristics our armies learned to abhor in our wars against the Shemitish allies of Argos--inhuman cruelty, lust, and wild-beast ferocity. The people of the city are Khauran's ruling caste, predominantly Hyborian, and valorous and war-like. But the treachery of their queen delivered them into the hands of their oppressors. The Shemites are the only armed force in Khauran, and the most hellish punishment is inflicted on any Khaurani found possessing weapons. A systematic persecution to destroy the young Khaurani men able to bear arms has been savagely pursued. Many have ruthlessly been slaughtered, others sold as slaves to the Turanians. Thousands have fled the kingdom and either entered the service of other rulers, or become outlaws, lurking in numerous bands along the borders."

"At present there is some possibility of invasion from the desert, which is inhabited by tribes of Shemitish nomads. The mercenaries of Constantius are men from the Shemitish cities of the west, Pelishtim, Anakim, Akkharim, and are ardently hated by the Zuagirs and other wandering tribes. As you know, good Alcemides, the countries of these barbarians are divided into the western meadowlands which stretch to the distant ocean, and in which rise the cities of the town-dwellers, and the eastern deserts, where the lean nomads hold sway; there is incessant warfare between the dwellers of the cities and the dwellers of the desert."

"The Zuagirs have fought with and raided Khauran for centuries, without success, but they resent its conquest by their western kin. It is rumored that their natural antagonism is being fomented by the man who was formerly the captain of the queen's guard, and who, somehow escaping the hate of Constantius, who actually had him upon the cross, fled to the nomads. He is called Conan, and is himself a barbarian, one of those gloomy Cimmerians whose ferocity our soldiers have more than once learned to their bitter cost. It is rumored that he has become the right-hand man of Olgerd Vladislav, the kozak adventurer who wandered down from the northern steppes and made himself chief of a band of Zuagirs. There are also rumors that this band has increased vastly in the last few months, and that Olgerd, incited no doubt by this Cimmerian, is even considering a raid on Khauran.

"It can not be anything more than a raid, as the Zuagirs are without siege-machines, or the knowledge of investing a city, and it has been proven repeatedly in the past that the nomads in their loose formation, or rather lack of formation, are no match in hand-to-hand fighting for the well-disciplined, fully-armed warriors of the Shemitish cities. The natives of Khauran would perhaps welcome this conquest, since the nomads could deal with them no more harshly than their present masters, and even total extermination would be preferable to the suffering they have to endure. But they are so cowed and helpless that they could give no aid to the invaders.

"Their plight is most wretched. Taramis, apparently possessed of a demon, stops at nothing. She has abolished the worship of Ishtar, and turned the temple into a shrine of idolatry. She has destroyed the ivory image of the goddess which these eastern Hyborians worship (and which, inferior as it is to the true religion of Mitra which we Western nations recognize, is still superior to the devil-worship of the Shemites) and filled the temple of Ishtar with obscene images of every imaginable sort--gods and goddesses of the night, portrayed in all the salacious and perverse poses and with all the revolting characteristics that a degenerate brain could conceive. Many of these images are to be identified as foul deities of the Shemites, the Turanians, the Vendhyans, and the Khitans, but others are reminiscent of a hideous and half-remembered antiquity, vile shapes forgotten except in the most obscure legends. Where the queen gained the knowledge of them I dare not even hazard a guess.

"She has instituted human sacrifice, and since her mating with Constantius, no less then five hundred men, women and children have been immolated. Some of these have died on the altar she has set up in the temple, herself wielding the sacrificial dagger, but most have met a more horrible doom.

"Taramis has placed some sort of monster in a crypt in the temple. What it is, and whence it came, none knows. But shortly after she had crushed the desperate revolt of her soldiers against Constantius, she spent a night alone in the desecrated temple, alone except for a dozen bound captives, and the shuddering people saw thick, foul-smelling smoke curling up from the dome, heard all night the frenetic chanting of the queen, and the agonized cries of her tortured captives; and toward dawn another voice mingled with these sounds--a strident, inhuman croaking that froze the blood of all who heard.

"In the full dawn Taramis reeled drunkenly from the temple, her eyes blazing with demoniac triumph. The captives were never seen again, nor the croaking voice heard. But there is a room in the temple into which none ever goes but the queen, driving a human sacrifice before her. And this victim is never seen again. All know that in that grim chamber lurks some monster from the black night of ages, which devours the shrieking humans Taramis delivers up to it.

"I can no longer think of her as a mortal woman, but as a rabid she-fiend, crouching in her blood-fouled lair amongst the bones and fragments of her victims, with taloned, crimsoned fingers. That the gods allow her to pursue her awful course unchecked almost shakes my faith in divine justice."

"When I compare her present conduct with her deportment when first I came to Khauran, seven months ago, I am confused with bewilderment, and almost inclined to the belief held by many of the people--that a demon has possessed the body of Taramis. A young soldier, Valerius, had another belief. He believed that a witch had assumed a form identical with that of Khauran's adored ruler. He believed that Taramis had been spirited away in the night, and confined in some dungeon, and that this being ruling in her place was but a female sorcerer. He swore that he would find the real queen, if she still lived, but I greatly fear that he himself has fallen victim to the cruelty of Constantius. He was implicated in the revolt of the palace guards, escaped and remained in hiding for some time, stubbornly refusing to seek safety abroad, and it was during this time that I encountered him and he told me his beliefs.

"But he has disappeared, as so many have, whose fate one dares not conjecture, and I fear he has been apprehended by the spies of Constantius.

"But I must conclude this letter and slip it out of the city by means of a swift carrier-pigeon, which will carry it to the post whence I purchased it, on the borders of Koth. By rider and camel-train it will eventually come to you. I must haste, before dawn. It is late, and the stars gleam whitely on the gardened roofs of Khauran. A shuddering silence envelops the city, in which I hear the throb of a sullen drum from the distant temple. I doubt not that Taramis is there, concocting more devilry."

But the savant was incorrect in his conjecture concerning the whereabouts of the woman he called Taramis. The girl whom the world knew as queen of Khauran stood in a dungeon, lighted only by a flickering torch which played on her features, etching the diabolical cruelty of her beautiful countenance.

On the bare stone floor before her crouched a figure whose nakedness was scarcely covered with tattered rags.

This figure Salome touched contemptuously with the upturned toe of her gilded sandal, and smiled vindictively as her victim shrank away.

"You do not love my caresses, sweet sister?"

Taramis was still beautiful, in spite of her rags and the imprisonment and abuse of seven weary months. She did not reply to her sister's taunts, but bent her head as one grown accustomed to mockery.

This resignation did not please Salome. She bit her red lip, and stood tapping the toe of her shoe against the floor as she frowned down at the passive figure. Salome was clad in the barbaric splendor of a woman of Shushan. Jewels glittered in the torchlight on her gilded sandals, on her gold breast-plates and the slender chains that held them in place. Gold anklets clashed as she moved, jeweled bracelets weighted her bare arms. Her tall coiffure was that of a Shemitish woman, and jade pendants hung from gold hoops in her ears, flashing and sparkling with each impatient movement of her haughty head. A gem-crusted girdle supported a silk shirt so transparent that it was in the nature of a cynical mockery of convention.

Suspended from her shoulders and trailing down her back hung a darkly scarlet cloak, and this was thrown carelessly over the crook of one arm and the bundle that arm supported.

Salome stooped suddenly and with her free hand grasped her sister's dishevelled hair and forced back the girl's head to stare into her eyes. Taramis met that tigerish glare without flinching.

"You are not so ready with your tears as formerly, sweet sister," muttered the witch-girl.

"You shall wring no more tears from me," answered Taramis. "Too often you have reveled in the spectacle of the queen of Khauran sobbing for mercy on her knees. I know that you have spared me only to torment me; that is why you have limited your tortures to such torments as neither slay nor permanently disfigure. But I fear you no longer; you have strained out the last vestige of hope, fright and shame from me. Slay me and be done with it, for I have shed my last tear for your enjoyment, you she-devil from hell!"

"You flatter yourself, my dear sister," purred Salome. "So far it is only your handsome body that I have caused to suffer, only your pride and self-esteem that I have crushed. You forget that, unlike myself, you are capable of mental torment. I have observed this when I have regaled you with narratives concerning the comedies I have enacted with some of your stupid subjects. But this time I have brought more vivid proof of these farces. Did you know that Krallides, your faithful councillor, had come skulking back from Turan and been captured?"

Taramis turned pale.

"What--what have you done to him?"

For answer Salome drew the mysterious bundle from under her cloak. She shook off the silken swathings and held it up--the head of a young man, the features frozen in a convulsion as if death had come in the midst of inhuman agony.

Taramis cried out as if a blade had pierced her heart.

"Oh, Ishtar! Krallides!"

"Aye! He was seeking to stir up the people against me, poor fool, telling them that Conan spoke the truth when he said I was not Taramis. How would the people rise against the Falcon's Shemites? With sticks and pebbles? Bah! Dogs are eating his headless body in the market-place, and this foul carrion shall be cast into the sewer to rot.

"How, sister!" She paused, smiling down at her victim. "Have you discovered that you still have unshed tears? Good! I reserved the mental torment for the last. Hereafter I shall show you many such sights as--this!"

Standing there in the torchlight with the severed head in her hand she did not look like anything ever borne by a human woman, in spite of her awful beauty. Taramis did not look up. She lay face down on the slimy floor, her slim body shaken in sobs of agony, beating her clenched hands against the stones. Salome sauntered toward the door, her anklets clashing at each step, her ear pendants winking in the torch-glare.

A few moments later she emerged from a door under a sullen arch that led into a court which in turn opened upon a winding alley. A man standing there turned toward her--a giant Shemite, with sombre eyes and shoulders like a bull, his great black beard falling over his mighty, silver-mailed breast.

"She wept?" His rumble was like that of a bull, deep, low-pitched and stormy. He was the general of the mercenaries, one of the few even of Constantius's associates who knew the secret of the queens of Khauran.

"Aye, Khumbanigash. There are whole sections of her sensibilities that I have not touched. When one sense is dulled by continual laceration, I will discover a newer, more poignant pang. Here, dog!" A trembling, shambling figure in rags, filth and matted hair approached, one of the beggars that slept in the alleys and open courts. Salome tossed the head to him. "Here, deaf one; cast that in the nearest sewer. Make the sign with your hands, Khumbanigash. He can not hear."

The general complied, and the tousled head bobbed, as the man turned painfully away.

"Why do you keep up this farce?" rumbled Khumbanigash. "You are so firmly established on the throne that nothing can unseat you. What if Khaurani fools learn the truth? They can do nothing. Proclaim yourself in your true identity! Show them their beloved ex-queen--and cut off her head in the public square!"

"Not yet, good Khumbanigash--"

The arched door slammed on the hard accents of Salome, the stormy reverberations of Khumbanigash. The mute beggar crouched in the courtyard, and there was none to see that the hands which held the severed head were quivering strongly brown, sinewy hands, strangely incongruous with the bent body and filthy tatters.

"I knew it!" It was a fierce, vibrant whisper, scarcely audible. "She lives! Oh, Krallides, your martyrdom was not in vain! They have her locked in that dungeon! Oh, Ishtar, if you love true men, aid me now!"

4 Wolves of the Desert

Olgerd Vladislav filled his jeweled goblet with crimson wine from a golden jug and thrust the vessel across the ebony table to Conan the Cimmerian. Olgerd's apparel would have satisfied the vanity of any Zaporoskan hetman.

His khalat was of white silk, with pearls sewn on the bosom. Girdled at the waist with a Bakhauriot belt, its skirts were drawn back to reveal his wide silken breeches, tucked into short boots of soft green leather, adorned with gold thread. On his head was a green silk turban, wound about a spired helmet chased with gold. His only weapon was a broad curved Cherkees knife in an ivory sheath girdled high on his left hip, kozak fashion. Throwing himself back in his gilded chair with its carven eagles, Olgerd spread his booted legs before him, and gulped down the sparkling wine noisily.

To his splendor the huge Cimmerian opposite him offered a strong contrast, with his square-cut black mane, brown, scarred countenance and burning blue eyes. He was clad in black mesh mail, and the only glitter about him was the broad gold buckle of the belt which supported his sword in its worn leather scabbard.

They were alone in the silk-walled tent, which was hung with gilt-worked tapestries and littered with rich carpets and velvet cushions, the loot of the caravans. From outside came a low, incessant murmur, the sound that always accompanies a great throng of men, in camp or otherwise. An occasional gust of desert wind rattled the palm-leaves.

"Today in the shadow, tomorrow in the sun," quoth Olgerd, loosening his crimson girdle a trifle and reaching again for the wine-jug. "That's the way of life. Once I was a hetman on the Zaporoska; now I'm a desert chief. Seven months ago you were hanging on a cross outside Khauran. Now you're lieutenant to the most powerful raider between Turan and the western meadows. You should be thankful to me!"

"For recognizing my usefulness?" Conan laughed and lifted the jug. "When you allow the elevation of a man, one can be sure that you'll profit by his advancement. I've earned everything I've won, with my blood and sweat." He glanced at the scars on the insides of his palms. There were scars, too, on his body, scars that had not been there seven months ago.

"You fight like a regiment of devils," conceded Olgerd. "But don't get to thinking that you've had anything to do with the recruits who've swarmed in to join us. It was our success at raiding, guided by my wit, that brought them in. These nomads are always looking for a successful leader to follow, and they have more faith in a foreigner than in one of their own race.

"There's no limit to what we may accomplish! We have eleven thousand men now. In another year we may have three times that number. We've contented ourselves, so far, with raids on the Turanian outposts and the city-states to the west. With thirty or forty thousand men we'll raid no longer. We'll invade and conquer and establish ourselves as rulers. I'll be emperor of all Shem yet, and you'll be my vizier, so long as you carry out my orders unquestioningly. In the meantime, I think we'll ride eastward and storm that Turanian outpost at Vezek, where the caravans pay toll."

Conan shook his head. "I think not."

Olgerd glared, his quick temper irritated.

"What do you mean, you think not? I do the thinking for this army!"

"There are enough men in this band now for my purpose," answered the Cimmerian. "I'm sick of waiting. I have a score to settle."

"Oh!" Olgerd scowled, and gulped wine, then grinned. "Still thinking of that cross, eh? Well, I like a good hater. But that can wait."

"You told me once you'd aid me in taking Khauran," said Conan.

"Yes, but that was before I began to see the full possibilities of our power," answered Olgerd. "I was only thinking of the loot in the city. I don't want to waste our strength unprofitably. Khauran is too strong a nut for us to crack now. Maybe in a year--"

"Within the week," answered Conan, and the kozak stared at the certainty in his voice.

"Listen," said Olgerd, "even if I were willing to throw away men on such a hare-brained attempt--what could you expect? Do you think these wolves could besiege and take a city like Khauran?"

"There'll be no siege," answered the Cimmerian. "I know how to draw Constantius out into the plain."

"And what then?" cried Olgerd with an oath. "In the arrowplay our horsemen would have the worst of it, for the armor of the asshuri is the better, and when it came to sword-strokes their close-marshaled ranks of trained swordsmen would cleave through our loose lines and scatter our men like chaff before the wind."

"Not if there were three thousand desperate Hyborian horsemen fighting in a solid wedge such as I could teach them," answered Conan.

"And where would you secure three thousand Hyborians?" asked Olgerd with vast sarcasm. "Will you conjure them out of the air?"

"I have them," answered the Cimmerian imperturbably. "Three thousand men of Khauran camp at the oasis of Akrel awaiting my orders."

"What?" Olgerd glared like a startled wolf.

"Aye. Men who had fled from the tyranny of Constantius. Most of them have been living the lives of outlaws in the deserts east of Khauran, and are gaunt and hard and desperate as man-eating tigers. One of them will be a match for any three squat mercenaries. It takes oppression and hardship to stiffen men's guts and put the fire of hell into their thews. They were broken up into small bands; all they needed was a leader. They believed the word I sent them by my riders, and assembled at the oasis and put themselves at my disposal."

"All this without my knowledge?" A feral light began to gleam in Olgerd's eye. He hitched at his weapon-girdle.

"It was I they wished to follow, not you."

"And what did you tell these outcasts to gain their allegiance?" There was a dangerous ring in Olgerd's voice.

"I told them that I'd use this horde of desert wolves to help them destroy Constantius and give Khauran back into the hands of its citizens."

"You fool!" whispered Olgerd. "Do you deem yourself chief already?"

The men were on their feet, facing each other across the ebony board, devil-lights dancing in Olgerd's cold gray eyes, a grim smile on the Cimmerian's hard lips.

"I'll have you torn between four palm-trees," said the kozak calmly.

"Call the men and bid them do it!" challenged Conan. "See if they obey you!"

Baring his teeth in a snarl, Olgerd lifted his hand--then paused. There was something about the confidence in the Cimmerian's dark face that shook him. His eyes began to burn like those of a wolf.

"You scum of the western hills," he muttered, "have you dared seek to undermine my power?"

"I didn't have to," answered Conan. "You lied when you said I had nothing to do with bringing in the new recruits. I had everything to do with it. They took your orders, but they fought for me. There is not room for two chiefs of the Zuagirs. They know I am the stronger man. I understand them better than you, and they, me; because I am a barbarian too."

"And what will they say when you ask them to fight for Khauran?" asked Olgerd sardonically.

"They'll follow me. I'll promise them a camel-train of gold from the palace. Khauran will be willing to pay that as a guerdon for getting rid of Constantius. After that, I'll lead them against the Turanians as you have planned. They want loot, and they'd as soon fight Constantius for it as anybody."

In Olgerd's eyes grew a recognition of defeat. In his red dreams of empire he had missed what was going on about him. Happenings and events that had seemed meaningless before now flashed into his mind, with their true significance, bringing a realization that Conan spoke no idle boast. The giant black-mailed figure before him was the real chief of the Zuagirs.

"Not if you die!" muttered Olgerd, and his hand flickered toward his hilt. But quick as the stroke of a great cat, Conan's arm shot across the table and his fingers locked on Olgerd's forearm. There was a snap of breaking bones, and for a tense instant the scene held: the men facing each other as motionless as images, perspiration starting out on Olgerd's forehead. Conan laughed, never easing his grip on the broken arm.

"Are you fit to live, Olgerd?"

His smile did not alter as the corded muscles rippled in knotting ridges along his forearm and his fingers ground into the kozak's quivering flesh. There was the sound of broken bones grating together and Olgerd's face turned the color of ashes; blood oozed from his lip where his teeth sank, but he uttered no sound.

With a laugh Conan released him and drew back, and the kozak swayed, caught the table edge with his good hand to steady himself.

"I give you life, Olgerd, as you gave it to me," said Conan tranquilly, "though it was for your own ends that you took me down from the cross. It was a bitter test you gave me then; you couldn't have endured it; neither could anyone, but a western barbarian.

"Take your horse and go. It's tied behind the tent, and food and water are in the saddle-bags. None will see your going, but go quickly. There's no room for a fallen chief on the desert. If the warriors see you, maimed and deposed, they'll never let you leave the camp alive."

Olgerd did not reply. Slowly, without a word, he turned and stalked across the tent, through the flapped opening. Unspeaking he climbed into the saddle of the great white stallion that stood tethered there in the shade of a spreading palm-tree; and unspeaking, with his broken arm thrust in the bosom of his khalat, he reined the steed about and rode eastward into the open desert, out of the life of the people of the Zuagir.

Inside the tent Conan emptied the wine-jug and smacked his lips with relish. Tossing the empty vessel into a corner, he braced his belt and strode out through the front opening, halting for a moment to let his gaze sweep over the lines of camel-hair tents that stretched before him, and the white-robed figures that moved among them, arguing, singing, mending bridles or whetting tulwars.

He lifted his voice in a thunder that carried to the farthest confines of the encampment: "Aie, you dogs, sharpen your ears and listen! Gather around here. I have a tale to tell you."

5 The Voice from the Crystal

In a chamber in a tower near the city wall a group of men listened attentively to the words of one of their number. They were young men, but hard and sinewy, with a bearing that comes only to men rendered desperate by adversity. They were clad in mail shirts and worn leather; swords hung at their girdles.

"I knew that Conan spoke the truth when he said it was not Taramis!" the speaker exclaimed. "For months I have haunted the outskirts of the palace, playing the part of a deaf beggar. At last I learned what I had believed--that our queen was a prisoner in the dungeons that adjoin the palace. I watched my opportunity and captured a Shemitish jailer--knocked him senseless as he left the courtyard late one night--dragged him into a cellar near by and questioned him. Before he died he told me what I have just told you, and what we have suspected all along--that the woman ruling Khauran is a witch: Salome. Taramis, he said, is imprisoned in the lowest dungeon.

"This invasion of the Zuagirs gives us the opportunity we sought. What Conan means to do, I can not say. Perhaps he merely wishes vengeance on Constantius. Perhaps he intends sacking the city and destroying it. He is a barbarian and no one can understand their minds.

"But this is what we must do: rescue Taramis while the battle rages! Constantius will march out into the plain to give battle. Even now his men are mounting. He will do this because there is not sufficient food in the city to stand a siege. Conan burst out of the desert so suddenly that there was no time to bring in supplies. And the Cimmerian is equipped for a siege. Scouts have reported that the Zuagirs have siege engines, built, undoubtedly, according to the instructions of Conan, who learned all the arts of war among the Western nations.

"Constantius does not desire a long siege; so he will march with his warriors into the plain, where he expects to scatter Conan's forces at one stroke. He will leave only a few hundred men in the city, and they will be on the walls and in the towers commanding the gates.

"The prison will be left all but unguarded. When we have freed Taramis our next actions will depend upon circumstances. If Conan wins, we must show Taramis to the people and bid them rise--they will! Oh, they will! With their bare hands they are enough to overpower the Shemites left in the city and close the gates against both the mercenaries and the nomads. Neither must get within the walls! Then we will parley with Conan. He was always loyal to Taramis. If he knows the truth, and she appeals to him, I believe he will spare the city. If, which is more probable, Constantius prevails, and Conan is routed, we must steal out of the city with the queen and seek safety in flight.

"Is all clear?"

They replied with one voice.

"Then let us loosen our blades in our scabbards, commend our souls to Ishtar, and start for the prison, for the mercenaries are already marching through the southern gate."

This was true. The dawnlight glinted on peaked helmets pouring in a steady stream through the broad arch, on the bright housings of the chargers. This would be a battle of horsemen, such as is possible only in the lands of the East. The riders flowed through the gates like a river of steel--sombre figures in black and silver mail, with their curled beards and hooked noses, and their inexorable eyes in which glimmered the fatality of their race--the utter lack of doubt or of mercy.

The streets and the walls were lined with throngs of people who watched silently these warriors of an alien race riding forth to defend their native city. There was no sound; dully, expressionless they watched, those gaunt people in shabby garments, their caps in their hands.

In a tower that overlooked the broad street that led to the southern gate, Salome lolled on a velvet couch cynically watching Constantius as he settled his broad sword-belt about his lean hips and drew on his gauntlets. They were alone in the chamber. Outside, the rhythmical clank of harness and shuffle of horses' hoofs welled up through the gold-barred casements.

"Before nightfall," quoth Constantius, giving a twirl to his thin mustache, "you'll have some captives to feed to your temple devil. Does it not grow weary of soft, city-bred flesh? Perhaps it would relish the harder thews of a desert man."

"Take care you do not fall prey to a fiercer beast than Thaug," warned the girl. "Do not forget who it is that leads these desert animals."

"I am not likely to forget," he answered. "That is one reason why I am advancing to meet him. The dog has fought in the West and knows the art of siege. My scouts had some trouble in approaching his columns, for his outriders have eyes like hawks; but they did get close enough to see the engines he is dragging on ox-cart wheels drawn by camels--catapults, rams, ballistas, mangonels--by Ishtar! he must have had ten thousand men working day and night for a month. Where he got the material for their construction is more than I can understand. Perhaps he has a treaty with the Turanians, and gets supplies from them.

"Anyway, they won't do him any good. I've fought these desert wolves before--an exchange of arrows for awhile, in which the armor of my warriors protects them--then a charge and my squadrons sweep through the loose swarms of the nomads, wheel and sweep back through, scattering them to the four winds. I'll ride back through the south gate before sunset, with hundreds of naked captives staggering at my horse's tail. We'll hold a fete tonight, in the great square. My soldiers delight in flaying their enemies alive--we will have a wholesale skinning, and make these weak-kneed townsfolk watch. As for Conan, it will afford me intense pleasure, if we take him alive, to impale him on the palace steps."

"Skin as many as you like," answered Salome indifferently. "I would like a dress made of human hide. But at least a hundred captives you must give to me--for the altar, and for Thaug."

"It shall be done," answered Constantius, with his gauntleted hand brushing back the thin hair from his high, bald forehead, burned dark by the sun. "For victory and the fair honor of Taramis!" he said sardonically, and, taking his vizored helmet under his arm, he lifted a hand in salute, and strode clanking from the chamber. His voice drifted back, harshly lifted in orders to his officers.

Salome leaned back on the couch, yawned, stretched herself like a great supple cat, and called: "Zang!"

A cat-footed priest, with features like yellowed parchment stretched over a skull, entered noiselessly.

Salome turned to an ivory pedestal on which stood two crystal globes, and taking from it the smaller, she handed the glistening sphere to the priest.

"Ride with Constantius," she said. "Give me the news of the battle. Go!"

The skull-faced man bowed low, and hiding the globe under his dark mantle, hurried from the chamber.

Outside in the city there was no sound, except the clank of hoofs and after a while the clang of a closing gate. Salome mounted a wide marble stair that led to the flat, canopied, marble-battlemented roof. She was above all other buildings in the city. The streets were deserted, the great square in front of the palace was empty. In normal times folk shunned the grim temple which rose on the opposite side of that square, but now the town looked like a dead city. Only on the southern wall and the roofs that overlooked it was there any sign of life. There the people massed thickly. They made no demonstration, did not know whether to hope for the victory or defeat of Constantius. Victory meant further misery under his intolerable rule; defeat probably meant the sack of the city and red massacre. No word had come from Conan. They did not know what to expect at his hands. They remembered that he was a barbarian.

The squadrons of the mercenaries were moving out into the plain. In the distance, just this side of the river, other dark masses were moving, barely recognizable as men on horses. Objects dotted the farther bank; Conan had not brought his siege engines across the river, apparently fearing an attack in the midst of the crossing. But he had crossed with his full force of horsemen. The sun rose and struck glints of fire from the dark multitudes. The squadrons from the city broke into a gallop; a deep roar reached the ears of the people on the wall.

The rolling masses merged, intermingled; at that distance it was a tangled confusion in which no details stood out. Charge and countercharge were not to be identified. Clouds of dust rose from the plains, under the stamping hoofs, veiling the action. Through these swirling clouds masses of riders loomed, appearing and disappearing, and spears flashed.

Salome shrugged her shoulders and descended the stair. The palace lay silent. All the slaves were on the wall, gazing vainly southward with the citizens.

She entered the chamber where she had talked with Constantius, and approached the pedestal, noting that the crystal globe was clouded, shot with bloody streaks of crimson. She bent over the ball, swearing under her breath.

"Zang!" she called. "Zang!"

Mists swirled in the sphere, resolving themselves into billowing dust-clouds through which black figures rushed unrecognizably; steel glinted like lightning in the murk. Then the face of Zang leaped into startling distinctness; it was as if the wide eyes gazed up at Salome. Blood trickled from a gash in the skull-like head, the skin was gray with sweat-runneled dust. The lips parted, writhing; to other ears than Salome's it would have seemed that the face in the crystal contorted silently. But sound to her came as plainly from those ashen lips as if the priest had been in the same room with her, instead of miles away, shouting into the smaller crystal. Only the gods of darkness knew what unseen, magic filaments linked together those shimmering spheres.

"Salome!" shrieked the bloody head. "Salome!"

"I hear!" she cried. "Speak! How goes the battle?"

"Doom is upon us!" screamed the skull-like apparition. "Khauran is lost! Aie, my horse is down and I can not win clear! Men are falling around me! They are dying like flies, in their silvered mail!"

"Stop yammering and tell me what happened!" she cried harshly.

"We rode at the desert-dogs and they came on to meet us!" yowled the priest. "Arrows flew in clouds between the hosts, and the nomads wavered. Constantius ordered the charge. In even ranks we thundered upon them.

"Then the masses of their horde opened to right and left, and through the cleft rushed three thousand Hyborian horsemen whose presence we had not even suspected. Men of Khauran, mad with hate! Big men in full armor on massive horses! In a solid wedge of steel they smote us like a thunderbolt. They split our ranks asunder before we knew what was upon us, and then the desert-men swarmed on us from either flank.

"They have ripped our ranks apart, broken and scattered us! It is a trick of that devil Conan! The siege engines are false--mere frames of palm trunks and painted silk, that fooled our scouts who saw them from afar. A trick to draw us out to our doom! Our warriors flee! Khumbanigash is down--Conan slew him. I do not see Constantius. The Khaurani rage through our milling masses like blood-mad lions, and the desert-men feather us with arrows. I--ahh!"

There was a flicker as of lightning, or trenchant steel, a burst of bright blood--then abruptly the image vanished, like a bursting bubble, and Salome was staring into an empty crystal ball that mirrored only her own furious features.

She stood perfectly still for a few moments, erect and staring into space. Then she clapped her hands and another skull-like priest entered, as silent and immobile as the first.

"Constantius is beaten," she said swiftly. "We are doomed."

"Conan will be crashing at our gates within the hour. If he catches me, I have no illusions as to what I can expect. But first I am going to make sure that my cursed sister never ascends the throne again. Follow me! Come what may, we shall give Thaug a feast."

As she descended the stairs and galleries of the palace, she heard a faint rising echo from the distant walls. The people there had begun to realize that the battle was going against Constantius. Through the dust clouds masses of horsemen were visible, racing toward the city.

Palace and prison were connected by a long closed gallery, whose vaulted roof rose on gloomy arches. Hurrying along this, the false queen and her slave passed through a heavy door at the other end that let them into the dim-lit recesses of the prison. They had emerged into a wide, arched corridor at a point near where a stone stair descended into the darkness. Salome recoiled suddenly, swearing. In the gloom of the hall lay a motionless form--a Shemitish jailer, his short beard tilted toward the roof as his head hung on a half-severed neck. As panting voices from below reached the girl's ears, she shrank back into the black shadow of an arch, pushing the priest behind her, her hand groping in her girdle.

6 The Vulture's Wings

It was the smoky light of a torch which roused Taramis, Queen of Khauran, from the slumber in which she sought forgetfulness. Lifting herself on her hand she raked back her tangled hair and blinked up, expecting to meet the mocking countenance of Salome, malign with new torments. Instead a cry of pity and horror reached her ears.

"Taramis! Oh, my Queen!"

The sound was so strange to her ears that she thought she was still dreaming. Behind the torch she could make out figures now, the glint of steel, then five countenances bent toward her, not swarthy and hook-nosed, but lean, aquiline faces, browned by the sun. She crouched in her tatters, staring wildly.

One of the figures sprang forward and fell on one knee before her, arms stretched appealingly toward her.

"Oh, Taramis! Thank Ishtar we have found you! Do you not remember me, Valerius? Once with your own lips you praised me, after the battle of Korveka!"

"Valerius!" she stammered. Suddenly tears welled into her eyes. "Oh, I dream! It is some magic of Salome's to torment me!"

"No!" The cry rang with exultation. "It is your own true vassals come to rescue you! Yet we must hasten. Constantius fights in the plain against Conan, who has brought the Zuagirs across the river, but three hundred Shemites yet hold the city. We slew the jailer and took his keys, and have seen no other guards. But we must be gone. Come!"

The queen's legs gave way, not from weakness but from the reaction. Valerius lifted her like a child, and with the torchbearer hurrying before them, they left the dungeon and went up a slimy stone stair. It seemed to mount endlessly, but presently they emerged into a corridor.

They were passing a dark arch when the torch was suddenly struck out, and the bearer cried out in fierce, brief agony. A burst of blue fire glared in the dark corridor, in which the furious face of Salome was limned momentarily, with a beastlike figure crouching beside her--then the eyes of the watchers were blinded by that blaze.

Valerius tried to stagger along the corridor with the queen; dazedly he heard the sound of murderous blows driven deep in flesh, accompanied by gasps of death and a bestial grunting. Then the queen was torn brutally from his arms, and a savage blow on his helmet dashed him to the floor.

Grimly he crawled to his feet, shaking his head in an effort to rid himself of the blue flame which seemed still to dance devilishly before him. When his blinded sight cleared, he found himself alone in the corridor--alone except for the dead. His four companions lay in their blood, heads and bosoms cleft and gashed. Blinded and dazed in that hell-born glare, they had died without an opportunity of defending themselves. The queen was gone.

With a bitter curse Valerius caught up his sword, tearing his cleft helmet from his head to clatter on the flags; blood ran down his cheek from a cut in his scalp.

Reeling, frantic with indecision, he heard a voice calling his name in desperate urgency: "Valerius! Valerius!"

He staggered in the direction of the voice, and rounded a corner just in time to have his arms filled with a soft, supple figure which flung itself frantically at him.

"Ivga! Are you mad!"

"I had to come!" she sobbed. "I followed you--hid in an arch of the outer court. A moment ago I saw her emerge with a brute who carried a woman in his arms. I knew it was Taramis, and that you had failed! Oh, you are hurt!"

"A scratch!" He put aside her clinging hands. "Quick, Ivga, tell me which way they went!"

"They fled across the square toward the temple."

He paled. "Ishtar! Oh, the fiend! She means to give Taramis to the devil she worships! Quick, Ivga! Run to the south wall where the people watch the battle! Tell them that their real queen has been found--that the impostor has dragged her to the temple! Go!"

Sobbing, the girl sped away, her light sandals pattering on the cobblestones, and Valerius raced across the court, plunged into the street, dashed into the square upon which it debouched, and raced for the great structure that rose on the opposite side.

His flying feet spurned the marble as he darted up the broad stair and through the pillared portico. Evidently their prisoner had given them some trouble. Taramis, sensing the doom intended for her, was fighting against it with all the strength of her splendid young body. Once she had broken away from the brutish priest, only to be dragged down again.

The group was halfway down the broad nave, at the other end of which stood the grim altar and beyond that the great metal door, obscenely carven, through which many had gone, but from which only Salome had ever emerged. Taramis's breath came in panting gasps; her tattered garment had been torn from her in the struggle. She writhed in the grasp of her apish captor like a white, naked nymph in the arms of a satyr. Salome watched cynically, though impatiently, moving toward the carven door, and from the dusk that lurked along the lofty walls the obscene gods and gargoyles leered down, as if imbued with salacious life.

Choking with fury, Valerius rushed down the great hall, sword in hand. At a sharp cry from Salome, the skull-faced priest looked up, then released Taramis, drew a heavy knife, already smeared with blood, and ran at the oncoming Khaurani.

But cutting down men blinded by the devil's-flame loosed by Salome was different from fighting a wiry young Hyborian afire with hate and rage.

Up went the dripping knife, but before it could fall Valerius's keen narrow blade slashed through the air, and the fist that held the knife jumped from its wrist in a shower of blood. Valerius, berserk, slashed again and yet again before the crumpling figure could fall. The blade licked through flesh and bone. The skull-like head fell one way, the half-sundered torso the other.

Valerius whirled on his toes, quick and fierce as a jungle-cat, glaring about for Salome. She must have exhausted her fire-dust in the prison. She was bending over Taramis, grasping her sister's black locks in one hand, in the other lifting a dagger. Then with a fierce cry Valerius's sword was sheathed in her breast with such fury that the point sprang out between her shoulders. With an awful shriek the witch sank down, writhing in convulsions, grasping at the naked blade as it was withdrawn, smoking and dripping. Her eyes were inhuman; with a more than human vitality she clung to the life that ebbed through the wound that split the crimson crescent on her ivory bosom. She groveled on the floor, clawing and biting at the naked stones in her agony.

Sickened at the sight, Valerius stooped and lifted the half-fainting queen. Turning his back on the twisting figure on the floor, he ran towards the door, stumbling in his haste. He staggered out upon the portico, halted at the head of the steps. The square thronged with people. Some had come at Ivga's incoherent cries; others had deserted the walls in fear of the onsweeping hordes out of the desert, fleeing unreasoningly towards the centre of the city. Dumb resignation had vanished. The throng seethed and milled, yelling and screaming. About the road there sounded somewhere the splintering of stone and timbers.

A band of grim Shemites cleft the crowd--the guards of the northern gates, hurrying towards the south gate to reinforce their comrades there. They reined up short at the sight of the youth on the steps, holding the limp, naked figure in his arms. The heads of the throng turned towards the temple; the crowd gaped, a new bewilderment added to their swirling confusion.

"Here is your queen!" yelled Valerius, straining to make himself understood above the clamor. The people gave back a bewildered roar. They did not understand, and Valerius sought in vain to lift his voice above their bedlam. The Shemites rode towards the temple steps, beating a way through the crowd with their spears.

Then a new, grisly element introduced itself into the frenzy. Out of the gloom of the temple behind Valerius wavered a slim white figure, laced with crimson. The people screamed; there in the arms of Valerius hung the woman they thought their queen; yet there in the temple door staggered another figure, like a reflection of the other. Their brains reeled. Valerius felt his blood congeal as he stared at the swaying witch-girl. His sword had transfixed her, sundered her heart. She should be dead; by all laws of nature she should be dead. Yet there she swayed, on her feet, clinging horribly to life.

"Thaug!" she screamed, reeling in the doorway. "Thaug!" As in answer to that frightful invocation there boomed a thunderous croaking from within the temple, the snapping of wood and metal.

"That is the queen!" roared the captain of the Shemites, lifting his bow. "Shoot down the man and other woman!"

But the roar of a roused hunting-pack rose from the people; they had guessed the truth at last, understood Valerius's frenzied appeals, knew that the girl who hung limply in his arms was their true queen. With a soul-shaking yell they surged on the Shemites, tearing and smiting with tooth and nail and naked hands, with the desperation of hard-pent fury loosed at last. Above them Salome swayed and tumbled down the marble stairs, dead at last.

Arrows flickered about him as Valerius ran back between the pillars of the portico, shielding the body of the queen with his own. Shooting and slashing ruthlessly, the mounted Shemites were holding their own with the maddened crowd. Valerius darted to the temple door--with one foot on the threshold he recoiled, crying out in horror and despair.

Out of the gloom at the other end of the great hall a vast dark form heaved up--came rushing towards him in gigantic frog-like hops. He saw the gleam of great unearthly eyes, the shimmer of fangs or talons. He fell back from the door, and then the whir of a shaft past his ear warned him that death was also behind him. He wheeled desperately. Four or five Shemites had cut their way through the throng and were spurring their horses up the steps, their bows lifted to shoot him down. He sprang behind a pillar, on which the arrows splintered. Taramis had fainted. She hung like a dead woman in his arms.

Before the Shemites could loose again, the doorway was blocked by a gigantic shape. With affrighted yells the mercenaries wheeled and began beating a frantic way through the throng, which crushed back in sudden, galvanized horror, trampling one another in their stampede.

But the monster seemed to be watching Valerius and the girl. Squeezing its vast, unstable bulk through the door, it bounded towards him, as he ran down the steps. He felt it looming behind him, a giant shadowy thing, like a travesty of nature cut out of the heart of night, a black shapelessness in which only the staring eyes and gleaming fangs were distinct.

There came a sudden thunder of hoofs; a rout of Shemites, bloody and battered, streamed across the square from the south, plowing blindly through the packed throng. Behind them swept a horde of horsemen yelling in a familiar tongue, waving red swords--the exiles, returned! With them rode fifty black-bearded desert-riders, and at their head a giant figure in black mail.

"Conan!" shrieked Valerius. "Conan!"

The giant yelled a command. Without checking their headlong pace, the desert men lifted their bows, drew and loosed. A cloud of arrows sang across the square, over the seething heads of the multitudes, and sank feather-deep in the black monster. It halted, wavered, reared, a black blot against the marble pillars. Again the sharp cloud sang, and yet again, and the horror collapsed and rolled down the steps, as dead as the witch who had summoned it out of the night of ages.

Conan drew rein beside the portico, leaped off. Valerius had laid the queen on the marble, sinking beside her in utter exhaustion. The people surged about, crowding in. The Cimmerian cursed them back, lifted her dark head, pillowed it against his mailed shoulder.

"By Crom, what is this? The real Taramis! But who is that yonder?"

"The demon who wore her shape," panted Valerius.

Conan swore heartily. Ripping a cloak from the shoulders of a soldier, he wrapped it about the naked queen. Her long dark lashes quivered on her cheeks; her eyes opened, stared up unbelievingly into the Cimmerian's scarred face.

"Conan!" Her soft fingers caught at him. "Do I dream? She told me you were dead--'

"Scarcely!" He grinned hardly. "You do not dream. You are Queen of Khauran again. I broke Constantius, out there by the river. Most of his dogs never lived to reach the walls, for I gave orders that no prisoners be taken--except Constantius. The city guard closed the gate in our faces, but we burst in with rams swung from our saddles. I left all my wolves outside, except this fifty. I didn't trust them in here, and these Khaurani lads were enough for the gate guards."

"It has been a nightmare!" she whimpered. "Oh, my poor people! You must help me try to repay them for all they have suffered, Conan, henceforth councilor as well as captain!"

Conan laughed, but shook his head. Rising, he set the queen upon her feet, and beckoned to a number of his Khaurani horsemen who had not continued the pursuit of the fleeing Shemites. They sprang from their horses, eager to do the bidding of their new-found queen.

"No, lass, that's over with. I'm chief of the Zuagirs now, and must lead them to plunder the Turanians, as I promised. This lad, Valerius, will make you a better captain than I. I wasn't made to dwell among marble walls, anyway. But I must leave you now, and complete what I've begun. Shemites still live in Khauran."

As Valerius started to follow Taramis across the square towards the palace, through a lane opened by the wildly cheering multitude, he felt a soft hand slipped timidly into his sinewy forgers and turned to receive the slender body of Ivga in his arms. He crushed her to him and drank her kisses with the gratitude of a weary fighter who has attained rest at last through tribulation and storm.

But not all men seek rest and peace; some are born with the spirit of the storm in their blood, restless harbingers of violence and bloodshed, knowing no other path . . .

The sun was rising. The ancient caravan road was thronged with white-robed horsemen, in a wavering line that stretched from the walls of Khauran to a spot far out in the plain. Conan the Cimmerian sat at the head of that column, near the jagged end of a wooden beam that stuck up out of the ground. Near that stump rose a heavy cross, and on that cross a man hung by spikes through his hands and feet.

"Seven months ago, Constantius," said Conan, "it was I who hung there, and you who sat here."

Constantius did not reply; he licked his gray lips and his eyes were glassy with pain and fear. Muscles writhed like cords along his lean body.

"You are more fit to inflict torture than to endure it," said Conan tranquilly. "I hung there on a cross as you are hanging, and I lived, thanks to circumstances and a stamina peculiar to barbarians. But you civilized men are soft; your lives are not nailed to your spines as are ours. Your fortitude consists mainly in inflicting torment, not in enduring it. You will be dead before sundown. And so, Falcon of the desert, I leave you to the companionship of another bird of the desert."

He gestured toward the vultures whose shadows swept across the sands as they wheeled overhead. From the lips of Constantius came an inhuman cry of despair and horror.

Conan lifted his reins and rode toward the river that shone like silver in the morning sun. Behind him the white-clad riders struck into a trot; the gaze of each, as he passed a certain spot, turned impersonally and with the desert man's lack of compassion, toward the cross and the gaunt figure that hung there, black against the sunrise. Their horses' hoofs beat out a knell in the dust. Lower and lower swept the wings of the hungry vultures.

THE END

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SHADOWS IN ZAMBOULA

By Robert E. Howard

A Drum Begins

"Peril hides in the house of Aram Baksh!"

The speaker's voice quivered with earnestness and his lean, black-nailed fingers clawed at Conan's mightily-muscled arm as he croaked his warning. He was a wiry, sunburnt man with a straggling black beard, and his ragged garments prolcaimed him a nomad. He looked smaller and meaner than ever in contrast to the giant Cimmerian with his black brows, broad chest, and powerful limbs. They stood in a corner of the Sword Makers' Bazaar, and on either side of them flowed past the many-tongued, many-colored stream of the Zamboulan streets, which are exotic, hybrid, flamboyant, and clamorous.

Conan pulled his eyes back from following a bold-eyed, red-lipped Ghanara whose short skirt bared her brown thigh at each insolent step, and frowned down at his importunate companion.

"What do you mean by peril?" he demanded.

The desert man glanced furtively over his shoulder before replying, and lowered his voice.

"Who can say? But desert men and travelers have slept in the house of Aram Baksh and never been seen or heard of again. What became of them? He swore they rose and went their way--and it is true that no citizen of the city has ever disappeared from his house. But no one saw the travelers again, and men say that goods and equipment recognised as theirs have been seen in the bazaars. If Aram did not sell them, after doing away with their owners, how came they there?"

"I have no goods," growled the Cimmerian, touching the shagreen-bound hilt of the broadsword that hung at his hip. "I have even sold my horse."

"But it is not always rich strangers who vanish by night from the house of Aram Baksh!" chattered the Zuagir. "Nay, poor desert men have slept there--because his score is less than that of the other taverns--and have been seen no more. Once a chief of the Zuagirs whose son had thus vanished complained to the satrap, Jungir Khan, who ordered the house searched by soldiers."

"And they found a cellar full of corpses?" asked Conan in good-humored derision.

"Nay! They found naught! And drove the chief from the city with threats and curses! But"--he drew closer to Conan and shivered--"something else was found! At the edge of the desert, beyond the houses, there is a clump of palm trees, and within that grove there is a pit. And within that pit have been found human bones, charred and blackened. Not once, but many times!"

"Which proves what?" grunted the Cimmerian.

"Aram Baksh is a demon! Nay, in this accursed city which Stygians built and which Hyrkanians rule--where white, brown, and black folk mingle together to produce hybrids of all unholy hues and breeds--who can tell who is a man, and who is a demon in disguise? Aram Baksh is a demon in the form of a man! At night he assumes his true guise and carries his guests off into the desert, where his fellow demons from the waste meet in conclave."

"Why does he always carry off strangers?" asked Conan skeptically.

"The people of the city would not suffer him to slay their people, but they care nought for the strangers who fall into his hands. Conan, you are of the West, and know not the secrets of this ancient land. But, since the beginning of happenings, the demons of the desert have worshipped Yog, the Lord of the Empty Abodes, with fire--fire that devours human victims.

"Be warned! You have dwelt for many moons in the tents of the Zuagirs, and you are our brother! Go not to the house of Aram Baksh!"

"Get out of sight!" Conan said suddenly. "Yonder comes a squad of the city watch. If they see you they may remember a horse that was stolen from the satrap's stable--"

The Zuagir gasped and moved convulsively. He ducked between a booth and a stone horse trough, pausing only long enough to chatter: "Be warned, my brother! There are demons in the house of Aram Baksh!" Then he darted down a narrow alley and was gone.

Conan shifted his broad sword-belt to his liking and calmly returned the searching stares directed at him by the squad of watchmen as they swung past. They eyed him curiously and suspiciously, for he was a man who stood out even in such a motley throng as crowded the winding streets of Zamboula. His blue eyes and alien features distinguished him from the Eastern swarms, and the straight sword at his hip added point to the racial difference.

The watchmen did not accost him but swung on down the street, while the crowd opened a lane for them. They were Pelishtim, squat, hook-nosed, with blue-black beards sweeping their mailed breasts--mercenaries hired for work the ruling Turanians considered beneath themselves, and no less hated by the mongrel population for that reason.

Conan glanced at the sun, just beginning to dip behind the flat-topped houses on the western side of the bazaar, and hitching once more at his belt, moved off in the direction of Aram Baksh's tavern.

With a hillman's stride he moved through the ever-shifting colors of the streets, where the ragged tunics of whining beggars brushed against the ermine-trimmed khalats of lordly merchants, and the pearl-sewn satin of rich courtesans. Giant black slaves slouched along, jostling blue-bearded wanders from the Shemitish cities, ragged nomads from the surrounding deserts, traders and adventureers from all the lands of the East.

The native population was no less hetrogeneous. Here, centuries ago, the armies of Stygia had come, carving an empire out of the eastern desert. Zamboula was but a small trading town then, lying amidst a ring of oases, and inhabited by descendants of nomads. The Stygians built it into a city and settled it with their own people, and with Shemite and Kushite slaves. The ceaseless caravans, threading the desert from east to west and back again, brought riches and more mingling of races. Then came the conquering Turanians, riding out of the East to thrust back the boundaries of Stygia, and now for a generation Zamboula had been Turan's westernmost outpost, ruled by a Turanian satrap.

The babel of a myriad tongues smote on the Cimmerian's ears as the restless pattern of the Zamboulan streets weaved about him--cleft now and then by a squad of clattering horsemen, the tall, supple warriors of Turan, with dark hawk-faces, clinking metal, and curved swords. The throng scampered from under their horses' hoofs, for they were the lords of Zamboula. But tall, somber Stygians, standing back in the shadows, glowered darkly, rememebering their ancient glories. The hybrid population cared little whether the king who controlled their destinies dwelt in dark Khemi or gleaming Aghrapur. Jungir Khan ruled Zamboula, and men whispered that Nafertari, the satrap's mistress, ruled Jungir Khan; but the people went their way, flaunting their myriad colors in the streets, bargaining, disputing, gambling, swilling, loving, as the people of Zamboula have done for all the centuries its towers and minarets have lifted over the sands of the Kharamun.

Bronze lanterns, carved with leering dragons, had been lighted in the streets before Conan reached the house of Aram Baksh. The tavern was the last occupied house on the street, which ran west. A wide garden, enclosed by a wall, where date palms grew thick, separated it from the houses farther east. To the west of the inn stood another grove of palms, through which the street, now become a road, wound out into the desert. Across the road from the tavern stood a row of deserted huts, shaded by straggling palm trees and occupied only by bats

and jackals. As Conan came down the road, he wondered why the beggars, so plentiful in Zamboula, had not appropriated these empty houses for sleeping quarters. The lights ceased some distance behind him. Here were no lanterns, except the one hanging before the tavern gate: only the stars, the soft dust of the road underfoot, and the rustle of the palm leaves in the desert breeze.

Aram's gate did not open upon the road but upon the alley which ran between the tavern and the garden of the date palms. Conan jerked lustily at the rope which dangled from the bell beside the lantern, augmenting its clamor by hammering on the iron-bound teakwood gate with the hilt of his sword. A wicket opened in the gate, and a black face peered through.

"Open, blast you," requested Conan. "I'm a guest. I've paid Aram for a room, and a room I'll have, by Crom!"

The black craned his neck to stare into the starlit road behind Conan; but he opened the gate without comment and closed it again behind the Cimmerian, locking it and bolting it. The wall was unusually high; but there were many thieves in Zamboula, and a house on the edge of the desert might have to be defended against a nocturnal nomad raid. Conan strode through a garden, where great pale blossoms nodded in the starlight, and entered the taproom, where a Stygian with the shaven head of a student sat at a table brooding over nameless mysteries, and some nondescripts wrangled over a game of dice in a corner.

Aram Baksh came forward, walking softly, a portly man, wih a black beard that swept his breast, a jutting hooknose, and small black eyes which were never still.

"You wish food?" he asked. "Drink?"

"I ate a joint of beef and a loaf of bread in the suk," grunted Conan. "Bring me a tankard of Ghazan wine--I've got just enough left to pay for it." He tossed a copper coin on the wine-splashed board.

"You did not win at the gaming tables?"

"How could I, with only a handful of silver to begin with? I paid you for the room this morning, because I knew I'd probably lose. I wanted to be sure I had a roof over my head tonight. I notice nobody sleeps in the streets of Zamboula. The very beggars hunt a niche they can barricade before dark. The city must be full of a particularly bloodthirsty band of thieves."

He gulped the cheap wine with relish and then followed Aram out of the taproom. Behind him the players halted their game to stare after him with a cryptic speculation in their eyes. They said nothing, but the Stygian laughed, a ghastly laugh of inhuman cynicism and mockery. The others lowered their eyes uneasily, avoiding one another's glance. The arts studied by a Stygian scholar are not calculated to make him share the feelings of a normal being.

Conan followed Aram down a corridor lighted by copper lamps, and it did not please him to note his host's noiseless tread. Aram's feet were clad in soft slippers and the hallway was carpeted with thick Turanian rugs; but there was an unpleasant suggestion of stealthiness about the Zamboulan.

At the end of the winding corridor, Aram halted at a door, across which a heavy iron bar rested in powerful metal brackets. This Aram lifted and showed the Cimmerian into a well-appointed chamber, the windows of which, Conan instantly noted, were small and strongly set with twisted bars of iron, tastefully gilded. There were rugs on the floor, a couch, after the Eastern fashion, and ornately carven stools. It was a much more elaborate chamber than Conan could have procured for the price nearer the center of the city--a fact that had first attracted him, when, that morning, he discoverd how slim a purse his roistering for the past few days had left him. He had ridden into Zamboula from the desert a week before.

Aram had lighted a bronze lamp, and he now called Conan's attention to the two doors. Both were provided with heavy bolts.

"You may sleep safely tonight, Cimmerian," said Aram, blinking over his bushy beard from the inner doorway.

Conan grunted and tossed his naked broadsword on the couch.

"Your bolts and bars are strong; but I always sleep with steel by my side."

Aram made no reply; he stood fingering his thick beard for a moment as he stared at the grim weapon. Then silently he withdrew, closing the door behind him. Conan shot the bolt into place, crossed the room, opened the opposite door, and looked out. The room was on the side of the house that faced the road running west from the city. The door opened into a small court that was enclosed by a wall of its own. The end walls, which shut it off from the rest of the tavern compound, were high and without entrances; but the wall that flanked the road was low, and there was no lock on the gate.

Conan stood for a moment in the door, the glow of the bronze lamps behind him, looking down the road to where it vanished among the dense palms. Their leaves rustled together in the faint breeze; beyond them lay the naked desert. Far up the street, in the other direction, lights gleamed and the noises of the city came faintly to him. Here was only starlight, the whispering of the palm leaves, and beyond that low wall, the dust of the road and the deserted huts thrusting their flat roofs against the low stars. Somewhere beyond the palm groves a drum began.

The garbled warnings of the Zuagir returned to him, seeming somewhow less fantastic than they had seemed in the crowded, sunlit streets. He wondered again at the riddle of those empty huts. Why did the beggars shun them? He turned back into the chamber, shut the door, and bolted it.

The light began to flicker, and he investigated, swearing when he found the palm oil in the lamp was almost exhausted. He started to shout for Aram, then shrugged his shoulders and blew out the light. In the soft darkness he stretched himself fully clad on the couch, his sinewy hand by instinct searching for and closing on the hilt of his broadsword. Glancing idly at the stars framed in the barred windows, with the murmur of the breeze though the palms in his ears, he sank into slumber with a vague consciousness of the muttering drum, out on the desert--the low rumble and mutter of a leather-covered drum, beaten with soft, rhythmic strokes of an open black hand . . .

The Night Skulkers

It was the stealthy opening of a door which awakened the Cimmerian. He did not awake as civilized men do, drowsy and drugged and stupid. He awoke instantly, with a clear mind, recognizing the sound that had interruped his sleep. Lying there tensely in the dark he saw the outer door slowly open. In a widening crack of starlit sky he saw framed a great black bulk, broad, stooping shoulders, and a misshapen head blocked out against the stars.

Conan felt the skin crawl between his shoulders. He had bolted that door securely. How could it be opening now, save by supernatural agency? And how could a human being possess a head like that outlined against the stars? All the tales he had heard in the Zuagir tents of devils and goblins came back to bead his flesh with clammy sweat. Now the monster slid noiselessly into the room, with a crouching posture and a shambling gait; and a familiar scent assailed the Cimmerian's nostrils, but did not reassure him, since Zuagir legendry represented demons as smelling like that.

Noiselessly Conan coiled his long legs under him; his naked sword was in his right hand, and when he struck it was as suddenly and murderously as a tiger lunging out of the dark. Not even a demon could have avoided that catapulting charge. His sword met and clove through flesh and bone, and something went heavily to the floor with a strangling cry. Conan crouched in the dark above it, sword dripping in his hand. Devil or beast or man, the thing was dead there on the floor. He sensed death as any wild thing senses it. He glared through the half-open door into the starlit court beyond. The gate stood open, but the court was empty.

Conan shut the door but did not bolt it. Groping in the darkness he found the lamp and lighted it. There was enough oil in it to burn for a minute or so. An instant later he was bending over the figure that sprawled on the floor in a pool of blood.

It was a gigantic black man, naked but for a loin cloth. One hand still grasped a knotty-headed budgeon. The fellow's kinky wool was built up into hornlike spindles with twigs and dried mud. This barbaric coiffure had given the head its misshapen appearance in the starlight. Provided with a clue to the riddle, Conan pushed back the thick red lips and grunted as he stared down at teeth filed to points.

He understood now the mystery of the strangers who had disappeared from the house of Aram Baksh; the riddle of the black drum thrumming out there beyond the palm groves, and of that pit of charred bones--that pit where strange meat might be roasted under the stars, while black beasts squatted about to glut a hideous hunger. The man on the floor was a cannibal slave from Darfar.

There were many of his kind in the city. Cannibalism was not tolerated openly in Zamboula. But Conan knew now why people locked themselves in so securely at night, and why even beggars shunned the open alley and doorless ruins. He grunted in disgust as he visualized brutish black shadows skulking up and down the nighted streets, seeking human prey--and such men as Aram Baksh to open the doors to them. The innkeeper was not a demon; he was worse. The slaves from Darfar were notorious thieves; there was no doubt that some of their pilfered loot found its way into the hands of Aram Baksh. And in return he sold them human flesh.

Conan blew out the light, stepped to the door and opened it, and ran his hand over the ornaments on the outer side. One of them was movable and worked the bolt inside. The room was a trap to catch human prey like rabbits. But this time, instead of a rabbit, it had caught a saber-toothed tiger.

Conan returned to the other door, lifted the bolt, and pressed against it. It was immovable, and he remembered the bolt on the other side. Aram was taking no chances either with his victims or the men with whom he dealt. Buckling on his sword belt, the Cimmerian strode out into the court, closing the door behind him. He had no intention of delaying the settlement of his reckoning with Aram Baksh. He wondered how many poor devils had been bludgeoned in their sleep and dragged out of that room and down the road that ran through the shadowed palm groves to the roasting pit.

He halted in the court. The drum was still muttering, and he caught the reflection of a leaping red glare through the groves. Cannibalism was more than a perverted appetite with the black men of Darfar; it was an integral element of their ghastly cult. The black vultures were already in conclave. But whatever flesh filled their bellies that night, it would not be his.

To reach Aram Baksh, he must climb one of the walls which separated the small enclosure from the main compound. They were high, meant to keep out the man-eaters; but Conan was no swamp-bred black man; his thews had been steeled in boyhood on the sheer cliffs of his native hills. He was standing at the foot of the nearer wall when a cry echoed under the trees.

In an instant Conan was crouching at the gate, glaring down the road. The sound had come from the shadows of the huts across the road. He heard a frantic choking and gurgling such as might result from a desperate attempt to shriek, with a black hand fastened over the victim's mouth. A close-knit clump of figures emerged from the shadows beyond the huts and started down the road--three huge black men carrying a slender, struggling figure between them. Conan caught the glimmer of pale limbs writhing in the starlight, even as, with a convulsive wrench, the captive slipped from the grasp of the brutal fingers and came flying up the road, a supple young woman, naked as the day she was born. Conan saw her plainly before she ran out of the road and into the shadows between the huts. The blacks were at her heels, and back in the shadows the figures merged and an intolerable scream of anguish and horror rang out.

Stirred to red rage by the ghoulishness of the episode, Conan raced across the road.

Neither victim nor abductors were aware of his presence until the soft swish of the dust about his feet brought them about; and then he was almost upon them, coming with the gusty fury of a hill wind. Two of the blacks turned to meet him, lifting their bludgeons. But they failed to estimate properly the speed at which he was coming. One of them was down, disemboweled, before he could strike, and wheeling catlike, Conan evaded the stroke of the other's cudgel and lashed in a whistling counter-cut. The black's head flew into the air; the headless body took three staggering steps, spurting blood and clawing horribly at the air with groping hands, and then slumped to the dust.

The remaining cannibal gave back with a strangled yell, hurling his captive from him. She tripped and rolled in the dust, and the black fled in panic toward the city. Conan was at his heels. Fear winged the black feet, but before they reached the easternmost hut, he sensed death at his back, and bellowed like an ox in the slaughter yards.

"Black dog of Hell!" Conan drove his sword between the dusky shoulders with such vengeful fury that the broad blade stood out half its length from the black breast. With a choking cry the black stumbled headlong, and Conan braced his feet and dragged out his sword as his victim fell.

Only the breeze disturbed the leaves. Conan shook his head as a lion shakes its mane and growled his unsatiated blood lust. But no more shapes slunk from the shadows, and before the huts the starlit road stretched empty. He whirled at the quick patter of feet behind him, but it was only the girl, rushing to throw herself on him and clasp his neck in a desperate grasp, frantic from terror of the abominable fate she had just escaped.

"Easy, girl," he grunted. "You're all right. How did they catch you?"

She sobbed something unintelligible. He forgot all about Aram Baksh as he scrutinized her by the light of the stars. She was white, though a very definite brunette, obviously one of Zamboula's many mixed breeds. She was tall, with a slender, supple form, as he was in a good position to observe. Admiration burned in his fierce eyes as he looked down on her splendid bosom and her lithe limbs, which still quivered from fright and exertion. He passed an arm around her flexible waist and said, reassuringly: "Stop shaking, wench; you're safe enough."

His touch seemed to restore her shaken sanity. She tossed back her thick, glossy locks and cast a fearful glance over her shoulder, while she pressed closer to the Cimmerian as if seeking security in the contact.

"They caught me in the streets," she muttered, shuddering. "Lying in wait, beneath a dark arch--black men, like great, hulking apes! Set have mercy on me! I shall dream of it!"

"What were you doing out on the streets this time of night?" he inquired, fascinated by the satiny feel of her sleek skin under his questing fingers.

She raked back her hair and stared blankly up into his face. She did not seem aware of his caresses.

"My lover," she said. "My lover drove me into the streets. He went mad and tried to kill me. As I fled from him I was seized by those beasts."

"Beauty like yours might drive a man mad," quoth Conan, running his fingers experimentally through the glossy tresses.

She shook her head, like one emerging from a daze. She no longer trembled, and her voice was steady.

"It was the spite of a priest--of Totrasmek, the high priest of Hanuman, who desires me for himself--the dog!"

"No need to curse him for that," grinned Conan. "The old hyena has better taste than I thought."

She ignored the bluff compliment. She was regaining her poise swiftly.

"My lover is a--a young Turanian soldier. To spite me, Totrasmek gave him a drug that drove him mad. Tonight he snatched up a sword and came at me to slay me in his madness, but I fled from him into the streets. The Negroes seized me and brought me to this--what was that?"

Conan had already moved. Soundlessly as a shadow he drew her behind the nearest hut, beneath the straggling palms. They stood in tense stillness, while the low muttering both had heard grew louder until voices were distinguishable. A group of Negroes, some nine or ten, were coming along the road from the direction of the city. The girl clutched Conan's arm and he felt the terrified quivering of her supple body against his.

Now they could understand the gutturals of the black men.

"Our brothers are already assembled at the pit," said one. "We have had no luck. I hope they have enough for us."

"Aram promised us a man," muttered another, and Conan mentally promised Aram something.

"Aram keeps his word," grunted yet another. "Many a man we have taken from his tavern. But we pay him well. I myself have given him ten bales of silk I stole from my master. It was good silk, by Set!"

The blacks shuffled past, bare splay feet scuffing up the dust, and their voices dwindled down the road.

"Well for us those corpses are lying behind these huts," muttered Conan. "If they look in Aram's death room they'll find another. Let's begone."

"Yes, let us hasten!" begged the girl, almost hysterical again. "My lover is wandering somewhere in the streets alone. The Negroes may take him."

"A devil of a custom this is!" growled Conan, as he led the way toward the city, paralleling the road but keeping behind the huts and straggling trees. "Why don't the citizens clean out these black dogs?"

"They are valuable slaves," murmured the girl. "There are so many of them they might revolt if they were denied the flesh for which they lust. The people of Zamboula know they skulk the streets at night, and all are careful to remain within locked doors, except when something unforseen happens, as it did to me. The blacks prey on anything they can catch, but they seldom catch anybody but strangers. The people of Zamboula are not concerned with the strangers that pass through the city.

"Such men as Aram Baksh sell these strangers to the blacks. He would not dare attempt such a thing with a citizen."

Conan spat in disgust, and a moment later led his companion out into the road which was becoming a street, with still, unlighted houses on each side. Slinking in the shadows was not congenial to his nature.

"Where did you want to go?" he asked. The girl did not seem to object to his arm around her waist.

"To my house, to rouse my servants," she answered. "To bid them search for my lover. I do not wish the city--the priests--anyone--to know of his madness. He--he is a young officer with a promising future. Perhaps we can drive this madness from him if we can find him."

"If we find him?" rumbled Conan. "What makes you think I want to spend the night scouring the streets for a lunatic?"

She cast a quick glance into his face, and properly interpreted the gleam in his blue eyes. Any woman could have known that he would follow her wherever she led--for a while, at least. But being a women, she concealed her knowledge of that fact.

"Please," she began with a hint of tears in her voice, "I have no one else to ask for help--you have been kind --"

"All right!" he grunted. "All right! What's the young reprobate's name?"

"Why--Alafdhal. I am Zabibi, a dancing-girl. I have danced often before the satrap, Jungir Khan, and his mistress Nafertari, and before all the lords and royal ladies of Zamboula. Totrasmek desired me and, because I repulsed him, he made me the innocent tool of his vengeance against Alafdhal. I asked a love potion of Totrasmek, not suspecting the depth of his guile and hate. He gave me a drug to mix with my lover's wine, and he swore that when Alafdhal drank it, he would love me even more madly than ever and grant my every wish. I mixed the drug secretly with my lover's wine. But having drunk, my lover went raving mad and things came about as I have told you. Curse Totrasmek, the hybrid snake--ahhh!"

She caught his arm convulsively and both stopped short. They had come into a district of shops and stalls, all deserted and unlighted, for the hour was late. They were passing an alley, and in its mouth a man was standing, motionless and silent. His head was lowered, but Conan caught the wierd gleam of eery eyes regarding them unblinkingly. His skin crawled, not with fear of the sword in the man's hand, but because of the uncanny suggestion of his posture and silence. They suggested madness. Conan pushed the girl aside and drew his sword.

"Don't kill him!" she begged. "In the name of Set, do not slay him! You are strong--overpower him!"

"We'll see," he muttered, grasping his sword in his right hand and clenching his left into a mallet-like fist.

He took a wary step toward the alley--and with a horrible moaning laugh the Tauranian charged. As he came he swung his sword, rising on his toes as he put all the power of his body behind the blows. Sparks flashed blue as Conan parried the blade, and the next instant the madman was stretched senseless in the dust from a thundering buffet of Conan's left fist.

The girl ran forward.

"Oh, he is not--he is not --"

Conan bent swiftly, turned the man on his side, and ran quick fingers over him.

"He's not hurt much," he grunted. "Bleeding at the nose, but anybody's likely to do that, after a clout on the jaw. He'll come to after a bit, and maybe his mind will be right. In the meantime I'll tie his wrists with his sword belt--so. Now where do you want me to take him?"

"Wait!" She knelt beside the senseless figure, seized the bound hands, and scanned them avidly. Then, shaking her head as if in baffled disappointment, she rose. She came close to the giant Cimmerian and laid her slender hands on his arching breast. Her dark eyes, like wet black jewels in the starlight, gazed up into his.

"You are a man! Help me! Totrasmek must die! Slay him for me!"

"And put my neck into a Turanian noose?" he grunted.

"Nay!" The slender arms, strong as pliant steel, were around his corded neck. Her supple body throbbed against his. "The Hyrkanians have no love for Totrasmek. The priests of Set fear him. He is a mongrel, who rules men by fear and superstition. I worship Set, and the Turanians bow to Erlik, but Totrasmek sacrifices to Hanuman the accursed! The Turanian lords fear his black arts and his power over the hybrid popularion, and they hate him. Even Jungir Khan and his mistress Nafertari fear and hate him. If he were slain in his temple at night, they would not seek his slayer very closely."

"And what of his magic?" rumbled the Cimmerian.

"You are a fighting man," she answered. "To risk your life is part of your profession."

"For a price," he admitted.

"There will be a price!" she breathed, rising on tiptoes, to gaze into his eyes.

The nearness of her vibrant body drove a flame through his veins. The perfume of her breath mounted to his brain. But as his arms closed about her supple figure she avoided them with a lithe movement, saying: "Wait! First serve me in this matter."

"Name your price." He spoke with some difficulty.

"Pick up my lover," she directed, and the Cimmerian stooped and swung the tall form easily to his broad shoulder. At the moment he felt as if he could have toppled over Jungir Khan's palace with equal ease. The girl murmured an endearment to the unconscious man, and there was no hypocrisy in her attitude. She obviously loved Alafdhal sincerely. Whatever business arrangement she made with Conan would have no bearing on her relationship with Alafdhal. Women are more practical about these things than men.

"Follow me!" She hurried along the street, while the Cimmerian strode easily after her, in no way discomforted by his limp burden. He kept a wary eye out for black shadows skulking under arches but saw nothing suspicious. Doubtless the men of Darfar were all gathered at the roasting pit. The girl turned down a narrow side street and presently knocked cautiously at an arched door.

Almost instantly a wicket opened in the upper panel and a black face glanced out. She bent close to the opening, whispering swiftly. Bolts creaked in their sockets, and the door opened. A giant black man stood framed against the soft glow of a copper lamp. A quick glance showed Conan the man was not from Darfar. His teeth were unfiled and his kinky hair was cropped close to his skull. He was from the Wadai.

At a word from Zabibi, Conan gave the limp body into the black's arms and saw the young officer laid on a velvet divan. He showed no signs of returning consciousness. The blow that had rendered him senseless might have felled an ox. Zabibi bent over him for an instant, her fingers nervously twining and twisting. Then she straightened and beckoned the Cimmerian.

The door closed softly, the locks clicked behind them, and the closing wicket shut off the glow of the lamps. In the starlight of the street Zabibi took Conan's hand. Her own hand trembled a little.

"You will not fail me?"

He shook his maned head, massive against the stars.

"Then follow me to Hanuman's shrine, and the gods have mercy on our souls."

Among the silent streets they moved like phantoms of antiquity. They went in silence. Perhaps the girl was thinking of her lover lying senseless on the divan under the copper lamps or was shrinking with fear of what lay ahead of them in the demon-haunted shrine of Hanuman. The barbarian was thinking only of the woman moving so supplely beside him. The perfume of her scented hair was in his nostrils, the sensuous aura of her presence filled his brain and left room for no other thoughts.

Once they heard the clank of brass-shod feet, and drew into the shadows of a gloomy arch while a squad of Pelishti watchmen swung past. There were fifteen of them; they marched in close formation, pikes at the ready, and the rearmost men had their broad, brass shields slung on their backs, to protect them from a knife stroke from behind. The skulking menace of the black maneaters was a threat even to armed men.

As soon as the clang of their sandals had receded up the street, Conan and the girl emerged from their hiding place and hurried on. A few moments later, they saw the squat, flat-topped edifice they sought looming ahead of them.

The temple of Hanuman stood alone in the midst of a broad square, which lay silent and deserted beneath the stars. A marble wall surrounded the shrine, with a broad opening directly before the portico. This opening had no gate nor any sort of barrier.

"Why don't the blacks seek their prey here?" muttered Conan. "There's nothing to keep them out of the temple."

He could feel the trembling of Zabibi's body as she pressed close to him.

"They fear Totrasmek, as all in Zamboula fear him, even Jungir Khan and Nafertari. Come! Come quickly, before my courage flows from me like water!"

The girl's fear was evident, but she did not falter. Conan drew his sword and strode ahead of her as they advanced through the open gateway. He knew the hideous habits of the priests of the East and was aware that an invader of Hanuman's shrine might expect to encounter almost any sort of nightmare horror. He knew there was a good chance that neither he nor the girl would ever leave the shrine alive, but he had risked his life too many times before to devote much thought to that consideration.

They entered a court paved with marble which gleamed whitely in the starlight. A short flight of broad marble steps led up to the pillared portico. The great bronze doors stood wide open as they had stood for centuries. But no worshippers burnt incense within. In the day men and women might come timidly into the shirne and place offerings to the ape-god on the black altar. At night the people shunned the temple of Hanuman as hares shun the lair of the serpent.

Burning censers bathed the interior in a soft, weird glow that created an illusion of unreality. Near the rear wall, behind the black stone altar, sat the god with his gaze fixed for ever on the open door, through which for centuries his victims had come, dragged by chains of roses. A faint groove ran from the sill to the altar, and when Conan's foot felt it, he stepped away as quickly as if he had trodden upon a snake. That groove had been worn by the faltering feet of the multitude of those who had died screaming on that grim altar.

Bestial in the uncertain light, Hanuman leered with his carven mask. He sat, not as an ape would crouch, but cross-legged as a man would sit, but his aspect was no less simian for that reason. He was carved from black marble, but his eyes were rubies, which glowed red and lustful as the coals of hell's deepest pits. His great hands lay upon his lap, palms upward, taloned fingers spread and grasping. In the gross emphasis of his attributes, in the leer of his satyr-countenance, was reflected the abominable cynicism of the degererate cult which deified him.

The girl moved around the image, making toward the back wall, and when her sleek flank brushed against a carven knee, she shrank aside and shuddered as if a reptile had touched her. There was a space of several feet between the broad back of the idol and the marble wall with its frieze of gold leaves. On either hand, flanking the idol, an ivory door under a gold arch was set in the wall.

"Those doors open into each end of a hairpin-shaped corridor," she said hurriedly. "Once I was in the interior of the shrine--once!" She shivered and twitched her slim shoulders at a memory both terrifying and obscene. "The corridor is bent like a horseshoe, with each horn opening into this room. Totrasmek's chambers are enclosed within the curve of the corridor and open into it. But there is a secret door in this wall which opens directly into an inner chamber--"

She began to run her hands over the smooth surface, where no crack or crevice showed. Conan stood beside her, sword in hand, glancing warily about him. The silence, the emptiness of the shrine, with imagination picturing what might lie behind that wall, made him feel like a wild beast nosing a trap.

"Ah!" The girl had found a hidden spring at last; a square opening gaped blackly in the wall. Then: "Set!" she screamed, and even as Conan leaped toward her, he saw that a great misshapen hand has fastened itself in her hair. She was snatched off her feet and jerked headfirst through the opening. Conan, grabbing ineffectually at her, felt his fingers slip from a naked limb, and in an instant she had vanished and the wall showed black as before. Only from beyond it came the muffled sounds of a struggle, a scream, faintly heard, and a low laugh that made Conan's blood congeal in his veins.

Black Hands Gripping

With an oath the Cimmerian smote the wall a terrible blow with the pommel of his sword, and the marble cracked and chipped. But the hidden door did not give way, and reason told him that doubtless it had been bolted on the other side of the wall. Turning, he sprang across the chamber to one of the ivory doors.

He lifted his sword to shatter the panels, but on a venture tried the door first with is left hand. It swung open easily, and he glared into a long corridor that curved away into dimness under the weird light of censers similar to those in the shrine. A heavy gold bolt showed on the jamb of the door, and he touched it lightly with his fingertips. The faint warmness of the metal could have been detected only by a man whose faculties were akin to those of a wolf. That bolt had been touched--and therefore drawn--within the last few seconds. The affair was taking on more and more of the aspect of a baited trap. He might have known Totrasmek would know when anyone entered the temple.

To enter the corridor would undoubtedly be to walk into whatever trap the priest had set for him. But Conan did not hesitate. Somewhere in that dim-lit interior Zabibi was a captive, and, from what he knew of the characteristics of Hanuman's priests, he was sure that she needed help badly. Conan stalked into the corridor with a pantherish tread, poised to strike right or left.

On his left, ivory, arched doors opened into the corridor, and he tried each in turn. All were locked. He had gone perhaps seventy-five feet when the corridor bent sharply to the left, describing the curve the girl had mentioned. A door opened into this curve, and it gave under his hand.

He was looking into a broad, square chamber, somewhat more clearly lighted than the corridor. Its walls were of white marble, the floor of ivory, the ceiling of fretted silver. He saw divans of rich satin, gold-worked footstools of ivory, a disk-shaped table of some massive, metal-like substance. On one of the divans a man was reclining, looking toward the door. He laughed as he met the Cimmerian's startled glare.

This man was naked except for a loin cloth and high-strapped sandals. He was brown-skinned, with close-cropped black hair and restless black eyes that set off a broad, arrogant face. In girth and breadth he was enormous, with huge limbs on which the great muscles swelled and rippled at each slightest movement. His hands were the largest Conan had ever seen. The assurance of gigantic physical strength colored his every action and inflection.

"Why not enter, barbarian?" he called mockingly, with an exaggerated gesture of invitation.

Conan's eyes began to smolder ominously, but he trod warily into the chamber, his sword ready.

"Who the devil are you?" he growled.

"I am Baal-pteor," the man answered. "Once, long ago and in another land, I had another name. But this is a good name, and why Totrasmek gave it to me, any temple wench can tell you."

"So you're his dog!" grunted Conan. "Well, curse your brown hide, Baal-pteor, where's the wench you jerked through the wall?"

"My master entertains her!" laughed Baal-pteor. "Listen!"

From beyond a door opposite the one by which Conan had entered there sounded a woman's scream, faint and muffled in the distance.

"Blast your soul!" Conan took a stride toward the door, then wheeled with his skin tingling, Baal-pteor was laughing at him, and that laugh was edged with menace that made the hackles rise on Conan's neck and sent a red wave of murder-lust driving across his vision.

He started toward Baal-pteor, the knuckles on his swordhand showing white. With a swift motion the brown man threw something at him--a shining crystal sphere that glistened in the weird light.

Conan dodged instinctively, but, miraculously, the globe stopped short in midair, a few feet from his face. It did not fall to the floor. It hung suspended, as if by invisible filaments, some five feet above the floor. And as he glared in amazement, it began to rotate with growing speed. And as it revolved it grew, expanded, became nebulous. It filled the chamber. It enveloped him. It blotted out furniture, walls, the smiling countenance of Baal-pteor. He was lost in the midst of a blinding bluish blur of whirling speed. Terrific winds screamed past Conan, tugging at him, striving to wrench him from his feet, to drag him into the vortex that spun madly before him.

With a choking cry Conan lurched backward, reeled, felt the solid wall against his back. At the contact the illusion ceased to be. The whirling, titanic sphere vanished like a bursting bubble. Conan reeled upright in the silver-ceilinged room, with a gray mist coiling about his feet, and saw Baal-pteor lolling on the divan, shaking with silent laughter.

"Son of a slut!" Conan lunged at him. But the mist swirled up from the floor, blotting out that giant brown form. Groping in a rolling cloud that blinded him, Conan felt a rending sensation of dislocation--and then room and mist and brown man were gone together. He was standing alone among the high reeds of a marshy fen, and a buffalo was lunging at him, head down. He leaped aside from the ripping scimitar-curved horns and drove his sword in behind the foreleg, through ribs and heart. And then it was not a buffalo dying there in the mud, but the brown-skinned Baal-pteor. With a curse Conan struck off his head; and the head soared from the ground and snapped beastlike tusks into his throat. For all his mighty strength he could not tear it loose--he was choking--strangling; then there was a rush and roar through space, the dislocating shock of an immeasurable impact, and he was back in the chamber with Baal-pteor, whose head was once more set firmly on his shoulders, and who laughed silently at him from the divan.

"Mesmerism!" muttered Conan, crouching and digging his toes hard against the marble.

His eyes blazed. This brown dog was playing with him, making sport of him! But this mummery, this child's play of mists and shadows of thought, it could not harm him. He had but to leap and strike and the brown acolyte would be a mangled corpse under his heel. This time he would not be fooled by shadows of illusion--but he was.

A blood-curdling snarl sounded behind him, and he wheeled and struck in a flash at the panther crouching to spring on him from the metal-colored table. Even as he struck, the apparition vanished and his blade clashed deafeningly on the adamantine surface. Instantly he sensed something abnormal. The blade stuck to the table! He wrenched at it savagely. It did not give. This was no mesmeristic trick. The table was a giant magnet. He gripped the hilt with both hands, when a voice at his shoulder brought him about, to face the brown man, who had at last risen from the divan.

Slightly taller than Conan and much heavier, Baal-pteor loomed before him, a daunting image of muscular development. His mighty arms were unnaturally long, and his great hands opened and closed, twitching convulsively. Conan released the hilt of his imprisoned sword and fell silent, watching his enemy thorugh slitted lids.

"Your head, Cimmerian!" taunted Baal-pteor. "I shall take it with my bare hands, twisting it from your shoulders as the head of a fowl is twisted! Thus the sons of Kosala offer sacrifice to Yajur. Barbarian, you look upon a strangler of Yota-pong. I was chosen by the priests of Yajur in my infancy, and throughout childhood, boyhood, and youth I was trained in the art of slaying with the naked hands--for only thus are the sacrifices enacted. Yajur loves blood, and we waste not a drop from the victim's veins. When I was a child they gave me infants to throttle; when I was a boy I strangled young girls; as a youth, women, old men, and young boys. Not until I reached my full manhood was I given a strong man to slay on the altar of Yota-pong.

"For years I offered the sacrifices to Yajur. Hundreds of necks have snapped between these fingers--" he worked them before the Cimmerian's angry eyes. "Why I fled from Yota-pong to become Totrasmek's servant is no concern of yours. In a moment you will be beyond curiosity. The priests of Kosala, the stranglers of Yajur, are strong beyond the belief of men.

And I was stronger than any. With my hands, barbarian, I shall break your neck!"

And like the stroke of twin cobras, the great hands closed on Conan's throat. The Cimmerian made no attempt to dodge or fend them away, but his own hands darted to the Kosalan's bull-neck. Baal-pteor's black eyes widened as he felt the thick cords of muscles that protected the barbarian's throat. With a snarl he exerted his inhuman strength, and knots and lumps and ropes of thews rose along his massive arms. And then a choking gasp burst from him as Conan's fingers locked on his throat. For an instant they stood there like statues, their faces masks of effort, veins beginning to stand out purply on their temples. Conan's thin lips drew back from his teeth in a grinning snarl. Baal-pteor's eyes were distended and in them grew an awful surprise and the glimmer of fear. Both men stood motionless as images, except for the expanding of their muscles on rigid arms and braced legs, but strength beyond common conception was warring there--strength that might have uprooted trees and crushed the skulls of bullocks.

The wind whistled suddenly from between Baal-pteor's parted teeth. His face was growing purple. Fear flooded his eyes. His thews seemed ready to burst from his arms and shoulders, yet the muscles of the Cimmerian's thick neck did not give; they felt like masses of woven iron cords under his desperate fingers. But his own flesh was giving way under the iron fingers of the Cimmerian which ground deeper and deeper into the yielding throat muscles, crushing them in upon jugular and windpipe.

The statuesque immobility of the group gave way to sudden, frenzied motion, as the Kosalan began to wrench and heave, seeking to throw himself backward. He let go of Conan's throat and grasped his wrists, trying to tear away those inexorable fingers.

With a sudden lunge Conan bore him backward until the small of his back crashed against the table. And still farther over its edge Conan bent him, back and back, until his spine was ready to snap.

Conan's low laugh was merciless as the ring of steel.

"You fool!" he all but whispered. "I think you never saw a man from the West before. Did you deem yourself strong, because you were able to twist the heads off civilized folk, poor weaklings with muscles like rotten string? Hell! Break the neck of a wild Cimmerian bull before you call yourself strong. I did that, before I was a full-grown man--like this!"

And with a savage wrench he twisted Baal-pteor's head around until the ghastly face leered over the left shoulder, and the vertebrae snapped like a rotten branch.

Conan hurled the flopping corpse to the floor, turned to the sword again, and gripped the hilt with both hands, bracing his feet against the floor. Blood trickled down his broad breast from the wounds Baal-pteor's finger nails had torn in the skin of his neck. His black hair was damp, sweat ran down his face, and his chest heaved. For all his vocal scorn of Baal-pteor's strength, he had almost met his match in the inhuman Kosalan. But without pausing to catch his breath, he exerted all his strength in a mighty wrench that tore the sword from the magnet where it clung.

Another instant and he had pushed open the door from behind which the scream had sounded, and was looking down a long straight corridor, lined with ivory doors. The other end was masked by a rich velvet curtain, and from beyond that curtain came the devilish strains of such music as Conan had never heard, not even in nightmares. It made the short hairs bristle on the back of his neck. Mingled with it was the panting, hysterical sobbing of a woman. Grasping his sword firmly, he glided down the corridor.

Dance, Girl, Dance!

When Zabibi was jerked head-first through the aperture which opened in the wall behind the idol, her first, dizzy, disconnected thought was that her time had come. She instinctively shut her eyes and waited for the blow to fall. But instead she felt herself dumped unceremoniously onto the smooth marble floor, which bruised her knees and hip. Opening her eyes, she stared fearfully around her, just as a muffled impact sounded from beyond the wall. She saw a brown-skinned giant in a loin cloth standing over her, and, across the chamber into which she had come, a man sat on a divan, with his back to a rich black velvet curtain, a broad, fleshy man, with fat white hands and sanky eyes. And her flesh crawled, for this man was Totrasmek, the priest of Hanuman, who for years had spun his slimy webs of power throughout the city of Zamboula.

"The barbarian seeks to batter his way through the wall," said Totrasmek sardonically, "but the bolt will hold."

The girl saw that a heavy golden bolt had been shot across the hidden door, which was plainly discernible from this side of the wall. The bolt and its sockets would have resisted the charge of an elephant.

"Go open one of the doors for him, Baal-pteor," ordered Totrasmek. "Slay him in the square chamber at the other end of the corridor."

The Kosalan salaamed and departed by the way of a door in the side wall of the chamber. Zabibi rose, staring fearfully at the priest, whose eyes ran avidly over her splendid figure. To this she was indifferent. A dancer of Zamboula was accustomed to nakedness. But the cruelty in his eyes started her limbs to quivering.

"Again you come to me in my retreat, beautiful one," he purred with cynical hypocrisy. "It is an unexpected honor. You seemed to enjoy your former visit so little, that I dared not hope for you to repeat it. Yet I did all in my power to provide you with an interesting experience."

For a Zamboulan dancer to blush would be an impossibility, but a smolder of anger mingled with the fear in Zabibi's dilated eyes.

"Fat pig! You know I did not come here for love of you."

"No," laughed Totrasmek, "you came like a fool, creeping through the night with a stupid barbarian to cut my throat. Why should you seek my life?"

"You know why!" she cried, knowing the futility of trying to dissemble.

"You are thinking of your lover," he laughed. "The fact that you are here seeking my life shows that he quaffed the drug I gave you. Well, did you not ask for it? And did I not send what you asked for, out of the love I bear you?"

"I asked you for a drug that would make him slumber harmlessly for a few hours," she said bitterly. "And you--you sent your servant with a drug that drove him mad! I was a fool ever to trust you. I might have known your protestations of friendship were lies, to disguise your hate and spite."

"Why did you wish your lover to sleep?" he retorted. "So you could steal from him the only thing he would never give you--the ring with the jewel men call the Star of Khorala--the star stolen from the queen of Ophir, who would pay a roomful of gold for its return. He would not give it to you willingly, because he knew that it holds a magic which, when properly controlled, will enslave the hearts of any of the opposite sex. You wished to steal it from him, fearing that his magicians would discover the key to that magic and he would forget you in his conquests of the queens of the world. You would sell it back to the queen of Ophir, who understands its power and would use it to enslave me, as she did before it was stolen."

"And why do you want it?" she demanded sulkily.

"I understand its powers. It would increase the power of my arts."

"Well," she snapped, "you have it now!"

"I have the Star of Khorala? Nay, you err."

"Why bother to lie?" she retorted bitterly. "He had it on his finger when he drove me into the streets. He did not have it when I found him again. Your servant must have been watching the house, and have taken it from him, after I escaped him. To the devil with it! I want my lover back sane and whole. You have the ring; you have punished us both. Why do you not restore his mind to him? Can you?"

"I could," he assured her, in evident enjoyment of her distress. He drew a phial from among his robes. "This contains the juice of the golden lotus. If your lover drank it, he would be sane again. Yes, I will be merciful. You have both thwarted and flouted me, not once but many times; he has constantly opposed my wishes. But I will be merciful. Come and take the phial from my hand."

She stared at Totrasmek, trembling with eagerness to seize it, but fearing it was but some cruel jest. She advanced timidly, with a hand extended, and he laughed heartlessly and drew back out of her reach. Even as her lips parted to curse him, some instinct snatched her eyes upward. From the gilded ceiling four jade-hued vessels were falling. She dodged, but they did not strike her. They crashed to the floor about her, forming the four corners of a square. And she screamed, and screamed again. For out of each ruin reared the hooded head of a cobra, and one struck at her bare leg. Her convulsive movement to evade it brought her within reach of the one on the other side and again she had to shift like lightning to avoid the flash of its hideous head.

She was caught in a frightful trap. All four serpents were swaying and striking at foot, ankle, calf, knee, thigh, hip, whatever portion of her voluptuous body chanced to be nearest to them, and she could not spring over them or pass between them to safety. She could only whirl and spring aside and twist her body to avoid the strokes, and each time she moved to dodge one snake, the motion brought her within range of another, so that she had to keep shifting with the speed of light. She could move only a short space in any direction, and the fearful hooded crests were menacing her every second. Only a dancer of Zamboula could have lived in that grisly square.

She became, herself, a blur of bewildering motion. The heads missed her by hair's breadths, but they missed, as she pitted her twinkling feet, flickering limbs, and perfect eye against the blinding speed of the scaly demons her enemy had conjured out of thin air.

Somewhere a thin, whining music struck up, mingling with the hissing of the serpents, like an evil night wind blowing through the empty sockets of a skull. Even in the flying speed of her urgent haste she realized that the darting of the serpents was no longer at random. They obeyed the grisly piping of the eery music. They struck with a horrible rhythm, and perforce her swaying, writhing, spinning body atturned itself to their rhythm. Her frantic motions melted into the measures of a dance compared to which the most obscene tarantella of Zamora would have seemed sane and restrained. Sick with shame and terror Zabibi heard the hateful mirth of her merciless tormenter.

"The Dance of the Cobras, my lovely one!" laughed Totrasmek. "So maidens danced in the sacrifice to Hanuman centuries ago--but never with such beauty and suppleness. Dance, girl, dance! How long can you avoid the fangs of the Poison People? Minutes? Hours? You will weary at last. Your swift, sure feet will stumble, your legs falter, your hips slow in their rotations. Then the fangs will begin to sink deep into your ivory flesh--"

Behind him the curtain shook as if struck by a gust of wind, and Totrasmek screamed. His eyes dilated and his hands caught convulsively at the length of bright steel which jutted suddenly from his breast.

The music broke off short. The girl swayed dizzily in her dance, crying out in dreadful anticipation of the flickering fangs--and then only four wisps of harmless blue smoke curled up from the floor about her, as Totrasmek sprawled headlong from the divan.

Conan came from behind the curtain, wiping his broad blade. Looking through the hangings he had seen the girl dancing desperately between four swaying spirals of smoke, but he had guessed that their appearance was very different to her. He knew he had killed Totrasmek.

Zabibi sank down on the floor, panting, but even as Conan started toward her, she staggered up again, though her legs trembled with exhaustion.

"The phial!" she gasped. "The phial!"

Totrasmek still grasped it in his stiffening hand. Ruthlessly she tore it from ihs locked fingers and then began frantically to ransack his garments.

"What the devil are you looking for?" Conan demanded.

"A ring--he stole it from Alafdhal. He must have, while my lover walked in madness through the streets. Set's devils!"

She had convinced herself that it was not on the person of Totrasmek. She began to cast about the chamber, tearing up divan covers and hangings and upsetting vessels.

She paused and raked a damp lock of hair out of her eyes.

"I forgot Baal-pteor!"

"He's in Hell with his neck broken," Conan assured her.

She expressed vindictive gratification at the news, but an instant later swore expressively.

"We can't stay here. It's not many hours until dawn. Lesser priests are likely to visit the temple at any hour of the night, and if we're discovered here with his corpse, the people will tear us to pieces. The Turanians could not save us."

She lifted the bolt on the secret door, and a few moments later they were in the streets and hurrying away from the silent square where brooded the age-old shrine of Hanuman.

In a winding street a short distance away, Conan halted and checked his companion with a heavy hand on her naked shoulder.

"Don't forget there was a price--"

"I have not forgotten!" She twisted free. "But we must go to--to Alafdhal first!"

A few minutes later the black slave let them through the wicket door. The young Turanian lay upon the divan, his arms and legs bound with heavy velvet ropes. His eyes were open, but they were like those of a mad dog, and foam was thick on his lips. Zabibi shuddered.

"Force his jaws open!" she commanded, and Conan's iron fingers accomplished the task.

Zabibi emptied the phial down the maniac's gullet. The effect was like magic. Instantly he became quiet. The glare faded from his eyes; he stared up at the girl in a puzzled way, but with recognition and intelligence. Then he fell into a normal slumber.

"When he awakes he will be quite sane," she whispered, motioning to the silent slave.

With a deep bow he gave into her hands a small leater bag and drew about her shoulders a silken cloak. Her manner had subtly changed when she beckoned Conan to follow her out of the chamber.

In an arch that opened on the street, she turned to him, drawing herself up with a new regality.

"I must now tell you the truth," she said. "I am not Zabibi. I am Nafertari. And he is not Alafdhal, a poor captain of the guardsmen. He is Jungir Khan, satrap of Zamboula."

Conan made no comment; his scarred dark countenance was immobile.

"I lied to you because I dared not divulge the truth to anyone," she said. "We were alone when Jungir Khan went mad. None knew of it but myself. Had it been known that the satrap of Zamboula was a madman, there would have been instant revolt and rioting, even as Totrasmek planned, who plotted our distruction.

"You see now how impossible is the reward for which you hoped. The satrap's mistress is not--cannot be for you. But you shall not go unrewarded. Here is a sack of gold."

She gave him the bag she had received from the slave.

"Go now, and when the sun is up come to the palace. I will have Jungir Khan make you captain of his guard. But you will take your orders from me, secretly. Your first duty will be to march a squad to the shrine of Hanuman, ostensibly to search for clues of the priest's slayer; in reality to search for the Star of Khorala. It must be hidden there somewhere. When you find it, bring it to me. You have my leave to go now."

He nodded, still silent, and strode away. The girl, watching the swing of his broad shoulders, was piqued to note that there was nothing in his bearing to show that he was in any way chagrined or abashed.

When he had rounded a corner, he glanced back, and then changed his direction and quickened his pace. A few moments later he was in the quarter of the city containing the Horse Market. There he smote on a door until from the window above a bearded head was thrust to demand the reason for the disturbance.

"A horse," demanded Conan. "The swiftest steed you have."

"I open no gates at this time of night," grumbled the horse trader.

Conan rattled his coins.

"Dog's son knave! Don't you see I'm white, and alone? Come down, before I smash your door!"

Presently, on a bay stallion, Conan was riding toward the house of Aram Baksh.

He turned off the road into the alley that lay between the tavern compound and the date-palm garden, but he did not pause at the gate. He rode on to the northeast corner of the wall, then turned and rode along the north wall, to halt within a few paces of the northwest angle. No trees grew near the wall, but there were some low bushes. To one of these he tied his horse and was about to climb into the saddle again, when he heard a low muttering of voices beyond the corner of the wall.

Drawing his foot from the stirrup he stole to the angle and peered around it. Three men were moving down the road toward the palm groves, and from their slouching gait he knew they were Negroes. They halted at his low call, bunching themselves as he strode toward them, his sword in his hand. Their eyes gleamed whitely in the starlight. Their brutish lust shone in their ebony faces, but they knew their three cudgels could not prevail against his sword, just as he knew it.

"Where are you going?" he challenged.

"To bid our brothers put out the fire in the pit beyond the groves," was the sullen gutteral reply. "Aram Baksh promised us a man, but he lied. We found one of our brothers dead in the trap-chamber. We go hungry this night."

"I think not," smiled Conan. "Aram Baksh will give you a man. Do you see that door?"

He pointed to a small, iron-bound portal set in the midst of the western wall.

"Wait there. Aram Baksh will give you a man."

Backing warily away until he was out of reach of a sudden bludgeon blow, he turned and melted around the northwest angle of the wall. Reaching his horse he paused to ascertain that the blacks were not sneaking after him, and then he climbed into the saddle and stood upright on it, quieting the uneasy steed with a low word. He reached up, grasped the coping of the wall and drew himself up and over. There he studied the grounds for an instant. The tavern was built in the southwest corner of the enclosure, the remaining space of which was occupied by groves and gardens. He saw no one in the grounds. The tavern was dark and silent, and he knew all the doors and windows were barred and bolted.

Conan knew that Aram Baksh slept in a chamber that opened into a cypress-bordered path that led to the door in the western wall. Like a shadow he glided among the trees, and a few moments later he rapped lightly on the chamber door.

"What is it?" asked a rumbling, sleepy voice from within.

"Aram Baksh!" hissed Conan. "The blacks are stealing over the wall!"

Almost instantly the door opened, framing the tavern-keeper, naked but for his shirt, with a dagger in his hand.

He craned his neck to stare into the Cimmerian's face.

"What tale is this--you!"

Conan's vengeful fingers strangled the yell in his throat. They went to the floor together and Conan wrenched the dagger from his enemy's hand. The blade glinted in the starlight, and blood spurted. Aram Baksh made hideous noises, gasping and gagging on a mouthful of blood. Conan dragged him to his feet and again the dagger slashed, and most of the curly beard fell to the floor.

Still gripping his captive's throat--for a man can scream incoherently even with his throat slit--Conan dragged him out of the dark chamber and down the cypress-shadowed path, to the iron-bound door in the outer wall. With one hand he lifted the bolt and threw the door open, disclosing the three shadowy figures which waited like black vultures outside. Into their eager arms Conan thrust the innkeeper.

A horrible, blood-choked scream rose from the Zamboulan's throat, but there was no response from the silent tavern. The people there were used to screams outside the wall. Aram Baksh fought like a wild man, his distended eyes turned frantically on the Cimmerian's face. He found no mercy there. Conan was thinking of the scores of wretches who owed their bloody doom to this man's greed.

In glee the Negroes dragged him down the road, mocking his frenzied gibberings. How could they recognize Aram Baksh in this half-naked, bloodstained figure, with the grotesquely shorn beard and unintelligible babblings? The sounds of the struggle came back to Conan, standing beside the gate, even after the clump of figures had vanished among the palms.

Closing the door behind him, Conan returned to his horse, mounted, and turned westward, toward the open desert, swinging wide to skirt the sinister belt of palm groves. As he rode, he drew from his belt a ring in which gleamed a jewel that snared the starlight in a shimmering iridescence. He held it up to admire it, turning it this way and that. The compact bag of gold pieces clinked gently at his saddle bow, like a promise of the greater riches to come.

"I wonder what she'd say if she knew I recognized her as Nafetari and him as Jungir Khan the instant I saw them," he mused. "I knew the Star of Khorala, too. There'll be a fine scene if she ever guesses that I slipped it off his finger while I was tying him with his sword belt. But they'll never catch me, with the start I'm getting."

He glanced back at the shadowy palm groves, among which a red glare was mounting. A chanting rose to the night, vibrating with savage exultation. And another sound mingled with it, a mad incoherent screaming, a frenzied gibbering in which no words could be distinguished. The noise followed Conan as he rode westward beneath the paling stars.

THE END

Contents

THE DEVIL IN IRON
by Robert E. Howard

One

The fisherman loosened his knife in its scabbard. The gesture was instinctive, for what he feared was nothing a knife could slay, not even the saw-edged crescent blade of the Yuetshi that could disembowel a man with an upward stroke. Neither man nor beast threatened him in the solitude which brooded over the castellated isle of Xapur.

He had climbed the cliffs, passed through the jungle that bordered them, and now stood surrounded by evidences of a vanished state. Broken columns glimmered among the trees, the straggling lines of crumbling walls meandered off into the shadows, and under his feet were broad paves, cracked and bowed by roots growing beneath.

The fisherman was typical of his race, that strange people whose origin is lost in the gray dawn of the past, and who have dwelt in their rude fishing huts along the southern shore of the Sea of Vilayet since time immemorial. He was broadly built, with long, apish arms and a mighty chest, but with lean loins and thin, bandy legs. His face was broad, his forehead low and retreating, his hair thick and tangled. A belt for a knife and a rag for a loin cloth were all he wore in the way of clothing.

That he was where he was proved that he was less dully incurious than most of his people. Men seldom visited Xapur. It was uninhabited, all but forgotten, merely one among the myriad isles which dotted the great inland sea. Men called it Xapur, the Fortified, because of its ruins, remnants of some prehistoric kingdom, lost and forgotten before the conquering

Hyborians had ridden southward. None knew who reared those stones, though dim legends lingered among the Yuetshi which half intelligibly suggested a connection of immeasurable antiquity between the fishers and the unknown island kingdom.

But it had been a thousand years since any Yuetshi had understood the import of these tales; they repeated them now as a meaningless formula, a gibberish framed to their lips by custom. No Yuetshi had come to Xapur for a century. The adjacent coast of the mainland was uninhabited, a reedy marsh given over to the grim beasts that haunted it. The fisher's village lay some distance to the south, on the mainland. A storm had blown his frail fishing craft far from his accustomed haunts and wrecked it in a night of flaring lightning and roaring waters on the towering cliffs of the isle. Now, in the dawn, the sky shone blue and clear; the rising sun made jewels of the dripping leaves. He had climbed the cliffs to which he had clung through the night because, in the midst of the storm, he had seen an appalling lance of lightning fork out of the black heavens, and the concussion of its stroke, which had shaken the whole island, had been accompanied by a cataclysmic crash that he doubted could have resulted from a riven tree.

A dull curiosity had caused him to investigate; and now he had found what he sought, and an animal-like uneasiness possessed him, a sense of lurking peril.

Among the trees reared a broken domelike structure, built of gigantic blocks of the peculiar ironlike green stone found only on the islands of Vilayet. It seemed incredible that human hands could have shaped and placed them, and certainly it was beyond human power to have overthrown the structure they formed. But the thunderbolt had splintered the ton-heavy blocks like so much glass, reduced others to green dust, and ripped away the whole arch of the dome.

The fisherman climbed over the debris and peered in, and what he saw brought a grunt from him. Within the ruined dome, surrounded by stone dust and bits of broken masonry, lay a man on a golden block. He was clad in a sort of skirt and a shagreen girdle. His black hair, which fell in a square mane to his massive shoulders, was confined about his temples by a narrow gold band. On his bare, muscular breast lay a curious dagger with a jeweled pommel, a shagreen-bound hilt, and a broad, crescent blade. It was much like the knife the fisherman wore at his hip, but it lacked the serrated edge and was made with infinitely greater skill.

The fisherman lusted for the weapon. The man, of course, was dead; had been dead for many centuries. This dome was his tomb. The fisherman did not wonder by what art the ancients had preserved the body in such a vivid likeness of life, which kept the muscular limbs full and unshrunken, the dark flesh vital. The dull brain of the Yuetshi had room only for his desire for the knife with its delicate, waving lines along the dully gleaming blade.

Scrambling down into the dome, he lifted the weapon from the man's breast. As he did so, a strange and terrible thing came to pass. The muscular, dark hands knotted convulsively, the lids flared open, revealing great, dark, magnetic eyes, whose stare struck the startled fisherman like a physical blow. He recoiled, dropping the jeweled dagger in his peturbation. The man on the dais heaved up to a sitting position, and the fisherman gaped at the full extent of his size, thus revealed. His narrowed eyes held the Yuetshi, and in those slitted orbs he read neither friendliness nor gratitude; he saw only a fire as alien and hostile as that which burns in the eyes of a tiger.

Suddenly the man rose and towered above him, menace in his every aspect. There was no room in the fisherman's dull brain for fear, at least for such fear as might grip a man who has just seen the fundamental laws of nature defied. As the great hands fell to his shoulders, he drew his saw-edged knife and struck upward with the same motion. The blade splintered against the stranger's corded belly as against a steel column, and then the fisherman's thick neck broke like a rotten twig in the giant hands.

* * *

Two

Jehungir Agha, lord of Khawarizm and keeper of the costal border, scanned once more the ornate parchment scroll with its peacock seal and laughed shortly and sardonically.

"Well?" bluntly demanded his counsellor Ghaznavi.

Jehungir shrugged his shoulders. He was a handsome man, with the merciless pride of birth and accomplishment.

"The king grows short of patience," he said. "In his own hand he complains bitterly of what he calls my failure to guard the frontier. By Tarim, if i cannot deal a blow to these robbers of the steppes, Khawarizm may own a new lord."

Ghaznavi tugged his gray-shot beard in meditation. Yezdigerd, king of Turan, was the mightiest monarch in the world. In his palace in the great port city of Aghrapur was heaped the plunder of empires. His fleets of purple-sailed war galleys had made Vilayet an Hyrkanian lake. The dark-skinned people of Zamora paid him tribute, as did the eastern provinces of Koth. The Shemites bowed to his rule as far west as Shushan. His armies ravaged the borders of Stygia in the south and the snowy lands of the Hyperboreans in the north. His riders bore torch and sword westward into Brythunia and Ophir and Corinthia, even to the borders of Nemedia. His gilt-helmeted swordsmen had trampled hosts under their horses' hoofs, and walled cities went up in flames at his command. In the glutted slave markets of Aghrapur, Sultanapur, Khawarizm, Shahpur, and Khorusun, women were sold for three small silver coins -- blonde Brythunians, tawny Stygians, dark-haired Zamorians, ebon Kushites, olive-skinned Shemites.

Yet, while his swift horsemen overthrew armies far from his frontiers, at his very borders an audacious foe plucked his beard with a red-dripping and smoke-stained hand.

On the broad steppes between the Sea of Vilayet and the borders of the easternmost Hyborian kingdoms, a new race had sprung up in the past half-century, formed originally of fleeing criminals, broken men, escaped slaves, and deserting soldiers. They were men of many crimes and countries, some born on the steppes, some fleeing from the kingdoms in the West. They were called kozak, which means wastrel.

Dwelling on the wild, open steppes, owning no law but their own peculiar code, they had become a people capable even of defying the Grand Monarch. Ceaselessly they raided the Turanian frontier, retiring in the steppes when defeated; with the pirates of Vilayet, men of much the same breed, they harried the coast, preying off the merchant ships which plied between the Hyrkanian ports.

"How am I to crush these wolves?" demanded Jehungir. "If I follow them into the steppes, I run the risk either of being cut off and destroyed, or of having them elude me entirely and burn the city in my absence. Of late they have been more daring than ever."

"That is because of the new chief who has risen among them," answered Ghaznavi. "You know whom I mean."

"Aye!" replied Jehungir feelingly. "It is that devil Conan; he is even wilder than the kozaks, yet he is crafty as a mountain lion."

"It is more through wild animal instinct than through intelligence," answered Ghaznavi. "The other kozaks are at least descendants of civilized men. He is a barbarian. But to dispose of him would be to deal them a crippling blow."

"But how?" demanded Jehungir. "He has repeatedly cut his way out of spots that seemed certain death for him. And, instinct or cunning, he has avoided or escaped every trap set for him."

"For every beast and for every man there is a trap he will not escape," quoth Ghaznavi. "When we have parleyed with the kozaks for the ransom of captives, I have observed this man Conan. He has a keen relish for women and strong drink. Have your captive Octavia fetched here."

Jehungir clapped his hands, and an impressive Kushite eunuch, an image of shining ebony in silken pantaloons, bowed before him and went to do his bidding. Presently he returned, leading by the wrist a tall, handsome girl, whose yellow hair, clear eyes, and fair skin identified her as a pure-blooded member of her race. Her scanty silk tunic, girded at the waist, displayed the marvelous contours of her magnificent figure. Her fine eyes flashed with resentment and her red lips were sulky, but submission had been taught her during her captivity. She stood with hanging head before her master until he motioned her to a seat on the divan beside him. Then he looked inquiringly at Ghaznavi.

"We must lure Conan away from the kozaks," said the counsellor abruptly. "Their war camp is at present pitched somewhere on the lower reaches of the Zaporoska River -- which, as you well know, is a wilderness of reeds, a swampy jungle in which our last expedition was cut to pieces by those masterless devils."

"I am not likely to forget that," said Jehungir wryly.

"There is an uninhabited island near the mainland," said Ghaznavi, "known as Xapur, the Fortified, because of some ancient ruins upon it. There is a peculiarity about it which makes it perfect for our purpose. It has no shoreline but rises sheer out of the sea in cliffs a hundred and fifty feet tall. Not even an ape could negotiate them. The only place where a man can go up or down is a narrow path on the western side that has the appearance of a worn stair, carved into the solid rock of the cliffs.

"If we could trap Conan on that island, alone, we could hunt him down at our leisure, with bows, as men hunt a lion."

"As well wish for the moon," said Jehungir impatiently. "Shall we send him a messenger, bidding him climb the cliffs and await our coming?"

"In effect, yes!" Seeing Jehungir's look of amazement, Ghaznavi continued: "We will ask for a parley with the kozaks in regard to prisoners, at the edge of the steppes by Fort Ghori. As usual, we will go with a force and encamp outside the castle. They will come, with an equal force, and the parley will go forward with the usual distrust and suspicion. But this time we will take with us, as if by casual chance, your beautiful captive." Octavia changed color and listened with intensified interest as the counsellor nodded toward her. "She will use all her wiles to attract Conan's attention. That should not be difficult. To that wild reaver, she should appear a dazzling vision of loveliness. Her vitality and substantial figure should appeal to him more vividly than would one of the doll-like beauties of your seraglio."

Octavia sprang up, her white fists clenched, her eyes blazing and her figure quivering with outraged anger.

"You would force me to play the trollop with this barbarian?" she exclaimed. "I will not! I am no market-block slut to smirk and ogle at a steppes robber. I am the daughter of a Nemedian lord--"

"You were of the Nemedian nobility before my riders carried you off," returned Jehungir cynically. "Now you are merely a slave who will do as she is bid."

"I will not!" she raged.

"On the contrary," rejoined Jehungir with studied cruelty, "you will. I like Ghaznavi's plan. Continue, prince among counsellors."

"Conan will probably wish to buy her. You will refuse to sell her, of course, or to exchange her for Hyrkanian prisoners. He may then try to steal her, or take her by force -- though I do not think even he would break the parley truce. Anyway, we must be prepared for whatever he might attempt.

"Then, shortly after the parley, before he has time to forget all about her, we will send a messenger to him, under a flag of truce, accusing him of stealing the girl and demanding her return. He may kill the messenger, but at least he will think that she has escaped.

"Then we will send a spy -- a Yuetishi fisherman will do -- to the kozak camp, who will tell Conan that Octavia is hiding on Xapur. If I know my man, he will go straight to that place."

"But we do not know that he will go alone," Jehungir argued.

"Does a man take a band of warriors with him, when going to a rendezvous with a woman he desires?" retorted Ghaznavi. "The chances are all that he will go alone. But we will take care of the other alternative. We will not await him on the island, where we might be trapped ourselves, but among the reeds of a marshy point, which juts out to within a thousand yards of Xapur. If he brings a large force, we'll beat a retreat and think up another plot. If he comes alone or with a small party, we will have him. Depend upon it, he will come, remembering your charming slave's smiles and meaning glances."

"I will never descend to such shame!" Octavia was wild with fury and humiliation. "I will die first!"

"You will not die, my rebellious beauty," said Jehungir, "but you will be subjected to a very painful and humiliating experience."

He clapped his hands, and Octavia palled. This time it was not the Kushite who entered, but a Shemite, a heavily muscled man of medium height with a short, curled, blue-black beard.

"Here is work for you, Gilzan," said Jehungir. "Take this fool, and play with her awhile. Yet be careful not to spoil her beauty."

With an inarticulate grunt the Shemite seized Octavia's wrist, and at the grasp of his iron fingers, all the defiance went out of her. With a piteous cry she tore away and threw herself on her knees before her implacable master, sobbing incoherently for mercy.

Jehungir dismissed the disappointed torturer with a gesture, and said to Ghaznavi: "If your plan succeeds, I will fill your lap with gold."

* * *

Three

In the darkness before dawn, an unaccustomed sound disturbed the solitude that slumbered over the reedy marshes and the misty waters of the coast. It was not a drowsy waterfowl nor a waking beast. It was a human who struggled through the thick reeds, which were taller than a man's head.

It was a woman, had there been anyone to see, tall, and yellow-haired, her splendid limbs molded by her draggled tunic. Octavia had escaped in good earnest, every outraged fiber of her still tingling from her experience in a captivity that had become unendurable.

Jehungir's mastery of her had been bad enough; but with deliberate fiendishness Jehungir had given her to a nobleman whose name was a byword for degeneracy even in Khawarizm.

Octavia's resilient flesh crawled and quivered at her memories. Desperation had nerved her climb from Jelal Khan's castle on a rope made of strips from torn tapestries, and chance had led her to a picketed horse. She had ridden all night, and dawn found her with a foundered steed on the swampy shores of the sea. Quivering with the abhorence of being dragged back to the revolting destiny planned for her by Jelal Khan, she plunged into the morass, seeking a hiding place from the pursuit she expected. When the reeds grew thinner around her and the water rose about her thighs, she saw the dim loom of an island ahead of her. A broad span of water lay between, but she did not hesitate. She waded out until the low waves were lapping about her waist; then she struck out strongly, swimming with a vigor that promised unusual endurance.

As she neared the island, she saw that it rose sheer from the water in castlelike cliffs. She reached them at last but found neither ledge to stand on below the water, nor to cling to above. She swam on, following the curve of the cliffs, the strain of her long flight beginning to weight her limbs. Her hands fluttered along the sheer stone, and suddenly they found a depression. With a sobbing gasp of relief, she pulled herself out of the water and clung there, a dripping white goddess in the dim starlight.

She had come upon what seemed to be steps carved in the cliff. Up them she went, flattening herself against the stone as she caught a faint clack of muffled oars. She strained her eyes and thought she made out a vague bulk moving toward the reedy point she had just quitted. But it was too far away for her to be sure in the darkness, and presently the faint sound ceased and she continued her climb. If it were her pursuers, she knew of no better course than to hide on the island. She knew that most of the islands off that marshy coast were uninhabited. This might be a pirate's lair, but even pirates would be preferable to the beast she had escaped.

A vagrant thought crossed her mind as she climbed, in which she mentally compared her former master with the kozak chief with whom -- by compulsion -- she had shamefully flirted in the pavillions of the camp by Fort Ghori, where the Hyrkanian lords had parleyed with the warriors of the steppes. His burning gaze had frightened and humiliated her, but his cleanly elemental fierceness set him above Jelal Khan, a monster such as only an overly opulent civilization can produce.

She scrambled up over the cliff edge and looked timidly at the dense shadows which confronted her. The trees grew close to the cliffs, presenting a solid mass of blackness. Something whirred above her head and she cowered, even though realizing it was only a bat.

She did not like the looks of those ebony shadows, but she set her teeth and went toward them, trying not to think of snakes. Her bare feet made no sound in the spongy loam under the trees.

Once among them, the darkness closed frighteningly about her. She had not taken a dozen steps when she was no longer able to look back and see the cliffs and the sea beyond. A few steps more and she became hopelessly confused and lost her sense of direction. Through the tangled branches not even a star peered. She groped and floundered on, blindly, and then came to a sudden halt.

Somewhere ahead there began the rhythmical booming of a drum. It was not such a sound as she would have expected to hear in that time and place. Then she forgot it as she was aware of a presence near her. She could not see, but she knew that something was standing beside her in the darkness.

With a stifled cry she shrank back, and as she did so, something that even in her panic she recognized as a human arm curved about her waist. She screamed and threw all her supple young strength into a wild lunge for freedom, but her captor caught her up like a child, crushing her frantic resistance with ease. The silence with which her frenzied pleas and protests were received added to her terror as she felt herself being carried through the darkness toward the distant drum, which still pulsed and muttered.

* * *

Four

As the first tinge of dawn reddened the sea, a small boat with a solitary occupant approached the cliffs. The man in the boat was a picturesque figure. A crimson scarf was knotted about his head; his wide silk breeches, of flaming hue, were upheld by a broad sash, which likewise supported a scimitar in a shagreen scabbard. His gilt-worked leather boots suggested the horseman rather than the seaman, but he handled his boat with skill. Through his widely open white silk shirt showed his broad, muscular breast, burned brown by the sun.

The muscles of his heavy, bronzed arms rippled as he pulled the oars with an almost feline ease of motion. A fierce vitality that was evident in each feature and motion set him apart from the common men; yet his expression was neither savage nor somber, though the smoldering blue eyes hinted at ferocity easily wakened. This was Conan, who had wandered into the armed camps of the kozaks with no other possession than his wits and his sword, and who had carved his way to leadership among them.

He paddled to the carven stair as one familiar with his environs and moored the boat to a projection of the rock. Then he went up the worn steps without hesitation. He was keenly alert, not because he consciously suspected hidden danger, but because alertness was a part of him, whetted by the wild existence he followed.

What Ghaznavi had considered animal intuition or some sixth sense was merely the razor-edged faculties and savage wit of the barbarian. Conan had no instinct to tell him that men were watching him from a covert among the reeds of the mainland.

As he climbed the cliff, one of these men breathed deeply and stealthily lifted a bow. Jehungir caught his wrist and hisssed an oath into his ear. "Fool! Will you betray us? Don't you realize he is out of range? Let him get upon the island. He will go looking for the girl. We will stay here awhile. He may have sensed our presence or guessed our plot. He may have warriors hidden somewhere. We will wait. In an hour, if nothing suspicious occurs, we'll row up to the foot of the stair and wait him there. If he does not return in a reasonable time, some of us will go upon the island and hunt him down. But I do not wish to do that if it can be helped. Some of us are sure to die if we have to go into the bush after him. I had rather catch him with arrows from a safe distance."

Meanwhile, the unsuspecting kozak had plunged into a forest. He went silently in his soft leather boots, his gaze sifting every shadow in eagerness to catch sight of the splendid, tawny-haired beauty of whom he had dreamed ever since he had seen her in the pavilion of Jehungir Agha by Fort Ghori. He would have desired her even if she had displayed repugnance toward him. But her cryptic smiles and glances had fired his blood, and with all the lawless violence which was his heritage he desired that white-skinned, golden-haired woman of civilization.

He had been on Xapur before. Less than a month ago, he had held a secret conclave here with a pirate crew. He knew that he was approaching a point where he could see the mysterious ruins which gave the island its name, and he wondered if he could find the girl hiding among them. Even with the thought, he stopped as though struck dead.

Ahead of him, among the trees, rose something that his reason told him was not possible. It was a great dark green wall, with towers rearing beyond the battlements.

Conan stood paralyzed in the disruption of the faculties which demoralizes anyone who is confronted by an impossible negation of sanity. He doubted neither his sight nor his reason, but something was monstrously out of joint. Less than a month ago, only broken ruins had showed among the trees. What human hands could rear such a mammoth pile as now met his eyes, in the few weeks which had elapsed? Besides, the buccaneers who roamed Vilyet ceaselessly would have learned of any work going on on such stupendous scale and would have informed the kozaks.

There was no explaining this thing, but it was so. he was on Xapur, and that fantastic heap of towering masonry was on Xapur, and all was madness and paradox; yet it was all true.

He wheeled to race back through the jungle, down the carven stair and across the blue waters to the distant camp at the mouth of the Zaporoska. In that moment of unreasoning panic, even the thought of halting so near the inland sea was repugnant. He would leave it behind him, would quit the armed camps and the steppes and put a thousand miles between him and the blue, mysterious East where the most basic laws of nature could be set at naught, by what diabolism he could not guess.

For an instant, the future fate of kingdoms that hinged on this gay-clad barbarian hung in the balance. It was a small thing that tipped the scales -- merely a shred of silk hanging on a bush that caught his uneasy glance. He leaned to it, his nostrils expanding, his nerves quivering to a subtle stimulant. On that bit of torn cloth, so faint that it was less with his physical faculties than by some obscure instinctive sense that he recognized it, lingered the tantalizing perfume that he connected with the sweet, firm flesh of the woman he had seen in Jehugir's pavilion. The fisherman had not lied, then; she was here! Then in the soil he saw a single track in the loam, the track of a bare foot, long and slender, but a man's, not a woman's, and sunk deeper than was natural. The conclusion was obvious; the man who made that track was carrying a burden, and what should it be but the girl the kozak was seeking?

He stood silently facing the dark towers that loomed through the trees, his eyes slits of blue balefire. Desire for the yellow-haired woman vied with a sullen, primordial rage at whoever had taken her. His human passion fought down his ultra-human fears, and dropping into the stalking crouch of a hunting panther, he glided toward the walls, taking advantage of the dense foliage to escape detection from the battlements.

As he approached, he saw that the walls were composed of the same green stone that had formed the ruins, and he was haunted by a vague sense of familiarity. It was as if he looked upon something he had never before seen but had dreamed of or pictured mentally. At last he recognized the sensation. The walls and towers followed the plan of the ruins. It was as if the crumbling lines had grown back into the structures they originally were.

No sound disturbed the morning quiet as Conan stole to the foot of the wall, which rose sheer from the luxuriant growth. On the southern reaches of the inland sea, the vegetation was almost tropical. He saw no one on the battlements, heard no sounds within. He saw a massive gate a short distance to his left and had no reason to suppose that it was not locked and guarded. But he believed that the woman he sought was somewhere beyond that wall, and the course he took was characteristically reckless.

Above him, vine-festooned branches reached out toward the battlements. He went up a great tree like a cat, and reaching a point above the parapet, he gripped a thick limb with both hands, swung back and forth at arm's length until he had gained momentum, and then let go and catapulted through the air, landing catlike on the battlements. Crouching there, he stared down into the streets of a city.

The circumference of the wall was not great, but the number of green stone buildings it contained was surprising. They were three or four stories in height, mainly flat-roofed, reflecting a fine architectural style. The streets converged like the spokes of a wheel into an octagon-shaped court in the centre of the town, which gave upon a lofty edifice, which, with its domes and towers, dominated the whole city. He saw no one moving in the streets or looking out of the windows, though the sun was already coming up. The silence that reigned there might have been that of a dead and deserted city. A narrow stone stair ascended the wall near him; down this he went.

Houses shouldered so closely to the wall that halfway down the stair, he found himself within arm's length of a window and halted to peer in. There were no bars, and the silk curtains were caught back with satin cords. He looked into a chamber whose walls were hidden by dark velvet tapestires. The floor was covered with thick rugs, and there were benches of polished ebony and an ivory dais heaped with furs.

He was about to continue his descent, when he heard the sound of someone approaching in the street below. Before the unknown person could round a corner and see him on the stair, he stepped quickly across the intervening space and dropped lightly into the room, drawing his scimitar. He stood for an instant statue-like; then, as nothing happened, he was moving

across the rugs toward an arched doorway, when a hanging was drawn aside, revealing a cushioned alcove from which a slender, dark-haired girl regarded him with languid eyes.

Conan glared at her tensely, expecting her momentarily to start screaming. But she merely smothered a yawn with a dainty hand, rose from the alcove, and leaned negligently against the hanging which she held with one hand.

She was undoubtedly a member of a white race, though her skin was very dark. Her square-cut hair was black as midnight, her only garment a wisp of silk about her supple hips.

Presently she spoke, but the tongue was unfamiliar to him, and he shook his head. She yawned again, stretched lithely and, without any show of fear or surprise, shifted to a language he did understand, a dialect of Yuetshi which sounded strangely archaic.

"Are you looking for someone?" she asked, as indifferently as if the invasion of her chamber by an armed stranger were the most common thing imaginable.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am Yateli," she answered languidly. "I must have feasted late last night, I am so sleepy now. Who are you?"

"I am Conan, a hetman among the kozaks," he answered, watching her narrowly. He believed her attitude to be a pose and expected her to try to escape from the chamber or rouse the house. But, though a velvet rope that might be a signal cord hung near her, she did not reach for it.

"Conan," she repeated drowsily. "You are not a Dagonian. I suppose you are a mercenary. Have you cut the heads off many Yuetshi?"

"I do not war on water rats!" he snorted.

"But they are very terrible," she murmured. "I remember when they were our slaves. But they revolted and burned and slew. Only the magic of Khosatral Khel has kept them from the walls--" she paused, a puzzled look struggling with the sleepiness of her expression. "I forgot," she muttered. "They did climb the walls, last night. There was shouting and fire, and the people calling in vain on Khosatral." She shook her head as if to clear it. "But that cannot be," she murmured, "because I am alive, and I thought I was dead. Oh, to the devil with it!"

She came across the chamber, and taking Conan's hand, drew him to the dais. He yielded in bewilderment and uncertainty. The girl smiled at him like a sleepy child; her long silky lashes drooped over dusky, clouded eyes. She ran her fingers through his thick black locks as if to assure herself of his reality.

"It was a dream," she yawned. "Perhaps it's all a dream. I feel like a dream now. I don't care. I can't remember something -- I have forgotten -- there is something I cannot understand, but I grow so sleepy when I try to think. Anyway, it doesn't matter."

"What do you mean?" he asked uneasily. "You said they climbed the walls last night? Who?"

"The Yuetshi. I thought so, anyway. A cloud of smoke hid everything, but a naked, bloodstained devil caught me by the throat and drove his knife into my breast. Oh, it hurt! But it was a dream, because see, there is no scar." She idly inspected her smooth bosom, and then sank upon Conan's lap and passed her supple arms about his massive neck. "I cannot remember," she murmured, nestling her dark head against his mighty breast. "Everything is dim and misty. It does not matter. You are no dream. You are strong. Let us live while we can. Love me!"

He cradled the girl's glossy head in the bend of his heavy arm and kissed her full red lips with unfeigned relish.

"You are strong," she repeated, her voice waning. "Love me -- love --" The sleepy murmur faded away; the dusky eyes closed, the long lashes drooping over the sensuous cheeks; the supple body relaxed in Conan's arms.

He scowled down at her. She seemed to partake of the illusion that haunted this whole city, but the firm resilience of her limbs under his questing fingers convinced him that he had a living human girl in his arms, and not the shadow of a dream. No less disturbed, he hastily laid her on the furs upon the dais. Her sleep was too deep to be natural. He decided that she must be an addict of some drug, perhaps like the black lotus of Xuthal.

Then he found something else to make him wonder. Among the furs on the dais was a gorgeous spotted skin, whose predominant hue was golden. It was not a clever copy, but the skin of an actual beast. And that beast, Conan knew, had been extinct for at least a thousand years; it was the great golden leopard which figures so prominently in Hyborian legendry, and which the ancient artists delighted to portray in pigments and marble.

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Conan passed through the archway into a winding corridor. Silence hung over the house, but outside he heard a sound which his keen ears recognized as something ascending the stair on the wall from which he had entered the building. An instant later he was startled to hear something land with a soft but weighty thud on the floor of the chamber he had just quitted. Turning quickly away, he hurried along the twisting hallway until something on the floor before him brought him to a halt.

It was a human figure, which lay half in the hall and half in an opening that obviously was normally concealed by a door, which was a duplicate of the panels of the wall. It was a man, dark and lean, clad only in a silk loincloth, with a shaven head and cruel features, and he lay as if death had struck him just as he was emerging from the panel. Conan bent above him, seeking the cause of his death, and discovered him to be merely sunk in the same deep sleep as the girl in the chamber.

But why should he select such a place for his slumbers? While meditating on the matter, Conan was galvanized by a sound behind him. Something was moving up the corridor in his direction. A quick glance down it showed that it ended in a great door, which might be locked. Conan jerked the supine body out of the panel entrance and stepped through, pulling the panel shut after him. A click told him it was locked in place. Standing in utter darkness, he heard a shuffling tread halt just outside the door, and a faint chill trickled along his spine. That was no human step, nor that of any beast he had ever encountered.

There was an instant of silence, then a faint creak of wood and metal. Putting out his hand he felt the door straining and bending inward, as if a great weight were being steadily borne against it from the outside. As he reached for his sword, this ceased and he heard a strange, slobbering mouthing that prickled the short hairs on his scalp. Scimitar in hand, he began backing away, and his heels felt steps, down which he nearly tumbled. He was in a narrow staircase leading downward.

He groped his way down in the blackness, feeling for, but not finding, some other opening in the walls. Just as he decided that he was no longer in the house, but deep in the earth under it, the steps ceased in a level tunnel.

* * *

Five

Along the dark, silent tunnel Conan groped, momentarily dreading a fall into some unseen pit; but at last his feet struck steps again, and he went up them until he came to a door on which his fumbling fingers found a metal catch. He came out into a dim and lofty room of enormous proportions. Fantastic columns marched about the mottled walls, upholding a ceiling, which, at once translucent and dusky, seemed like a cloudy midnight sky, giving an illusion of impossible height. If any light filtered in from the outside, it was curiously altered.

In a brooding twilight, Conan moved across the bare green floor. The great room was circular, pierced on one side by the great, bronze valves of a giant door. Opposite this, on a dais against the wall, up to which led broad curving steps, there stood a throne of copper, and when Conan saw what was coiled on this throne, he retreated hastily, lifting his scimitar.

Then, as the thing did not move, he scanned it more closely and presently mounted the glass steps and stared down at it. It was a gigantic snake, apparently carved of some jadelike substance. Each scale stood out as distinctly as in real life, and the iridescent colors were vividly reproduced. The great wedge-shaped head was half submerged in the folds of its trunk; so neither the eyes nor jaws were visible. Recognition stirred in his mind. The snake was evidently meant to represent one of those grim monsters of the marsh, which in past ages had haunted the reedy edges of Vilayet's southern shores. But, like the golden leopard, they had been extinct for hundreds of years. Conan had seen rude images of them, in minature, among the idol huts of the Yuetshi, and there was a description of them in the Book of Skelos, which drew on prehistoric sources.

Conan admired the scaly torso, thick as his thigh and obviously of great length, and he reached out and laid a curious hand on the thing. And as he did so, his heart nearly stopped. An icy chill congealed the blood in his veins and lifted the short hair on his scalp. Under his hand there was not the smooth, brittle surface of glass or metal or stone, but the yielding, fibrous mass of a living thing. He felt cold, sluggish life flowing under his fingers.

His hand jerked back in instinctive repulsion. Sword shaking in his grasp, horror and revulsion and fear almost choking him, he backed away and down the glass steps with painful care, glaring in awful fascinastion at the grisly thing that slumbered on the copper throne. It did not move.

He reached the bronze door and tried it, with his heart in his teeth, sweating with fear that he should find himself locked in with that slimy horror. But the valves yielded to his touch, and he glided though and closed them behind him.

He found himself in a wide hallway with lofty, tapestried walls, where the light was the same twilight gloom. It made distant objects indistinct, and that made him uneasy, rousing thoughts of serpents gliding unseen through the dimness. A door at the other end seemed miles away in the illusive light. Nearer at hand, the tapestry hung in such a way as to suggest an opening behind it, and lifting it cautiously he discovered a narrow stair leading up.

While he hesitated he heard, in the great room he had just left, the same shuffling tread he had heard outside the locked panel. Had he been followed through the tunnel? He went up the stair hastily, dropping the tapestry in place behind him.

Emerging presently into a twisting corridor, he took the first doorway he came to. He had a twofold purpose in his apparently aimless prowling; to escape from the building and its mysteries, and to find the Nemedian girl who, he felt, was imprisoned somewhere in this palace, temple, or whatever it was. He believed it was the great domed edifice at the center of the city, and it was likely that here dwelt the ruler of the town, to whom a captive woman would doubtless be brought.

He found himself in a chamber, not another corridor, and was about to retrace his steps, when he heard a voice which came from behind one of the walls. There was no door in that wall, but he leaned close and heard distinctly. And an icy chill crawled slowly along his spine. The tongue was Nemedian, but the voice was not human. There was a terifying resonance about it, like a bell tolling at midnight.

"There was no life in the Abyss, save that which was incorporated in me," it tolled. "Nor was there light, nor motion, nor any sound. Only the urge behind and beyond life guided and impelled me on my upward journey, blind, insensate, inexorable. Through ages upon ages, and the changeless strata of darkness I climbed--"

Ensorcelled by that belling resonance, Conan crouched forgetful of all else, until its hypnotic power caused a strange replacement of faculties and perception, and sound created the illusion of sight. Conan was no longer aware of the voice, save as far-off rhythmical waves of sound. Transported beyond his age and his own individuality, he was seeing the transmutation of the being men called Khosatral Khel which crawled up from Night and the Abyss ages ago to clothe itself in the substance of the material universe.

But human flesh was too frail, too paltry to hold the terrific essence that was Khosatral Khel. So he stood up in the shape and aspect of a man, but his flesh was not flesh; nor the bone, bone; nor blood, blood. He became a blasphemy against all nature, for he caused to live and think and act a basic substance that before had never known the pulse and stir of animate being.

He stalked through the world as a god, for no earthly weapon could harm him, and to him a century was like an hour. In his wanderings he came upon a primitive people inhabiting the island of Dagonia, and it pleased him to give this race culture and civilization, and by his aid they built the city of Dagon and they abode there and worshipped him. Strange and grisly were his servants, called from the dark corners of the planet where grim survivals of forgotten ages yet lurked. His house in Dagon was connected with every other house by tunnels through which his shaven-headed priests bore victims for the sacrifice.

But after many ages, a fierce and brutish people appeared on the shores of the sea. They called themselves Yuetshi, and after a fierce battle were defeated and enslaved, and for nearly a generation they died on the altars of Khosatral.

His sorcery kept them in bonds. Then their priest, a strange, gaunt man of unknown race, plunged into the wilderness, and when he returned he bore a knife that was of no earthly substance. It was forged of a meteor, which flashed through the sky like a flaming arrow and fell in a far valley. The slaves rose. Their saw-edged crescents cut down the men of Dagon

like sheep, and against that unearthly knife the magic of Khosatral was impotent. While carnage and slaughter bellowed through the red smoke that choked the streets, the grimmest act of that grim drama was played in the cryptic dome behind the great daised chamber with its copper throne and its walls mottled like the skin of serpents.

From that dome, the Yuetshi priest emerged alone. He had not slain his foe, because he wished to hold the threat of his loosing over the heads of his own rebellious subjects. He had left Khosatral lying upon the golden dais with the mystic knife across his breast for a spell to hold him senseless and inanimate until doomsday.

But the ages passed and the priest died, the towers of deserted Dagon crumbled, the tales became dim, and the Yuetshi were reduced by plagues and famines and war to scattered remnants, dwelling in squalor along the seashore.

Only the cryptic dome resisted the rot of time, until a chance thunderbolt and the curiosity of a fisherman lifted from the breast of the god the magic knife and broke the spell. Khosatral Khel rose and lived and waxed mighty once more. It pleased him to restore the city as it was in the days before its fall. By his necromancy he lifted the towers from the dust of forgotten millenia, and the folk which had been dust for ages moved in life again.

But folk who have tasted of death are only partly alive. In the dark corners of their souls and minds, death still lurks unconquered. By night the people of Dagon moved and loved, hated and feasted, and remembered the fall of Dagon and their own slaughter only as a dim dream; they moved in an enchanted mist of illusion, feeling the strangeness of their existence but not inquiring the reasons therefor. With the coming of day, they sank into deep sleep, to be roused again only by the coming of night, which is akin to death.

All this rolled in a terrible panorama before Conan's consciousness as he crouched beside the tapestried wall. His reason stasggered. All certainty and sanity were swept away, leaving a shadowy universe through which stole hooded figures of grisly potentialities. Through the belling of the voice, which was like a tolling of triumph over the ordered laws of a sane planet, a human sound anchored Conan's mind from its flight through spheres of madness. It was the hysterical sobbing of a woman.

Involuntarily he sprung up.

* * *

Six

Jehungir Agha waited with growing impatience in his boat among the reeds. More than an hour passed, and Conan had not reappeared. Doubtless he was still searching the island for the girl he thought to be hidden there. But another surmise occurred to the Agha. Suppose the hetman had left his warriors near by, and that they should grow suspicious and come to investigate his long absence? Jehungir spoke to the oarsmen, and the long boat slid from among the reeds and glided toward the carven stairs.

Leaving half a dozen men in the boat, he took the rest, ten mighty archers of Khawarizm, in spired helmets and tiger-skin cloaks. Like hunters invading the retreat of the lion, they stole forward under the trees, arrows on strings. Silence reigned over the forest except when a great green thing that might have been a parrot swirled over their heads with a low thunder of broad wings and then sped off through the trees. With a sudden gesture, Jehungir halted his party, and they stared incredulously at the towers that showed through the verdure in the distance.

"Tarim!" muttered Jehungir. "The pirates have rebuilt the ruins! Doubtless Conan is there. We must investigate this. A fortified town this close to the mainland! -- Come!"

With renewed caution, they glided through the trees. The game had altered; from pursuers and hunters they had become spies.

And as they crept through the tangled gowth, the man they sought was in peril more deadly than their filigreed arrows.

Conan realized with a crawling of his skin that beyond the wall the belling voice had ceased. He stood motionless as a statue, his gaze fixed on a curtained door through which he knew that a culminating horror would presently appear.

It was dim and misty in the chamber, and Conan's hair began to lift on his scalp as he looked. He saw a head and a pair of gigantic shoulders grow out of the twilight doom. There was no sound of footsteps, but the great dusky form grew more distinct until Conan recognized the figure of a man. He was clad in sandals, a skirt, and a broad shagreen girdle. His square-cut mane was confined by a circle of gold. Conan stared at the sweep of the monstrous shoulders, the breadth of swelling breast, the bands and ridges and clusters of muscles on torso and limbs. The face was without weakness and without mercy. The eyes were balls of dark fire. And Conan knew that this was Khosatral Khel, the ancient from the Abyss, the god of Dagonia.

No word was spoken. No word was necessary. Khosatral spread his great arms, and Conan, crouching beneath them, slashed at the giant's belly. Then he bounded back, eyes blazing with surprise. The keen edge had rung on the mighty body as on an anvil, rebounding without cutting. Then Khosatral came upon him in an irrestible surge.

There was a fleeting concussion, a fierce writhing and intertwining of limbs and bodies, and then Conan sprang clear, every thew quivering from the violence of his efforts; blood started where the grazing fingers had torn the skin. In that instant of contact, he had experienced the ultimate madness of blasphemed nature; no human flesh had bruised his, but metal animated and sentient; it was a body of living iron which opposed his.

Khosatral loomed above the warrior in the gloom. Once let those great fingers lock and they would not loosen until the human body hung limp in their grasp. In that twilit chambr it was as if a man fought with a dream-monster in a nightmare.

Flinging down his useless sword, Conan caught up a heavy bench and hurled it with all his power. It was such a missile as few men could even lift. On Khosatral's mighty breast it smashed into shreds and splinters. It did not even shake the giant on his braced legs. His face lost something of its human aspect, a nimbus of fire played about his awesome head, and like a moving tower he came on.

With a desperate wrench Conan ripped a whole section of tapestry from the wall and whirling it, with a muscular effort greater than that required for throwing the bench, he flung it over the giant's head. For an instant Khosatral floundered, smothered and blinded by the clinging stuff that resisted his strength as wood or steel could not have done, and in that instant Conan caught up his scimitar and shot out into the corridor. Without checking his speed, he hurled himself through the door of the adjoining chamber, slammed the door, and shot the bolt.

Then as he wheeled, he stopped short, all the blood in him seeming to surge to his head. Crouching on a heap of silk cushions, golden hair streaming over her naked shoulders, eyes blank with terror, was the woman for whom he had dared so much. He almost forgot the horror at his heels until a splintering crash behind him brought him to his senses. He caught up the girl and sprang for the opposite door. She was too helpless with fright either to resist or to aid him. A faint whimper was the only sound of which she seemed capable.

Conan wasted no time trying the door. A shattering stroke of his scimitar hewed the lock asunder, and as he sprang through to the stair that loomed beyond it, he saw the head and shoulders of Khosatral crash through the other door. The colossus was splintering the massive panels as if they were of cardboard.

Conan raced up the stair, carrying the big girl over one shoulder as easily as if she had been a child. Where he was going he had no idea, but the stair ended at the door of a round, domed chamber. Khosatral was coming up the stair behind them, silently as a wind of death, and as swiftly.

The chamber's walls were of solid steel, and so was the door. Conan shut it and dropped in place the great bars with which it was furnished. The thought struck him that this was Khosatral's chamber, where he locked himself in to sleep securely from the monsters he had loosed from the Pits to do his bidding.

Hardly were the bolts in place when the great door shook and trembled to the giant's assault. Conan shrugged his shoulders. This was the end of the trail. There was no other door in the chamber, nor any window. Air, and the strange misty light, evidently came from interstices in the dome. He tested the nicked edge of his scimitar, quite cool now that he was at bay. He had done his volcanic best to escape; when the giant came crashing through that door, he would explode in another savage onslaught with the useless sword, not because he expected it to do any good, but because it was his nature to die fighting. For the moment there was no course of action to take, and his calmness was not forced or feigned.

The gaze he turned on his fair companion was as admiring and intense as if he had a hundred years to live. He had dumped her unceremoniously on the floor when he turned to close the door, and she had risen to her knees, mechanically arranging her streaming locks and her scanty garment. Conan's fierce eyes glowed with approval as they devoured her thick golden hair, her clear, wide eyes, her milky skin, sleek with exuberant health, the firm swell of her breasts, the contours of her splendid hips.

A low cry escaped her as the door shook and a bolt gave way with a groan.

Conan did not look around. He knew the door would hold a little while longer.

"They told me you had escaped," he said. "A Yuetshi fisher told me you were hiding here. What is your name?"

"Octavia," she gasped mechanically. Then words came in a rush. She caught at him with desperate fingers. "Oh Mitra! what nightmare is this? The people -- the dark-skinned people -- one of them caught me in the forest and brought me here. They carried me to -- to that -- that thing. He told me -- he said -- am I mad? Is this a dream?"

He glanced at the door which bulged inward as if from the impact of a battering-ram.

"No," he said; "it's no dream. That hinge is giving way. Strange that a devil has to break down a door like a common man; but after all, his strength itself is a diabolism."

"Can you not kill him?" she panted. "You are strong."

Conan was too honest to lie to her. "If a mortal man could kill him, he'd be dead now," he answered. "I nicked my blade on his belly."

Her eyes dulled. "Then you must die, and I must -- oh Mitra!" she screamed in sudden frenzy, and Conan caught her hands, fearing that she would harm herself. "He told me what he was going to do to me!" she panted. "Kill me! Kill me with your sword before he bursts the door!"

Conan looked at her and shook his head.

"I'll do what I can," he said. "That won't be much, but it'll give you a chance to get past him down the stair. Then run for the cliffs. I have a boat tied at the foot of the steps. If you can get out of the palace, you may escape him yet. The people of this city are all asleep."

She dropped her head in her hands. Conan took up his scimitar and moved over to stand before the echoing door. One watching him would not have realized that he was waiting for a death he regarded as inevitable. His eyes smoldered more vividly; his muscular hand knotted harder on his hilt; that was all.

The hinges had given under the giant's terrible assault, and the door rocked crazily, held only by the bolts. And these solid steel bars were buckling, bending, bulging out of their sockets. Conan watched in an almost impersonal fascination, envying the monster his inhuman strength.

Then, without warning, the bombardment ceased. In the stillness, Conan heard other noises on the landing outside -- the beat of wings, and a muttering voice that was like the whining of wind through midnight branches. Then presently there was silence, but there was a new feel in the air. Only the whetted instincts of barbarism could have sensed it, but Conan knew, without seeing or hearing him leave, that the master of Dagon no longer stood outside the door.

He glared through a crack that had been started in the steel of the portal. The landing was empty. He drew the warped bolts and cautiously pulled aside the sagging door. Khosatral was not on the stair, but far below he heard the clang of a metal door. He did not know whether the giant was plotting new deviltries or had been summoned away by that muttering voice, but he wasted no time in conjectures.

He called to Octavia, and the new note in his voice brought her up to her feet and to his side almost without her conscious volition.

"What is it?" she gasped.

"Don't stop to talk!" He caught her wrist. "Come on!" The chance for action had transformed him; his eyes blazed, his voice crackled. "The knife!" he muttered, while almost dragging the girl down the stair in his fierce haste. "The magic Yuetshi blade! He left it in the dome! I--" his voice died suddenly as a clear mental picture sprang up before him. That dome adjoined the great room where stood the copper throne -- sweat started out on his body. The only way to that dome was through that room with the copper throne and the foul thing that slumbered in it.

But he did not hesitate. Swiftly they descended the stair, crossed the chamber, descended the next stair, and came into the great dim hall with its mysterious hangings. They had seen no sign of the colossus. Halting before the great bronze-valved door, Conan caught Octavia by her shoulders and shook her in his intensity.

"Listen!" he snapped. "I'm going into the room and fasten the door. Stand here and listen; if Khosatral comes, call to me. If you hear me cry out for you to go, run as though the Devil were on your heels -- which he probably will be. Make for that door at the other end of the hall, because I'll be past helping you. I'm going for the Yuetshi knife!"

Before she could voice the protest her lips were framing, he had slid through the valves and shut them behind him. He lowered the bolt cautiously, not noticing that it could be worked from the outside. In the dim twilight his gaze sought that grim copper throne; yes, the scaly brute was still there, filling the throne with its loathsome coils. He saw a door behind the throne and knew that it led into the dome. But to reach it he must mount the dais, a few feet from the throne itself.

A wind blowing across the green floor would have made more noise than Conan's slinking feet. Eyes glued on the sleeping reptile he reached the dais and mounted the glass steps. The snake had not moved. He was reaching for the door...

The bolt on the bronze portal clanged and Conan stifled an awful oath as he saw Octavia come into the room. She stared about, uncertain in the deeper gloom, and he stood frozen, not daring to shout a warning. Then she saw his shadowy figure and ran toward the dais, crying: "I want to go with you! I'm afraid to stay alone -- oh!" She threw up her hands with a terrible scream as for the first time she saw the occupant of the throne. The wedge-shaped head had lifted from its coils and thrust out toward her on a yard of shining neck.

Then with a smooth, flowing motion, it began to ooze from the throne, coil by coil, its ugly head bobbing in the direction of the paralyzed girl.

Conan cleared the space between him and the throne with a desperate bound, his scimitar swinging with all his power. And with such blinding speed did the serpent move that it whipped about and met him in full midair, lapping his limbs and body with half a dozen coils. His half-checked stroke fell futilely as he crashed down on the dais, gashing the scaly trunk but not severing it.

Then he was writhing on the glass steps with fold after slimy fold knotting about him, twisting, crushing, killing him. His right arm was still free, but he could get no purchase to strike a killing blow, and he knew one blow must suffice. With a groaning convulsion of muscular expansion that bulged his veins almost to bursting on his temples and tied his muscles in quivering, tortured knots, he heaved up on his feet, lifting almost the full weight of that forty-foot devil.

An instant he reeled on wide-braced legs, feeling his ribs caving in on his vitals and his sight growing dark, while his scimitar gleamed above his head. Then it fell, shearing through the scales and flesh and vertebrae. And where there had been one huge, writhing cable, now there were horribly two, lashing and flopping in the death throes. Conan staggered away from their blind strokes. He was sick and dizzy, and blood oozed from his nose. Groping in a dark mist he clutched Octavia and shook her until she gasped for breath.

"Next time I tell you to stay somewhere," he gasped, "you stay!"

He was too dizzy even to know whether she replied. Taking her wrist like a truant schoolgirl, he led her around the hideous stumps that still loomed and knotted on the floor. Somewhere, in the distance, he thought he heard men yelling, but his ears were still roaring so that he could not be sure.

The door gave to his efforts. If Khosatral had placed the snake there to guard the thing he feared, evidently he considered it ample precaution. Conan half expected some other monstrosity to leap at him with the opening of the door, but in the dimmer light he saw only the vague sweep of the arch above, a dully gleaming block of gold, and a half-moon glimmer on the stone.

With a gasp of gratification, he scooped it up and did not linger for further exploration. He turned and fled across the room and down the great hall toward the distant door that he felt led to the outer air. He was correct. A few minutes later he emerged into the silent streets, half carrying, half guiding his companion. There was no one to be seen, but beyond the western wall there sounded cries and moaning wails that made Octavia tremble. He led her to the southwestern wall and without difficulty found a stone stair that mounted the rampart. He had appropriated a thick tapestry rope in the great hall, and now, having reached the parapet, he looped the soft, strong cord about the girl's hips and lowered her to the earth. Then, making one end fast to a merlon, he slid down after her. There was but one way of escape from the island -- the stair on the western cliffs. In that direction he hurried, swinging wide around the spot from which had come the cries and the sound of terrible blows.

Octavia sensed that grim peril lurked in those leafy fastnesses. Her breath came pantingly and she pressed close to her protector. But the forest was slient now, and they saw no shape of menace until they emerged from the trees and glimpsed a figure standing on the edge of the cliffs.

Jehungir Agha had escaped the doom that had overtaken his warriors when an iron giant sallied suddenly from the gate and battered and crushed them into bits of shredded flesh and splintered bone. When he saw the swords of his archers break on that manlike juggernaut, he had known it was no human foe they faced, and he had fled, hiding in the deep woods until the sounds of slaughter ceased. Then he crept back to the stair, but his boatmen were not waiting for him.

They had heard the screams, and presently, waiting nervously, had seen, on the cliff above them, a blood-smeared monster waving gigantic arms in awful triumph. They had waited for no more. When Jehungir came upon the cliffs, they were just vanishing among the reeds beyond earshot. Khosatral was gone -- had either returned to the city or was prowling the forest in search of the man who had escaped him outside the walls.

Jehungir was just preparing to descend the stairs and depart in Conan's boat, when he saw the hetman and the girl emerge from the trees. The experience which had congealed his blood and almost blasted his reason had not altered Jehungir's intentions towards the kozak chief. The sight of the man he had come to kill filled him with gratification. He was astonished to see the girl he had given to Jelal Khan, but he wasted no time on her. Lifting his bow he drew the shaft to its head and loosed. Conan crouched and the arror splintered on a tree, and Conan laughed.

"Dog!" he taunted. "You can't hit me! I was not born to die on Hyrkanian steel! Try again, pig of Turan!"

Jehungir did not try again. That was his last arrow. He drew his scimitar and advanced, confident in his spired helmet and close-meshed mail. Conan met him halfway in a blinding whirl of swords. The curved blades ground together, sprang apart, circled in glittering arcs that blurred the sight which tried to follow them. Octavia, watching, did not see the stroke, but she heard its chopping impact and saw Jehungir fall, blood spurting from his side where the Cimmerian's steel had sundered his mail and bitten to his spine.

But Octavia's scream was not caused by the death of her former master. With a crash of bending boughs, Khosatral Khel was upon them. The girl could not flee; a moaning cry escaped her as her knees gave way and pitched her groveling to the sward.

Conan, stooping above the body of the Agha, made no move to escape. Shifting his reddened scimitar to his left hand, he drew the great half-blade of the Yuetshi. Khosatral Khel was towering above him, his arms lifted like mauls, but as the blade caught the sheen of the sun, the giant gave back suddenly.

But Conan's blood was up. He rushed in, slashing with the crescent blade. And it did not splinter. Under its edge, the dusky metal of Khosatral's body gave way like common flesh beneath a cleaver. From the deep gash flowed a strange ichor, and Khosatral cried out like the dirging of a great bell. His terrible arms flailed down, but Conan, quicker than the archers who had died beneath those awful flails, avoided their strokes and struck again and yet again. Khosatral reeled and tottered; his cries were awful to hear, as if metal were given a tongue of pain, as if iron shrieked and bellowed under torment.

Then, wheeling away, he staggered into the forest; he reeled in his gait, crashed through bushes, and caromed off trees. Yet though Conan followed him with the speed of hot passion, the walls and towers of Dagon loomed through the trees before the man came with dagger-reach of the giant.

Then Khosatral turned again, flailing the air with desperate blows, but Conan, fired to beserk fury, was not to be denied. As a panther strikes down a bull moose at bay, so he plunged under the bludgeoning arms and drove the crescent blade to the hilt under the spot wheer a human's heart would be.

Khosatral reeled and fell. In the shape of a man he reeled, but it was not the shape of a man that struck the loam. Where there had been the likeness of a human face, there was no face at all, and the metal limbs melted and changed... Conan, who had not shrunk from Khosatral living, recoiled blenching for Khosatral dead, for he had witnessed an awful transmutation; in his dying throes Khosatral Khel hed become again the thing that had crawled up from the Abyss millennia gone. Gagging with intolerable repugnance, Conan turned to flee the sight; and he was suddenly aware that the pinnacles of Dagon no longer glimmered through the trees. They had faded like smoke -- the battlements, the crenellated towers, the great bronze gates, the velvets, the gold, the ivory, and the dark-haired women, and the men with their shaven skulls. With the passing of the inhuman intellect which had given them rebirth, they had faded back into the dust which they had been for ages uncounted. Only the stumps of broken columns rose above crumbling walls and broken paves and shatterd dome. Conan again looked upon the ruins of Xapur as he remembered them.

The wild hetman stood like a statue for a space, dimly grasping something of the cosmic tragedy of the fitful ephemera called mankind and the hooded shapes of darkness which prey upon it. Then as he heard his voice called in accents of fear, he started, as one awakening from a deream, glanced again at the thing on the ground, shuddered and turned away toward the cliffs and the girl that waited there.

She was peering fearfully under the trees, and she greeted him with a half-stifled cry of relief. He had shaken off the dim monstrous visions which had momentarily haunted him, and was his exuberant self again.

"Where is he?" she shuddered.

"Gone back to Hell whence he crawled," he replied cheerfully. "Why didn't you climb the stair and make your escape in my boat?"

"I wouldn't desert--" she began, then changed her mind, and amended rather sulkily, "I have nowhere to go. The Hyrkanians would enslave me again, and the pirates would--"

"What of the kozaks?" he suggested.

"Are they better than the pirates?" she asked scornfully. Conan's admiration increased to see how well she had recovered her poise after having endured such frantic terror. Her arrogance amused him.

"You seemed to think so in the camp by Ghori," he answered. "You were free enough with your smiles then."

Her red lips curled in disdain. "Do you think I was enamored of you? Do you dream that I would have shamed myself before an ale-guzzling, meat-gorging barbarian unless I had to? My master -- whose body lies there -- forced me to do as i did."

"Oh!" Conan seemed rather crestfallen. Then he laughed with undiminished zest. "No matter. You belong to me now. Give me a kiss."

"You dare ask--" she began angrily, when she felt herself snatched off her feet and crushed to the hetman's muscular breast. She fought him fiercely, with all the supple strength of her magnificent youth, but he only laughed exuberantly, drunk with the possession of this splendid creature writhing in his arms.

He crushed her struggles easily, drinking the nectar of her lips with all the unrestrained passion that was his, until the arms that strained against them melted and twined convulsively about his massive neck. Then he laughed down into the clear eyes, and said: "Why should not a chief of the Free People be preferable to a city-bred dog of Turan?"

She shook back her tawny locks, still tingling in every nerve from the fire of his kisses. She did not loosen her arms from his neck. "Do you deem yourself an Agha's equal?" she challenged.

He laughed and strode with her in his arms toward the stair. "You shall judge," he boasted. "I'll burn Khawarizm for a torch to light your way to my tent."

by Robert E. Howard

Chapter I

: Death Strikes a King

The king of Vendhya was dying. Through the hot, stifling night the temple gongs boomed and the conchs roared. Their clamor was a faint echo in the gold-domed chamber where Bunda Chand struggled on the velvet-cushioned dais. Beads of sweat glistened on his dark skin; his fingers twisted the gold-worked fabric beneath him. He was young; no spear had touched him, no poison lurked in his wine. But his veins stood out like blue cords on his temples, and his eyes dilated with the nearness of death. Trembling slave-girls knelt at the foot of the dais, and leaning down to him, watching him with passionate intensity, was his sister, the Devi Yasmina. With her was the wazam, a noble grown old in the royal court.

She threw up her head in a gusty gesture of wrath and despair as the thunder of the distant drums reached her ears.

"The priests and their clamor!" she exclaimed. "They are no wiser than the leeches who are helpless! Nay, he dies and none can say why. He is dying now--and I stand here helpless, who would burn the whole city and spill the blood of thousands to save him."

"Not a man of Ayodhya but would die in his place, if it might be, Devi," answered the wazam. "This poison-"

"I tell you it is not poison!" she cried. "Since his birth he has been guarded so closely that the cleverest poisoners of the East could not reach him. Five skulls bleaching on the Tower of the Kites can testify to attempts which were made--and which failed. As you well know, there are ten men and ten women whose sole duty is to taste his food and wine, and fifty armed warriors guard his chamber as they guard it now. No, it is not poison; it is sorcery--black, ghastly magic-"

She ceased as the king spoke; his livid lips did not move, and there was no recognition in his glassy eyes. But his voice rose in an eery call, indistinct and far away, as if called to her from beyond vast, wind-blown gulfs.

"Yasmina! Yasmina! My sister, where are you? I can not find you. All is darkness, and the roaring of great winds!"

"Brother!" cried Yasmina, catching his limp hand in a convulsive grasp. "I am here! Do you not know me-"

Her voice died at the utter vacancy of his face. A low confused moan waned from his mouth. The slave-girls at the foot of the dais whimpered with fear, and Yasmina beat her breast in anguish.

In another part of the city a man stood in a latticed balcony overlooking a long street in which torches tossed luridly, smokily revealing upturned dark faces and the whites of gleaming eyes. A long-drawn wailing rose from the multitude.

The man shrugged his broad shoulders and turned back into the arabesque chamber. He was a tall man, compactly built, and richly clad.

"The king is not yet dead, but the dirge is sounded," he said to another man who sat cross-legged on a mat in a corner. This man was clad in a brown camel-hair robe and sandals, and a green turban was on his head. His expression was tranquil, his gaze impersonal.

"The people know he will never see another dawn," this man answered.

The first speaker favored him with a long, searching stare.

"What I can not understand," he said, "is why I have had to wait so long for your masters to strike. If they have slain the king now, why could they not have slain him months ago?"

"Even the arts you call sorcery are governed by cosmic laws," answered the man in the green turban. "The stars direct these actions, as in other affairs. Not even my masters can alter the stars. Not until the heavens were in the proper order could they perform this necromancy." With a long, stained fingernail he mapped the constellations on the marble-tiled floor. "The slant of the moon presaged evil for the king of Vendhya; the stars are in turmoil, the Serpent in the House of the Elephant. During such juxtaposition, the invisible guardians are removed from the spirit of Bhunda Chand. A path is opened in the unseen realms, and once a point of contact was established, mighty powers were put in play along that path."

"Point of contact?" inquired the other. "Do you mean that lock of Bhunda Chand's hair?"

"Yes. All discarded portions of the human body still remain part of it, attached to it by intangible connections. The priests of Asura have a dim inkling of this truth, and so all nail trimmings, hair and other waste products of the persons of the royal family are carefully reduced to ashes and the ashes hidden. But at the urgent entreaty of the princess of Khosala, who loved Bhunda Chand vainly, he gave her a lock of his long black hair as a token of remembrance. When my masters decided upon his doom, the lock, in its golden, jewel-encrusted case, was stolen from under her pillow while she slept, and another substituted, so like the first that she never knew the difference. Then the genuine lock travelled by camel-caravan up the long, long road to Peshkhauri, thence up the Zhaibar Pass, until it reached the hands of those for whom it was intended."

"Only a lock of hair," murmured the nobleman.

"By which a soul is drawn from its body and across gulfs of echoing space," returned the man on the mat.

The nobleman studied him curiously.

"I do not know if you are a man or a demon, Khemsa," he said at last. "Few of us are what we seem. I, whom the Kshatriyas know as Kerim Shah, a prince from Iranistan, am no greater a masquerader than most men. They are all traitors in one way or another, and half of them know not whom they serve. There at least I have no doubts; for I serve King Yezdigerd of Turan."

"And I the Black Seers of Yimsha," said Khemsa; "and my masters are greater than yours, for they have accomplished by their arts what Yezdigerd could not with a hundred thousand swords."

Outside, the moan of the tortured thousands shuddered up to the stars which crusted the sweating Vendhyan night, and the conchs bellowed like oxen in pain.

In the gardens of the palace the torches glinted on polished helmets and curved swords and gold-chased corselets. All the noble-born fighting-men of Ayodhya were gathered in the great palace or about it, and at each broad-arched gate and door fifty archers stood on guard, with bows in their hands. But Death stalked through the royal palace and none could stay his ghostly tread.

On the dais under the golden dome the king cried out again, racked by awful paroxysms. Again his voice came faintly and far away, and again the Devi bent to him, trembling with a fear that was darker than the terror of death.

"Yasmina!" Again that far, weirdly dreeing cry, from realms immeasurable. "Aid me! I am far from my mortal house! Wizards have drawn my soul through the wind-blown darkness. They seek to snap the silver cord that binds me to my dying body. They cluster around me; their hands are taloned, their eyes are red like flame burning in darkness. Aie, save me, my sister! Their fingers sear me like fire! They would slay my body and damn my soul! What is this they bring before me?--Aie!"

At the terror in his hopeless cry Yasmina screamed uncontrollably and threw herself bodily upon him in the abandon of her anguish. He was torn by a terrible convulsion; foam flew from his contorted lips and his writhing fingers left their marks on the girl's shoulders. But the glassy blankness passed from his eyes like smoke blown from a fire, and he looked up at his sister with recognition.

"Brother!" she sobbed. "Brother-"

"Swift!" he gasped, and his weakening voice was rational. "I know now what brings me to the pyre. I have been on a far journey and I understand. I have been ensorcelled by the wizards of the Himelians. They drew my soul out of my body and far away, into a stone room. There they strove to break the silver cord of life, and thrust my soul into the body of afoul night-weird their sorcery summoned up from hell. Ali! I feel their pull upon me now! Your cry and the grip of your fingers brought me back, but I am going fast. My soul clings to my body, but its hold weakens. Quick--kill me, before they can trap my soul for ever!"

"I cannot!" she wailed, smiting her naked breasts.

"Swiftly, I command you!" There was the old imperious note in his failing whisper. "You have never disobeyed me--obey my last command! Send my soul clean to Asura! Haste, lest you damn me to spend eternity as a filthy gaunt of darkness. Strike, I command you! Strike!"

Sobbing wildly, Yasmina plucked a jeweled dagger from her girdle and plunged it to the hilt in his breast. He stiffened and then went limp, a grim smile curving his dead lips. Yasmina hurled herself face-down on the rush-covered floor, beating the reeds with her clenched hands. Outside, the gongs and conchs brayed and thundered and the priests gashed themselves with copper knives.

Chapter II

: A Barbarian from the Hills

Chunder Shan, governor of Peshkhauri, laid down his golden pen and carefully scanned that which he had written on parchment that bore his official seal. He had ruled Peshkhauri so long only because he weighed his every word, spoken or written. Danger breeds caution, and only a wary man lives long in that wild country where the hot Vendhyan plains meet the crags of the Himelians. An hour's ride westward or northward and one crossed the border and was among the Hills where men lived by the law of the knife.

The governor was alone in his chamber, seated at his ornately carven table of inlaid ebony. Through the wide window, open for the coolness, he could see a square of the blue Himelian night, dotted with great white stars. An adjacent parapet was a shadowy line, and further crenelles and embrasures were barely hinted at in the dim starlight. The governor's fortress was strong, and situated outside the walls of the city it guarded. The breeze that stirred the tapestries on the wall brought faint noises from the streets of Peshkhauri--occasional snatches of wailing song, or the thrum of a cithern.

The governor read what he had written, slowly, with his open hand shading his eyes from the bronze butterlamp, his lips moving. Absently, as he read, he heard the drum of horses' hoofs outside the barbican, the sharp staccato of the guards' challenge. He did not heed, intent upon his letter. It was addressed to the wazam of Vendhya, at the royal court of Ayodhya, and it stated, after the customary salutations:

"Let it be known to your excellency that I have faithfully carried out your excellency's instructions. The seven tribesmen are well guarded in their prison, and I have repeatedly sent word into the hills that their chief come in person to bargain for their release. But he has made no move, except to send word that unless they are freed he will burn Peshkhauri and cover his saddle with my hide, begging your excellency's indulgence. This he is quite capable of attempting, and I have tripled the numbers of the lance guards. The man is not a native of Ghulistan. I cannot with certainty predict his next move. But since it is the wish of the Devi--'

He was out of his ivory chair and on his feet facing the arched door, all in one instant. He snatched at the curved sword lying in its ornate scabbard on the table, and then checked the movement.

It was a woman who had entered unannounced, a woman whose gossamer robes did not conceal the rich garments beneath them any more than they concealed the suppleness and beauty of her tall, slender figure. A filmy veil fell below her breasts, supported by a flowing head-dress bound about with a triple gold braid and adorned with a golden crescent. Her dark eyes regarded the astonished governor over the veil, and then with an imperious gesture of her white hand, she uncovered her face.

"Devi!" The governor dropped to his knees before her, surprize and confusion somewhat spoiling the stateliness of his obeisance. With a gesture she motioned him to rise, and he hastened to lead her to the ivory chair, all the while bowing level with his girdle. But his first words were of reproof.

"Your Majesty! This was most unwise! The border is unsettled. Raids from the hills are incessant. You came with a large attendance?"

"An ample retinue followed me to Peshkhauri," she answered. "I lodged my people there and came on to the fort with my maid, Gitara."

Chunder Shan groaned in horror.

"Devi! You do not understand the peril. An hour's ride from this spot the hills swarm with barbarians who make a profession of murder and rapine. Women have been stolen and men stabbed between the fort and the city. Peshkhauri is not like your southern provinces--'

"But I am here, and unharmed," she interrupted with a trace of impatience. "I showed my signet ring to the guard at the gate, and to the one outside your door, and they admitted me unannounced, not knowing me, but supposing me to be a secret courier from Ayodhya. Let us not now waste time.

"You have received no word from the chief of the barbarians?"

"None save threats and curses, Devi. He is wary and suspicious. He deems it a trap, and perhaps he is not to be blamed. The Kshatriyas have not always kept their promises to the hill people."

"He must be brought to terms!" broke in Yasmina, the knuckles of her clenched hands showing white.

"I do not understand." The governor shook his head. "When I chanced to capture these seven hillmen, I reported their capture to the wazam, as is the custom, and then, before I could hang them, there came an order to hold them and communicate with their chief. This I did, but the man holds aloof, as I have said. These men are of the tribe of Afghulis, but he is a foreigner from the west, and he is called Conan. I have threatened to hang them tomorrow at dawn, if he does not come."

"Good!" exclaimed the Devi. "You have done well. And I will tell you why I have given these orders. My brother-" she faltered, choking, and the governor bowed his head, with the customary gesture of respect for a departed sovereign.

"The king of Vendhya was destroyed by magic," she said at last. "I have devoted my life to the destruction of his murderers. As he died he gave me a clue, and I have followed it. I have read the Book of Skelos, and talked with nameless hermits in the caves below Jhelai. I learned how, and by whom, he was destroyed. His enemies were the Black Seers of Mount Yimsha."

"Asura!" whispered Chunder Shan, paling.

Her eyes knifed him through. "Do you fear them?"

"Who does not, Your Majesty?" he replied. "They are black devils, haunting the uninhabited hills beyond the Zhaibar. But the sages say that they seldom interfere in the lives of mortal men."

"Why they slew my brother I do not know," she answered. "But I have sworn on the altar of Asura to destroy them! And I need the aid of a man beyond the border. A Kshatriya army, unaided, would never reach Yimsha."

"Aye," muttered Chunder Shan. "You speak the truth there. It would be fight every step of the way, with hairy hillmen hurling down boulders from every height, and rushing us with their long knives in every valley. The Turanians fought their way through the Himelians once, but how many returned to Khurusun? Few of those who escaped the swords of the Kshatriyas, after the king, your brother, defeated their host on the Jhumda River, ever saw Secunderam again."

"And so I must control men across the border," she said, "men who know the way to Mount Yimsha-"

"But the tribes fear the Black Seers and shun the unholy mountain," broke in the governor.

"Does the chief, Conan, fear them?" she asked.

"Well, as to that," muttered the governor, "I doubt if there is anything that devil fears."

"So I have been told. Therefore he is the man I must deal with. He wishes the release of his seven men. Very well; their ransom shall be the heads of the Black Seers!" Her voice thrummed with hate as she uttered the last words, and her hands clenched at her sides. She looked an image of incarnate passion as she stood there with her head thrown high and her bosom heaving.

Again the governor knelt, for part of his wisdom was the knowledge that a woman in such an emotional tempest is as perilous as a blind cobra to any about her.

"It shall be as you wish, Your Majesty." Then as she presented a calmer aspect, he rose and ventured to drop a word of warning. "I can not predict what the chief Conan's action will be. The tribesmen are always turbulent, and I have reason to believe that emissaries from the Turanians are stirring them up to raid our borders. As your majesty knows, the Turanians have established themselves in Secunderam and other northern cities, though the hill tribes remain unconquered. King Yezdigerd has long looked southward with greedy lust and perhaps is seeking to gain by treachery what he could not win by force of arms. I have thought that Conan might well be one of his spies."

"We shall see," she answered. "If he loves his followers, he will be at the gates at dawn, to parley. I shall spend the night in the fortress. I came in disguise to Peshkhauri, and lodged my retinue at an inn instead of the palace. Besides my people, only yourself knows of my presence here."

"I shall escort you to your quarters, Your Majesty," said the governor, and as they emerged from the doorway, he beckoned the warrior on guard there, and the man fell in behind them, spear held at salute.

The maid waited, veiled like her mistress, outside the door, and the group traversed a wide, winding corridor, lighted by smoky torches, and reached the quarters reserved for visiting notables--generals and viceroys, mostly; none of the royal family had ever honored the fortress before. Chunder Shan had a perturbed feeling that the suite was not suitable to such an exalted personage as the Devi, and though she sought to make him feel at ease in her presence, he was glad when she dismissed him and he bowed himself out. All the menials of the fort had been summoned to serve his royal guest--though he did not divulge her identity--and he stationed a squad of spearmen before her doors, among them the warrior who had guarded his own chamber. In his preoccupation he forgot to replace the man.

The governor had not been long gone from her when Yasmina suddenly remembered something else which she had wished to discuss with him, but had forgotten until that moment. It concerned the past actions of one Kerim Shah, a nobleman from Iranistan, who had dwelt for a while in Peshkhauri before coming on to the court at Ayodhya. A vague suspicion concerning the man had been stirred by a glimpse of him in Peshkhauri that night. She wondered if he had followed her from Ayodhya. Being a truly remarkable Devi, she did not summon the governor to her again, but hurried out into the corridor alone, and hastened toward his chamber.

Chunder Shan, entering his chamber, closed the door and went to his table. There he took the letter he had been writing and tore it to bits. Scarcely had he finished when he heard something drop softly onto the parapet adjacent to the window. He looked up to see a figure loom briefly against the stars, and then a man dropped lightly into the room. The light glinted on a long sheen of steel in his hand.

"Shhhh!" he warned. "Don't make a noise, or I'll send the devil a henchman!"

The governor checked his motion toward the sword on the table. He was within reach of the yard-long Zhaibar knife that glittered in the intruder's fist, and he knew the desperate quickness of a hillman.

The invader was a tall man, at once strong and supple. He was dressed like a hillman, but his dark features and blazing blue eyes did not match his garb. Chunder Shan had never seen a man like him; he was not an Easterner, but some barbarian from the West. But his aspect was as untamed and formidable as any of the hairy tribesmen who haunt the hills of Ghulistan.

"You come like a thief in the night," commented the governor, recovering some of his composure, although he remembered that there was no guard within call. Still, the hillman could not know that.

"I climbed a bastion," snarled the intruder. "A guard thrust his head over the battlement in time for me to rap it with my knifehilt."

"You are Conan?"

"Who else? You sent word into the hills that you wished for me to come and parley with you. Well, by Crom, I've come! Keep away from that table or I'll gut you."

"I merely wish to seat myself," answered the governor, carefully sinking into the ivory chair, which he wheeled away from the table. Conan moved restlessly before him, glancing suspiciously at the door, thumbing the razor edge of his three-foot knife. He did not walk like an Afghuli, and was bluntly direct where the East is subtle.

"You have seven of my men," he said abruptly. "You refused the ransom I offered. What the devil do you want?"

"Let us discuss terms," answered Chunder Shan cautiously.

"Terms?" There was a timbre of dangerous anger in his voice. "What do you mean? Haven't I offered you gold?"

Chunder Shan laughed.

"Gold? There is more gold in Peshkhauri than you ever saw."

"You're a liar," retorted Conan. "I've seen the suk of the goldsmiths in Khurusun."

"Well, more than an Afghuh ever saw," amended Chunder Shan. "And it is but a drop of all the treasure of Vendhya. Why should we desire gold? It would be more to our advantage to hang these seven thieves."

Conan ripped out a sulfurous oath and the long blade quivered in his grip as the muscles rose in ridges on his brown arm.

"I'll split your head like a ripe melon!"

A wild blue flame flickered in the hillman's eyes, but Chunder Shan shrugged his shoulders, though keeping an eye on the keen steel.

"You can kill me easily, and probably escape over the wall afterward. But that would not save the seven tribesmen. My men would surely hang them. And these men are headmen among the Afghulis."

"I know it," snarled Conan. "The tribe is baying like wolves at my heels because I have not procured their release. Tell me in plain words what you want, because, by Crom! if there's no other way, I'll raise a horde and lead it to the very gates of Peshkhauri!"

Looking at the man as he stood squarely, knife in fist and eyes glaring, Chunder Shan did not doubt that he was capable of it. The governor did not believe any hill-horde could take Peshkhauri, but he did not wish a devastated countryside.

"There is a mission you must perform," he said, choosing his words with as much care as if they had been razors. "There-"

Conan had sprung back, wheeling to face the door at the same instant, lips asnarl. His barbarian ears had caught the quick tread of soft slippers outside the door. The next instant the door was thrown open and a slim, silk-robed form entered hastily, pulling the door shut--then stopping short at sight of the hillman.

Chunder Shan sprang up, his heart jumping into his mouth.

"Devi!" he cried involuntarily, losing his head momentarily in his fright.

"Devi" It was like an explosive echo from the hillman's lips. Chunder Shan saw recognition and intent flame up in the fierce blue eyes.

The governor shouted desperately and caught at his sword, but the hillman moved with the devastating speed of a hurricane. He sprang, knocked the governor sprawling with a savage blow of his knife-hilt, swept up the astounded Devi in one brawny arm and leaped for the window. Chunder Shan, struggling frantically to his feet, saw the man poise an instant on the sill in a flutter of silken skirts and white limbs that was his royal captive, and heard his fierce, exultant snarl: "Now dare to hang my men!" and then Conan leaped to the parapet and was gone. A wild scream floated back to the governor's ears.

"Guard! Guard!" screamed the governor, struggling up and running drunkenly to the door. He tore it open and reeled into the hall. His shouts re-echoed along the corridors, and warriors came running, gaping to see the governor holding his broken head, from which the blood streamed.

"Turn out the lancers!" he roared. "There has been an abduction!" Even in his frenzy he had enough sense left to withhold the full truth. He stopped short as he heard a sudden drum of hoofs outside, a frantic scream and a wild yell of barbaric exultation.

Followed by the bewildered guardsmen, the governor raced for the stair. In the courtyard of the fort a force of lancers stood by saddled steeds, ready to ride at an instant's notice. Chunder Shan led his squadron flying after the fugitive, though his head swam so he had to hold with both hands to the saddle. He did not divulge the identity of the victim, but said merely that the noblewoman who had borne the royal signet-ring had been carried away by the chief of the Afghulis. The abductor was out of sight and hearing, but they knew the path he would strike the road that runs straight to the mouth of the Zhaibar. There was no moon; peasant huts rose dimly in the starlight. Behind them fell away the grim bastion of the fort, and the towers of Peshkhauri. Ahead of them loomed the black walls of the Himelians.

Chapter III

: Khemsa Uses Magic

In the confusion that reigned in the fortress while the guard was being turned out, no one noticed that the girl who had accompanied the Devi slipped out the great arched gate and vanished in the darkness. She ran straight for the city, her garments tucked high. She did not follow the open road, but cut straight through fields and over slopes, avoiding fences and leaping irrigation ditches as surely as if it were broad daylight, and as easily as if she were a trained masculine runner. The hoof-drum of the guardsmen had faded away up the hill before she reached the city wall. She did not go to the great gate, beneath whose arch men leaned on spears and craned their necks into the darkness, discussing the unwonted activity about the fortress. She skirted the wall until she reached a certain point where the spire of the tower was visible above the battlements. Then she placed her hands to her mouth and voiced a low weird call that carried strangely.

Almost instantly a head appeared at an embrasure and a rope came wriggling down the wall. She seized it, placed a foot in the loop at the end, and waved her arm. Then quickly and smoothly she was drawn up the sheer stone curtain. An instant later she scrambled over the merlons and stood up on a flat roof which covered a house that was built against the wall. There was an open trap there, and a man in a camel-hair robe who silently coiled the rope, not showing in any way the strain of hauling a full-grown woman up a forty-foot wall.

"Where is Kerim Shah?" she gasped, panting after her long run.

"Asleep in the house below. You have news?"

"Conan has stolen the Devi out of the fortress and carried her away into the hills!" She blurted out her news in a rush, the words stumbling over one another.

Khemsa showed no emotion, but merely nodded his turbaned head. "Kerim Shah will be glad to hear that," he said.

"Wait!" The girl threw her supple arms about his neck. She was panting hard, but not only from exertion. Her eyes blazed like black jewels in the starlight. Her upturned face was close to Khemsa's, but though he submitted to her embrace, he did not return it.

"Do not tell the Hyrkanian!" she panted. "Let us use this knowledge ourselves! The governor has gone into the hills with his riders, but he might as well chase a ghost. He has not told anyone that it was the Devi who was kidnapped. None in Peshkhauri or the fort knows it except us."

"But what good does it do us?" the man expostulated. "My masters sent me with Kerim Shah to aid him in every way-"

"Aid yourself?" she cried fiercely. "Shake off your yoke!"

"You mean--disobey my masters?" he gasped, and she felt his whole body turn cold under her arms.

"Aye!" she shook him in the fury of her emotion. "You too are a magician! Why will you be a slave, using your powers only to elevate others? Use your arts for yourself?"

"That is forbidden!" He was shaking as if with an ague. "I am not one of the Black Circle. Only by the command of the masters do I dare to use the knowledge they have taught me."

"But you can use it!" she argued passionately. "Do as I beg you! Of course Conan has taken the Devi to hold as hostage against the seven tribesmen in the governor's prison. Destroy them, so Chunder Shan can not use them to buy back the Devi. Then let us go into the mountains and take her from the Afghulis. They can not stand against your sorcery with their knives. The treasure of the Vendhyan kings will be ours as ransom--and then when we have it in our hands, we can trick them, and sell her to the king of Turan. We shall have wealth beyond our maddest dreams. With it we can buy warriors. We will take Khorbhul, oust the Turanians from the hills, and send our hosts southward; become king and queen of an empire!"

Khemsa too was panting, shaking like a leaf in her grasp; his face showed gray in the starlight, beaded with great drops of perspiration.

"I love you!" she cried fiercely, writhing her body against his, almost strangling him in her wild embrace, shaking him in her abandon. "I will make a king of you! For love of you I betrayed my mistress; for love of me betray your masters! Why fear the Black Seers? By your love for me you have broken one of their laws already! Break the rest! You are as strong as they!"

A man of ice could not have withstood the searing heat of her passion and fury. With an inarticulate cry he crushed her to him, bending her backward and showering gasping kisses on her eyes, face and lips.

"I'll do it!" His voice was thick with laboring emotions. He staggered like a drunken man. "The arts they have taught me shall work for me, not for my masters. We shall be rulers of the world--of the world-"

"Come then!" Twisting lithely out of his embrace, she seized his hand and led him toward the trap-door. "First we must make sure that the governor does not exchange those seven Afghulis for the Devi."

He moved like a man in a daze, until they had descended a ladder and she paused in the chamber below. Kerim Shah lay on a couch motionless, an arm across his face as though to shield his sleeping eyes from the soft light of a brass lamp. She plucked Khemsa's arm and made a quick gesture across her own throat. Khemsa lifted his hand; then his expression changed and he drew away.

"I have eaten his salt," he muttered. "Besides, he can not interfere with us."

He led the girl through a door that opened on a winding stair. After their soft tread had faded into silence, the man on the couch sat up. Kerim Shah wiped the sweat from his face. A knife-thrust he did not dread, but he feared Khemsa as a man fears a poisonous reptile.

"People who plot on roofs should remember to lower their voices," he muttered. "But as Khemsa has turned against his masters, and as he was my only contact between them, I can count on their aid no longer. From now on I play the game in my own way."

Rising to his feet he went quickly to a table, drew pen and parchment from his girdle and scribbled a few succinct lines.

"To Khosru Khan, governor of Secunderam: the Cimmerian Conan has carried the Devi Yasmina to the villages of the Afghulis. It is an opportunity to get the Devi into our hands, as the lung has so long desired. Send three thousand horsemen at once. I will meet them in the valley of Gurashah with native guides."

And he signed it with a name that was not in the least like Kerim Shah.

Then from a golden cage he drew forth a carrier pigeon, to whose leg he made fast the parchment, rolled into a tiny cylinder and secured with gold wire. Then he went quickly to a casement and tossed the bird into the night. It wavered on fluttering wings, balanced, and was gone like a flitting shadow. Catching up helmet, sword and cloak, Kerim Shah hurried out of the chamber and down the winding stair.

The prison quarters of Peshkhauri were separated from the rest of the city by a massive wall, in which was set a single ironbound door under an arch. Over the arch burned a lurid red cresset, and beside the door squatted a warrior with spear and shield.

This warrior, leaning on his spear, and yawning from time to time, started suddenly to his feet. He had not thought he had dozed, but a man was standing before him, a man he had not heard approach. The man wore a camel-hair robe and a green turban. In the flickering light of the cresset his features were shadowy, but a pair of lambent eyes shone surprizingly in the lurid glow.

"Who comes?" demanded the warrior, presenting his spear. "Who are you?"

The stranger did not seem perturbed, though the spear-point touched his bosom. His eyes held the warrior's with strange intensity.

"What are you obliged to do?" he asked, strangely.

"To guard the gate!" The warrior spoke thickly and mechanically; he stood rigid as a statue, his eyes slowly glazing.

"You lie! You are obliged to obey me! You have looked into my eyes, and your soul is no longer your own. Open that door!"

Stiffly, with the wooden features of an image, the guard wheeled about, drew a great key from his girdle, turned it in the massive lock and swung open the door. Then he stood at attention, his unseeing stare straight ahead of him.

A woman glided from the shadows and laid an eager hand on the mesmerist's arm.

"Bid him fetch us horses, Khemsa," she whispered.

"No need of that," answered the Rakhsha. Lifting his voice slightly he spoke to the guardsman. "I have no more use for you. Kill yourself!"

Like a man in a trance the warrior thrust the butt of his spear against the base of the wall, and placed the keen head against his body, just below the ribs. Then slowly, stolidly, he leaned against it with all his weight, so that it transfixed his body and came out between his shoulders. Sliding down the shaft he lay still, the spear jutting above him its full length, like a horrible stalk growing out of his back.

The girl stared down at him in morbid fascination, until Khemsa took her arm and led her through the gate. Torches lighted a narrow space between the outer wall and a lower inner one, in which were arched doors at regular intervals. A warrior paced this enclosure, and when the gate opened he came sauntering up, so secure in his knowledge of the prison's strength that he was not suspicious until Khemsa and the girl emerged from the archway. Then it was too late. The Rakhsha did not waste time in hypnotism, though his action savored of magic to the girl. The guard lowered his spear threateningly, opening his mouth to shout an alarm that would bring spearmen swarming out of the guardrooms at either end of the alleyway. Khemsa flicked the spear aside with his left hand, as a man might flick a straw, and his right flashed out and back, seeming gently to caress the warrior's neck in passing. And the guard pitched on his face without a sound, his head lolling on a broken neck.

Khemsa did not glance at him, but went straight to one of the arched doors and placed his open hand against the heavy bronze lock. With a rending shudder the portal buckled inward. As the girl followed him through, she saw that the thick teakwood hung in splinters, the bronze bolts were bent and twisted from their sockets, and the great hinges broken and disjointed. A thousand-pound battering-ram with forty men to swing it could have shattered the barrier no more completely. Khemsa was drunk with freedom and the exercise of his power, glorying in his might and flinging his strength about as a young giant exercises his thews with unnecessary vigor in the exultant pride of his prowess.

The broken door let them into a small courtyard, lit by a cresset. Opposite the door was a wide grille of iron bars. A hairy hand was visible, gripping one of these bars, and in the darkness behind them glimmered the whites of eyes.

Khemsa stood silent for a space, gazing into the shadows from which those glimmering eyes gave back his stare with burning intensity. Then his hand went into his robe and came out again, and from his opening fingers a shimmering feather of sparkling dust sifted to the flags. Instantly a flare of green fire lighted the enclosure. In the brief glare the forms of seven men, standing motionless behind the bars, were limned in vivid detail; tall, hairy men in ragged hillmen's garments. They did not speak, but in their eyes blazed the fear of death, and their hairy fingers gripped the bars.

The fire died out but the glow remained, a quivering ball of lambent green that pulsed and shimmered on the flags before Khemsa's feet. The wide gaze of the tribesmen was fixed upon it. It wavered, elongated; it turned into a luminous green-smoke spiraling upward. It twisted and writhed like a great shadowy serpent, then broadened and billowed out in shining folds and whirls. It grew to a cloud moving silently over the flags--straight toward the grille. The men watched its coming with dilated eyes; the bars quivered with the grip of their desperate fingers. Bearded lips parted but no sound came forth. The green cloud rolled on the bars and blotted them from sight; like a fog it oozed through the grille and hid the men within. From the enveloping folds came a strangled gasp, as of a man plunged suddenly under the surface of water. That was all.

Khemsa touched the girl's arm, as she stood with parted lips and dilated eyes. Mechanically she turned away with him, looking back over her shoulder. Already the mist was thinning; close to the bars she saw a pair of sandalled feet, the toes turned upward--she glimpsed the indistinct outlines of seven still, prostrate shapes.

"And now for a steed swifter than the fastest horse ever bred in a mortal stable," Khemsa was saying. "We will be in Afghulistan before dawn."

Chapter IV

: An Encounter in the Pass

Yasmina Devi could never clearly remember the details of her abduction. The unexpectedness and violence stunned her; she had only a confused impression of a whirl of happenings--the terrifying grip of a mighty arm, the blazing eyes of her abductor, and his hot breath burning on her flesh. The leap through the window to the parapet, the mad race across battlements and roofs when the fear of falling froze her, the reckless descent of a rope bound to a merlon--he went down almost at a run, his captive folded limply over his brawny shoulder--all this was a befuddled tangle in the Devi's mind. She retained a more vivid memory of him running fleetly into the shadows of the trees, carrying her like a child, and vaulting into the saddle of a fierce Bhalkhana stallion which reared and snorted. Then there was a sensation of flying, and the racing hoofs were striking sparks of fire from the flinty road as the stallion swept up the slopes.

As the girl's mind cleared, her first sensations were furious rage and shame. She was appalled. The rulers of the golden kingdoms south of the Himelians were considered little short of divine; and she was the Devi of Vendhya! Fright was submerged in regal wrath. She cried out furiously and began struggling. She, Yasmina, to be carried on the saddle-bow of a hill chief, like a common wench of the market-place! He merely hardened his massive thews slightly against her writhings, and for the first time in her life she experienced the coercion of superior physical strength. His arms felt like iron about her slender limbs. He glanced down at her and grinned hugely. His teeth glimmered whitely in the starlight. The reins lay loose on the stallion's flowing mane, and every thew and fiber of the great beast strained as he hurtled along the boulder-strewn trail. But Conan sat easily, almost carelessly, in the saddle, riding like a centaur.

"You hill-bred dog!" she panted, quivering with the impact of shame, anger, and the realization of helplessness. "You dare--you dare! Your life shall pay for this! Where are you taking me?"

"To the villages of Afghulistan," he answered, casting a glance over his shoulder.

Behind them, beyond the slopes they had traversed, torches were tossing on the walls of the fortress, and he glimpsed a flare of light that meant the great gate had been opened. And he laughed, a deep-throated boom gusty as the hill wind.

"The governor has sent his riders after us," he laughed. "By Crom, we will lead him a merry chase! What do you think, Devi--will they pay seven lives for a Kshatriya princess?"

"They will send an army to hang you and your spawn of devils," she promised him with conviction.

He laughed gustily and shifted her to a more comfortable position in his arms. But she took this as a fresh outrage, and renewed her vain struggle, until she saw that her efforts were only amusing him. Besides, her light silken garments, floating on the wind, were being outrageously disarranged by her struggles. She concluded that a scornful submission was the better part of dignity, and lapsed into a smoldering quiescence.

She felt even her anger being submerged by awe as they entered the mouth of the Pass, lowering like a black well mouth in the blacker walls that rose like colossal ramparts to bar their way. It was as if a gigantic knife had cut the Zhaibar out of walls of solid rock. On either hand sheer slopes pitched up for thousands of feet, and the mouth of the Pass was dark as hate. Even Conan could not see with any accuracy, but he knew the road, even by night. And knowing that armed men were racing through the starlight after him, he did not check the stallion's speed. The great brute was not yet showing fatigue. He thundered along the road that followed the valley bed, labored up a slope, swept along a low ridge where treacherous shale on either hand lurked for the unwary, and came upon a trail that followed the lap of the left-hand wall.

Not even Conan could spy, in that darkness, an ambush set by Zhaibar tribesmen. As they swept past the black mouth of a gorge that opened into the Pass, a javelin swished through the air and thudded home behind the stallion's straining shoulder. The great beast let out his life in a shuddering sob and stumbled, going headlong in mid-stride. But Conan had recognized the flight and stroke of the javelin, and he acted with spring-steel quickness.

As the horse fell he leaped clear, holding the girl aloft to guard her from striking boulders. He lit on his feet like a cat, thrust her into a cleft of rock, and wheeled toward the outer darkness, drawing his knife.

Yasmina, confused by the rapidity of events, not quite sure just what had happened, saw a vague shape rush out of the darkness, bare feet slapping softly on the rock, ragged garments whipping on the wind of his haste. She glimpsed the flicker of steel, heard the lightning crack of stroke, parry and counterstroke, and the crunch of bone as Conan's long knife split the other's skull.

Conan sprang back, crouching in the shelter of the rocks. Out in the night men were moving and a stentorian voice roared: "What, you dogs! Do you flinch? In, curse you, and take them!"

Conan started, peered into the darkness and lifted his voice.

"Yar Afzal! Is it you?"

There sounded a startled imprecation, and the voice called warily.

"Conan? Is it you, Conan?"

"Aye!" the Cimmerian laughed. "Come forth, you old war-dog. I've slain one of your men."

There was movement among the rocks, a light flared dimly, and then a flame appeared and came bobbing toward him, and as it approached, a fierce bearded countenance grew out of the darkness. The man who carried it held it high, thrust forward, and craned his neck to peer among the boulders it lighted; the other hand gripped a great curved tulwar. Conan stepped forward, sheathing his knife, and the other roared a greeting.

"Aye, it is Conan! Come out of your rocks, dogs! It is Conan!"

Others pressed into the wavering circle of light--wild, ragged, bearded men, with eyes like wolves, and long blades in their fists. They did not see Yasmina, for she was hidden by Conan's massive body. But peeping from her covert, she knew icy fear for the first time that night. These men were more like wolves than human beings.

"What are you hunting in the Zhaibar by night, Yar Afzal?" Conan demanded of the burly chief, who grinned like a bearded ghoul.

"Who knows what might come up the Pass after dark? We Wazulis are night-hawks. But what of you, Conan?"

"I have a prisoner," answered the Cimmerian. And moving aside he disclosed the cowering girl. Reaching a long arm into the crevice he drew her trembling forth.

Her imperious bearing was gone. She stared timidly at the ring of bearded faces that hemmed her in, and was grateful for the strong arm that clasped her possessively. The torch was thrust close to her, and there was a sucking intake of breath about the ring.

"She is my captive," Conan warned, glancing pointedly at the feet of the man he had slain, just visible within the ring of light. "I was taking her to Afghulistan, but now you have slain my horse, and the Kshatriyas are close behind me."

"Come with us to my village," suggested Yar Afzal. "We have horses hidden in the gorge. They can never follow us in the darkness. They are close behind you, you say?"

"So close that I hear now the clink of their hoofs on the flint," answered Conan grimly.

Instantly there was movement; the torch was dashed out and the ragged shapes melted like phantoms into the darkness. Conan swept up the Devi in his arms, and she did not resist. The rocky ground hurt her slim feet in their soft slippers and she felt very small and helpless in that brutish, primordial blackness among those colossal, nighted crags.

Feeling her shiver in the wind that moaned down the defiles, Conan jerked a ragged cloak from its owner's shoulders and wrapped it about her. He also hissed a warning in her ear, ordering her to make no sound. She did not hear the distant clink of shod hoofs on rock that warned the keen-eared hillmen; but she was far too frightened to disobey, in any event.

She could see nothing but a few faint stars far above, but she knew by the deepening darkness when they entered the gorge mouth. There was a stir about them, the uneasy movement of horses. A few muttered words, and Conan mounted the horse of the man he had killed, lifting the girl up in front of him. Like phantoms except for the click of their hoofs, the band swept away up the shadowy gorge. Behind them on the trail they left the dead horse and the dead man, which were found less than half an hour later by the riders from the fortress, who recognized the man as a Wazuli and drew their own conclusions accordingly.

Yasmina, snuggled warmly in her captor's arms, grew drowsy in spite of herself. The motion of the horse, though it was uneven, uphill and down, yet possessed a certain rhythm which combined with weariness and emotional exhaustion to force sleep upon her. She had lost all sense of time or direction. They moved in soft thick darkness, in which she sometimes glimpsed vaguely gigantic walls sweeping up like black ramparts, or great crags shouldering the stars; at times she sensed echoing depths beneath them, or felt the wind of dizzy heights blowing cold about her. Gradually these things faded into a dreamy unwakefulness in which the clink of hoofs and the creak of saddles were like the irrelevant sounds in a dream.

She was vaguely aware when the motion ceased and she was lifted down and carried a few steps. Then she was laid down on something soft and rustling, and something--a folded coat perhaps--was thrust under her head, and the cloak in which she was wrapped was carefully tucked about her. She heard Yar Afzal laugh.

"A rare prize, Conan; fit mate for a chief of the Afghulis."

"Not for me," came Conan's answering rumble. "This wench will buy the lives of my seven headmen, blast their souls."

That was the last she heard as she sank into dreamless slumber.

She slept while armed men rode through the dark hills, and the fate of kingdoms hung in the balance. Through the shadowy gorges and defiles that night there rang the hoofs of galloping horses, and the starlight glimmered on helmets and curved blades, until the ghoulish shapes that haunt the crags stared into the darkness from ravine and boulder and wondered what things were afoot.

A band of these sat gaunt horses in the black pit-mouth of a gorge as the hurrying hoofs swept past. Their leader, a well-built man in a helmet and gilt-braided cloak, held up his hand warningly, until the riders had sped on. Then he laughed softly.

"They must have lost the trail! Or else they have found that Conan has already reached the Afghuli villages. It will take many riders to smoke out that hive. There will be squadrons riding up the Zhaibar by dawn."

"If there is fighting in the hills there will be looting," muttered a voice behind him, in the dialect of the Irakzai.

"There will be looting," answered the man with the helmet. "But first it is our business to reach the valley of Gurashah and await the riders that will be galloping southward from Secunderam before daylight."

He lifted his reins and rode out of the defile, his men falling in behind him--thirty ragged phantoms in the starlight.

Chapter V

: The Black Stallion

The sun was well up when Yasmina awoke. She did not start and stare blankly, wondering where she was. She awoke with full knowledge of all that had occurred. Her supple limbs were stiff from her long ride, and her firm flesh seemed to feel the contact of the muscular arm that had borne her so far.

She was lying on a sheepskin covering a pallet of leaves on a hard-beaten dirt floor. A folded sheepskin coat was under her head, and she was wrapped in a ragged cloak. She was in a large room, the walls of which were crudely but strongly built of uncut rocks, plastered with sun-baked mud. Heavy beams supported a roof of the same kind, in which showed a trap-door up to which led a ladder. There were no windows in the thick walls, only loop-holes. There was one door, a sturdy bronze affair that must have been looted from some Vendhyan border tower. Opposite it was a wide opening in the wall, with no door, but several strong wooden bars in place. Beyond them Yasmina saw a magnificent black stallion munching a pile of dried grass. The building was fort, dwelling-place and stable in one.

At the other end of the room a girl in the vest and baggy trousers of a hill-woman squatted beside a small fire, cooking strips of meat on an iron grid laid over blocks of stone. There was a sooty cleft in the wall a few feet from the floor, and some of the smoke found its way out there. The rest floated in blue wisps about the room.

The hill-girl glanced at Yasmina over her shoulder, displaying a bold, handsome face, and then continued her cooking. Voices boomed outside; then the door was kicked open, and Conan strode in. He looked more enormous than ever with the morning sunlight behind him, and Yasmina noted some details that had escaped her the night before. His garments were clean and not ragged. The broad Bakhariot girdle that supported his knife in its ornamented scabbard would have matched the robes of a prince, and there was a glint of fine Turanian mail under his shirt.

"Your captive is awake, Conan," said the Wazuli girl, and he grunted, strode up to the fire and swept the strips of mutton off into a stone dish.

The squatting girl laughed up at him, with some spicy jest, and he grinned wolfishly, and hooking a toe under her haunches, tumbled her sprawling onto the floor. She seemed to derive considerable amusement from this bit of rough horse-play, but Conan paid no more heed to her. Producing a great hunk of bread from somewhere, with a copper jug of wine, he carried the lot to Yasmina, who had risen from her pallet and was regarding him doubtfully.

"Rough fare for a Devi, girl, but our best," he grunted. "It will fill your belly, at least."

He set the platter on the floor, and she was suddenly aware of a ravenous hunger. Making no comment, she seated herself cross-legged on the floor, and taking the dish in her lap, she began to eat, using her fingers, which were all she had in the way of table utensils. After all, adaptability is one of the tests of true aristocracy. Conan stood looking down at her, his thumbs hooked in his girdle. He never sat cross-legged, after the Eastern fashion.

"Where am I?" she asked abruptly.

"In the but of Yar Afzal, the chief of the Khurum Wazulis," he answered. "Afghulistan lies a good many miles farther on to the west. We'll hide here awhile. The Kshatriyas are beating up the hills for you--several of their squads have been cut up by the tribes already."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Keep you until Chunder Shan is willing to trade back my seven cow-thieves," he grunted. "Women of the Wazulis are crushing ink out of shoki leaves, and after a while you can write a letter to the governor."

A touch of her old imperious wrath shook her, as she thought how maddeningly her plans had gone awry, leaving her captive of the very man she had plotted to get into her power. She flung down the dish, with the remnants of her meal, and sprang to her feet, tense with anger.

"I will not write a letter! If you do not take me back, they will hang your seven men, and a thousand more besides!"

The Wazuli girl laughed mockingly, Conan scowled, and then the door opened and Yar Afzal came swaggering in. The Wazuli chief was as tall as Conan, and of greater girth, but he looked fat and slow beside the hard compactness of the Cimmerian. He plucked his red-stained beard and stared meaningly at the Wazuli girl, and that wench rose and scurried out without delay. Then Yar Afzal turned to his guest.

"The damnable people murmur, Conan," quoth he. "They wish me to murder you and take the girl to hold for ransom. They say that anyone can tell by her garments that she is a noble lady. They say why should the Afghuh dogs profit by her, when it is the people who take the risk of guarding her?"

"Lend me your horse," said Conan. "I'll take her and go."

"Pish!" boomed Yar Afzal. "Do you think I can't handle my own people? I'll have them dancing in their shirts if they cross me! They don't love you--or any other outlander--but you saved my life once, and I will not forget. Come out, though, Conan; a scout has returned."

Conan hitched at his girdle and followed the chief outside. They closed the door after them, and Yasmina peeped through a loop-hole. She looked out on a level space before the hut. At the farther end of that space there was a cluster of mud and stone huts, and she saw naked children playing among the boulders, and the slim erect women of the hills going about their tasks.

Directly before the chief's but a circle of hairy, ragged men squatted, facing the door. Conan and Yar Afzal stood a few paces before the door, and between them and the ring of warriors another man sat cross-legged. This one was addressing his chief in the harsh accents of the Wazuli which Yasmina could scarcely understand, though as part of her royal education she had been taught the languages of Iranistan and the kindred tongues of Ghulistan.

"I talked with a Dagozai who saw the riders last night," said the scout. "He was lurking near when they came to the spot where we ambushed the lord Conan. He overheard their speech. Chunder Shan was with them. They found the dead horse, and one of the men recognized it as Conan's. Then they found the man Conan slew, and knew him for a Wazuli. It seemed to them that Conan had been slain and the girl taken by the Wazuli; so they turned aside from their purpose of following to Afghulistan. But they did not know from which village the dead man was come, and we had left no trail a Kshatriya could follow.

"So they rode to the nearest Wazuli village, which was the village of Jugra, and burnt it and slew many of the people. But the men of Khojur came upon them in darkness and slew some of them, and wounded the governor. So the survivors retired down the Zhaibar in the darkness before dawn, but they returned with reinforcements before sunrise, and there has been skirmishing and fighting in the hills all morning. It is said that a great army is being raised to sweep the hills about the Zhaibar. The tribes are whetting their knives and laying ambushes in every pass from here to Gurashah valley. Moreover, Kerim Shah has returned to the hills."

A grunt went around the circle, and Yasmina leaned closer to the loop-hole at the name she had begun to mistrust.

"Where went he?" demanded Yar Afzal.

"The Dagozai did not know; with him were thirty Irakzai of the lower villages. They rode into the hills and disappeared."

"These Irakzai are jackals that follow a lion for crumbs," growled Yar Afzal. "They have been lapping up the coins Kerim Shah scatters among the border tribes to buy men like horses. I like him not, for all he is our kinsman from Iranistan."

"He's not even that," said Conan. "I know him of old. He's an Hyrkanian, a spy of Yezdigerd's. If I catch him I'll hang his hide to a tamarisk."

"But the Kshatriyas!" clamored the men in the semicircle. "Are we to squat on our haunches until they smoke us out? They will learn at last in which Wazuh village the wench is held. We are not loved by the Zhaibari; they will help the Kshatriyas hunt us out."

"Let them come," grunted Yar Afzal. "We can hold the defiles against a host."

One of the men leaped up and shook his fist at Conan.

"Are we to take all the risks while he reaps the rewards?" he howled. "Are we to fight his battles for him?"

With a stride Conan reached him and bent slightly to stare full into his hairy face. The Cimmerian had not drawn his long knife, but his left hand grasped the scabbard, jutting the hilt suggestively forward.

"I ask no man to fight my battles," he said softly. "Draw your blade if you dare, you yapping dog!"

The Wazuh started back, snarling like a cat.

"Dare to touch me and here are fifty men to rend you apart!" he screeched.

"What!" roared Yar Afzal, his face purpling with wrath. His whiskers bristled, his belly swelled with his rage. "Are you chief of Khurum? Do the Wazulis take orders from Yar Afzal, or from a low-bred cur?"

The man cringed before his invincible chief, and Yar Afzal, striding up to him, seized him by the throat and choked him until his face was turning black. Then he hurled the man savagely against the ground and stood over him with his tulwar in his hand.

"Is there any who questions my authority?" he roared, and his warriors looked down sullenly as his bellicose glare swept their semicircle. Yar Afzal grunted scornfully and sheathed his weapon with a gesture that was the apex of insult. Then he kicked the fallen agitator with a concentrated vindictiveness that brought howls from his victim.

"Get down the valley to the watchers on the heights and bring word if they have seen anything," commanded Yar Afzal, and the man went, shaking with fear and grinding his teeth with fury.

Yar Afzal then seated himself ponderously on a stone, growling in his beard. Conan stood near him, legs braced apart, thumbs hooked in his girdle, narrowly watching the assembled warriors. They stared at him sullenly, not daring to brave Yar Afzal's fury, but hating the foreigner as only a hillman can hate.

"Now listen to me, you sons of nameless dogs, while I tell you what the lord Conan and I have planned to fool the Kshatriyas." The boom of Yar Afzal's bull-like voice followed the discomfited warrior as he slunk away from the assembly.

The man passed by the cluster of huts, where women who had seen his defeat laughed at him and called stinging comments, and hastened on along the trail that wound among spurs and rocks toward the valley head.

Just as he rounded the first turn that took him out of sight of the village, he stopped short, gaping stupidly. He had not believed it possible for a stranger to enter the valley of Khurum without being detected by the hawk-eyed watchers along the heights; yet a man sat cross-legged on a low ledge beside the path--a man in a camel-hair robe and a green turban.

The Wazuli's mouth gaped for a yell, and his hand leaped to his knife-hilt. But at that instant his eyes met those of the stranger and the cry died in his throat, his fingers went limp. He stood like a statue, his own eyes glazed and vacant.

For minutes the scene held motionless; then the man on the ledge drew a cryptic symbol in the dust on the rock with his forefinger. The Wazuli did not see him place anything within the compass of that emblem, but presently something gleamed there--a round, shiny black ball that looked like polished jade. The man in the green turban took this up and tossed it to the Wazuli, who mechanically caught it.

"Carry this to Yar Afzal," he said, and the Wazuli turned like an automaton and went back along the path, holding the black jade ball in his outstretched hand. He did not even turn his head to the renewed jeers of the women as he passed the huts. He did not seem to hear.

The man on the ledge gazed after him with a cryptic smile. A girl's head rose above the rim of the ledge and she looked at him with admiration and a touch of fear that had not been present the night before.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

He ran his fingers through her dark locks caressingly.

"Are you still dizzy from your flight on the horse-of-air, that you doubt my wisdom?" he laughed. "As long as Yar Afzal lives, Conan will bide safe among the Wazuli fighting-men. Their knives are sharp, and there are many of them. What I plot will be safer, even for me, than to seek to slay him and take her from among them. It takes no wizard to predict what the Wazulis will do, and what Conan will do, when my victim hands the globe of Yezud to the chief of Khurum."

Back before the hut, Yar Afzal halted in the midst of some tirade, surprized and displeased to see the man he had sent up the valley, pushing his way through the throng.

"I bade you go to the watchers!" the chief bellowed. "You have not had time to come from them."

The other did not reply; he stood woodenly, staring vacantly into the chief's face, his palm outstretched holding the jade ball. Conan, looking over Yar Afzal's shoulder, murmured something and reached to touch the chief's arm, but as he did so, Yar Afzal, in a paroxysm of anger, struck the man with his clenched fist and felled him like an ox. As he fell, the jade sphere rolled to Yar Afzal's foot, and the chief, seeming to see it for the first time, bent and picked it up. The men, staring perplexedly at their senseless comrade, saw their chief bend, but they did not see what he picked up from the ground.

Yar Afzal straightened, glanced at the jade, and made a motion to thrust it into his girdle.

"Carry that fool to his hut," he growled. "He has the look of a lotus-eater. He returned me a blank stare. I--aie!"

In his right hand, moving toward his girdle, he had suddenly felt movement where movement should not be. His voice died away as he stood and glared at nothing; and inside his clenched right hand he felt the quivering of change, of motion, of life. He no longer held a smooth shining sphere in his fingers. And he dared not look; his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he could not open his hand. His astonished warriors saw Yar Afzal's eyes distend, the color ebb from his face. Then suddenly a bellow of agony burst from his bearded lips; he swayed and fell as if struck by lightning, his right arm tossed out in front of him. Face down he lay, and from between his opening fingers crawled a spider--a hideous, black, hairy-legged monster whose body shone like black jade. The men yelled and gave back suddenly, and the creature scuttled into a crevice of the rocks and disappeared.

The warriors started up, glaring wildly, and a voice rose above their clamor, a far-carrying voice of command which came from none knew where. Afterward each man there--who still lived--denied that he had shouted, but all there heard it.

"Yar Afzal is dead! Kill the outlander!"

That shout focused their whirling minds as one. Doubt, bewilderment and fear vanished in the uproaring surge of the blood-lust. A furious yell rent the skies as the tribesmen responded instantly to the suggestion. They came headlong across the open space, cloaks flapping, eyes blazing, knives lifted.

Conan's action was as quick as theirs. As the voice shouted he sprang for the hut door. But they were closer to him than he was to the door, and with one foot on the sill he had to wheel and parry the swipe of a yard-long blade. He split the man's skull--ducked another swinging knife and gutted the wielder--felled a man with his left fist and stabbed another in the belly--and heaved back mightily against the closed door with his shoulders. Hacking blades were nicking chips out of the jambs about his ears, but the door flew open under the impact of his shoulders, and he went stumbling backward into the room. A bearded tribesman, thrusting with all his fury as Conan sprang back, overreached and pitched head-first through the doorway. Conan stopped, grasped the slack of his garments and hauled him clear, and slammed the door in the faces of the men who came surging into it. Bones snapped under the impact, and the next instant Conan slammed the bolts into place and whirled with desperate haste to meet the man who sprang from the floor and tore into action like a madman.

Yasmina cowered in a corner, staring in horror as the two men fought back and forth across the room, almost trampling her at times; the flash and clangor of their blades filled the room, and outside the mob clamored like a wolf-pack, hacking deafeningly at the bronze door with their long knives, and dashing huge rocks against it. Somebody fetched a tree trunk, and the door began to stagger under the thunderous assault. Yasmina clasped her ears, staring wildly. Violence and fury within, cataclysmic madness without. The stallion in his stall neighed and reared, thundering with his heels against the walls. He wheeled and launched his hoofs through the bars just as the tribesman, backing away from Conan's murderous swipes, stumbled against them. His spine cracked in three places like a rotten branch and he was hurled headlong against the Cimmerian, bearing him backward so that they both crashed to the beaten floor.

Yasmina cried out and ran forward; to her dazed sight it seemed that both were slain. She reached them just as Conan threw aside the corpse and rose. She caught his arm, trembling from head to foot.

"Oh, you live! I thought--I thought you were dead!"

He glanced down at her quickly, into the pale, upturned face and the wide staring dark eyes.

"Why are you trembling?" he demanded. "Why should you care if I live or die?"

A vestige of her poise returned to her, and she drew away, making a rather pitiful attempt at playing the Devi.

"You are preferable to those wolves howling without," she answered, gesturing toward the door, the stone sill of which was beginning to splinter away.

"That won't hold long," he muttered, then turned and went swiftly to the stall of the stallion.

Yasmina clenched her hands and caught her breath as she saw him tear aside the splintered bars and go into the stall with the maddened beast. The stallion reared above him, neighing terribly, hoofs lifted, eyes and teeth flashing and ears laid back, but Conan leaped and caught his mane with a display of sheer strength that seemed impossible, and dragged the beast down on his forelegs. The steed snorted and quivered, but stood still while the man bridled him and clapped on the gold-worked saddle, with the wide silver stirrups.

Wheeling the beast around in the stall, Conan called quickly to Yasmina, and the girl came, sidling nervously past the stallion's heels. Conan was working at the stone wall, talking swiftly as he worked.

"A secret door in the wall here, that not even the Wazuli know about. Yar Afzal showed it to me once when he was drunk. It opens out into the mouth of the ravine behind the hut. Ha!"

As he tugged at a projection that seemed casual, a whole section of the wall slid back on oiled iron runners. Looking through, the girl saw a narrow defile opening in a sheer stone cliff within a few feet of the hut's back wall. Then Conan sprang into the saddle and hauled her up before him. Behind them the great door groaned like a living thing and crashed in, and a yell rang to the roof as the entrance was instantly flooded with hairy faces and knives in hairy fists. And then the great stallion went through the wall like a javelin from a catapult, and thundered into the defile, running low, foam flying from the bit-rings.

That move came as an absolute surprize to the Wazulis. It was a surprize, too, to those stealing down the ravine. It happened so quickly--the hurricane-like charge of the great horse--that a man in a green turban was unable to get out of the way. He went down under the frantic hoofs, and a girl screamed. Conan got one glimpse of her as they thundered by--a slim, dark girl in silk trousers and a jeweled breast-band, flattening herself against the ravine wall. Then the black horse and his riders were gone up the gorge like the spume blown before a storm, and the men who came tumbling through the wall into the defile after them met that which changed their yells of blood-lust to shrill screams of fear and death.

Chapter VI

: The Mountain of the Black Seers

"Where now?" Yasmina was trying to sit erect on the rocking saddle-bow, clutching her captor. She was conscious of a recognition of shame that she should not find unpleasant the feel of his muscular flesh under her fingers.

"To Afghulistan," he answered. "It's a perilous road, but the stallion will carry us easily, unless we fall in with some of your friends, or my tribal enemies. Now that Yar Afzal is dead, those damned Wazulis will be on our heels. I'm surprized we haven't sighted them behind us already."

"Who was that man you rode down?" she asked.

"I don't know. I never saw him before. He's no Ghuli, that's certain. What the devil he was doing there is more than I can say. There was a girl with him, too."

"Yes." Her gaze was shadowed. "I can not understand that. That girl was my maid, Gitara. Do you suppose she was coming to aid me? That the man was a friend? If so, the Wazulis have captured them both."

"Well," he answered, "there's nothing we can do. If we go back, they'll skin us both. I can't understand how a girl like that could get this far into the mountains with only one man--and he a robed scholar, for that's what he looked like. There's something infernally queer in all this. That fellow Yar Afzal beat and sent away--he moved like a man walking in his sleep. I've seen the priests of Zamora perform their abominable rituals in their forbidden temples, and their victims had a stare like that man. The priests looked into their eyes and muttered incantations, and then the people became the walking dead men, with glassy eyes, doing as they were ordered."

"And then I saw what the fellow had in his hand, which Yar Afzal picked up. It was like a big black jade bead, such as the temple girls of Yezud wear when they dance before the black stone spider which is their god. Yar Afzal held it in his hand, and he didn't pick up anything else. Yet when he fell dead, a spider, like the god at Yezud, only smaller, ran out of his fingers."

"And then, when the Wazulis stood uncertain there, a voice cried out for them to kill me, and I know that voice didn't come from any of the warriors, nor from the women who watched by the huts. It seemed to come from above."

Yasmina did not reply. She glanced at the stark outlines of the mountains all about them and shuddered. Her soul shrank from their gaunt brutality. This was a grim, naked land where anything might happen. Age-old traditions invested it with shuddery horror for anyone born in the hot, luxuriant southern plains.

The sun was high, beating down with fierce heat, yet the wind that blew in fitful gusts seemed to sweep off slopes of ice. Once she heard a strange rushing above them that was not the sweep of the wind, and from the way Conan looked up, she knew it was not a common sound to him, either. She thought that a strip of the cold blue sky was momentarily blurred, as if some all but invisible object had swept between it and herself, but she could not be sure. Neither made any comment, but Conan loosened his knife in his scabbard.

They were following a faintly marked path dipping down into ravines so deep the sun never struck bottom, laboring up steep slopes where loose shale threatened to slide from beneath their feet, and following knife-edge ridges with blue-hazed echoing depths on either hand.

The sun had passed its zenith when they crossed a narrow trail winding among the crags. Conan reined the horse aside and followed it southward, going almost at right angles to their former course.

"A Galzai village is at one end of this trail," he explained. "Their women follow it to a well, for water. You need new garments."

Glancing down at her filmy attire, Yasmina agreed with him. Her cloth-of-gold slippers were in tatters, her robes and silken under-garments torn to shreds that scarcely held together decently. Garments meant for the streets of Peshkhauri were scarcely appropriate for the crags of the Himelians.

Coming to a crook in the trail, Conan dismounted, helped

Yasmina down and waited. Presently he nodded, though she heard nothing.

"A woman coming along the trail," he remarked. In sudden panic she clutched his arm.

"You will not--not kill her?"

"I don't kill women ordinarily," he grunted; "though some of the hill-women are she-wolves. No," he grinned as at a huge jest. "By Crom, I'll pay for her clothes! How is that?" He displayed a large handful of gold coins, and replaced all but the largest. She nodded, much relieved. It was perhaps natural for men to slay and die; her flesh crawled at the thought of watching the butchery of a woman.

Presently a woman appeared around the crook of the trail--a tall, slim Galzai girl, straight as a young sapling, bearing a great empty gourd. She stopped short and the gourd fell from her hands when she saw them; she wavered as though to run, then realized that Conan was too close to her to allow her to escape, and so stood still, staring at them with a mixed

expression of fear and curiosity.

Conan displayed the gold coin.

"If you will give this woman your garments," he said, "I will give you this money."

The response was instant. The girl smiled broadly with surprize and delight, and, with the disdain of a hill-woman for prudish conventions, promptly yanked off her sleeveless embroidered vest, slipped down her wide trousers and stepped out of them, twitched off her wide-sleeved shirt, and kicked off her sandals. Bundling them all in a bunch, she proffered them to Conan, who handed them to the astonished Devi.

"Get behind that rock and put these on," he directed, further proving himself no native hill-man. "Fold your robes up into a bundle and bring them to me when you come out."

"The money!" clamored the hill-girl, stretching out her hands eagerly. "The gold you promised me!"

Conan flipped the coin to her, she caught it, bit, then thrust it into her hair, bent and caught up the gourd and went on down the path, as devoid of self-consciousness as of garments. Conan waited with some impatience while the Devi, for the first time in her pampered life, dressed herself. When she stepped from behind the rock he swore in surprize, and she felt a curious rush of emotions at the unrestrained admiration burning in his fierce blue eyes. She felt shame, embarrassment, yet a stimulation of vanity she had never before experienced, and a tingling when meeting the impact of his eyes. He laid a heavy hand on her shoulder and turned her about, staring avidly at her from all angles.

"By Crom!" said he. "In those smoky, mystic robes you were aloof and cold and far off as a star! Now you are a woman of warm flesh and blood! You went behind that rock as the Devi of Vendhya; you come out as a hill-girl--though a thousand times more beautiful than any wench of the Zhaibar! You were a goddess--now you are real!"

He spanked her resoundingly, and she, recognizing this as merely another expression of admiration, did not feel outraged. It was indeed as if the changing of her garments had wrought a change in her personality. The feelings and sensations she had suppressed rose to domination in her now, as if the queenly robes she had cast off had been material shackles and inhibitions.

But Conan, in his renewed admiration, did not forget that peril lurked all about them. The farther they drew away from the region of the Zhaibar, the less likely he was to encounter any Kshatriya troops. On the other hand he had been listening all throughout their flight for sounds that would tell him the vengeful Wazulis of Khurum were on their heels.

Swinging the Devi up, he followed her into the saddle and again reined the stallion westward. The bundle of garments she had given him, he hurled over a cliff, to fall into the depths of a thousand-foot gorge.

"Why did you do that?" she asked. "Why did you not give them to the girl?"

"The riders from Peshkhauri are combing these hills," he said. "They'll be ambushed and harried at every turn, and by way of reprisal they'll destroy every village they can take. They may turn westward any time. If they found a girl wearing your garments, they'd torture her into talking, and she might put them on my trail."

"What will she do?" asked Yasmina.

"Go back to her village and tell her people that a stranger attacked her," he answered. "She'll have them on our track, all right. But she had to go on and get the water first; if she dared go back without it, they'd whip the skin off her. That gives us a long start. They'll never catch us. By nightfall we'll cross the Afghuh border."

"There are no paths or signs of human habitation in these parts," she commented. "Even for the Himelians this region seems singularly deserted. We have not seen a trail since we left the one where we met the Galzai woman."

For answer he pointed to the northwest, where she glimpsed a peak in a notch of the crags.

"Yimsha," grunted Conan. "The tribes build their villages as far from the mountain as they can."

She was instantly rigid with attention.

"Yimsha!" she whispered. "The mountain of the Black Seers!"

"So they say," he answered. "This is as near as I ever approached it. I have swung north to avoid any Kshatriya troops that might be prowling through the hills. The regular trail from Khurum to Afghulistan lies farther south. This is an ancient one, and seldom used."

She was staring intently at the distant peak. Her nails bit into her pink palms.

"How long would it take to reach Yimsha from this point?"

"All the rest of the day, and all night," he answered, and grinned. "Do you want to go there? By Crom, it's no place for an ordinary human, from what the hill-people say."

"Why do they not gather and destroy the devils that inhabit it?" she demanded.

"Wipe out wizards with swords? Anyway, they never interfere with people, unless the people interfere with them. I never saw one of them, though I've talked with men who swore they had. They say they've glimpsed people from the tower among the crags at sunset or sunrise--tall, silent men in black robes."

"Would you be afraid to attack them?"

"I?" The idea seemed a new one to him. "Why, if they imposed upon me, it would be my life or theirs. But I have nothing to do with them. I came to these mountains to raise a following of human beings, not to war with wizards."

Yasmina did not at once reply. She stared at the peak as at a human enemy, feeling all her anger and hatred stir in her bosom anew. And another feeling began to take dim shape. She had plotted to hurl against the masters of Yimsha the man in whose arms she was now carried. Perhaps there was another way, besides the method she had planned, to accomplish her purpose. She could not mistake the look that was beginning to dawn in this wild man's eyes as they rested on her. Kingdoms have fallen when a woman's slim white hands pulled the strings of destiny. Suddenly she stiffened, pointing.

"Look!"

Just visible on the distant peak there hung a cloud of peculiar aspect. It was a frosty crimson in color, veined with sparkling gold. This cloud was in motion; it rotated, and as it whirled it contracted. It dwindled to a spinning taper that flashed in the sun. And suddenly it detached itself from the snow-tipped peak, floated out over the void like a gay-hued feather, and became invisible against the cerulean sky.

"What could that have been?" asked the girl uneasily, as a shoulder of rock shut the distant mountain from view; the phenomenon had been disturbing, even in its beauty.

"The hill-men call it Yimsha's Carpet, whatever that means," answered Conan. "I've seen five hundred of them running as if the devil were at their heels, to hide themselves in caves and crags, because they saw that crimson cloud float up from the peak. What in-"

They had advanced through a narrow, knife-cut gash between turreted walls and emerged upon a broad ledge, flanked by a series of rugged slopes on one hand, and a gigantic precipice on the other. The dim trail followed this ledge, bent around a shoulder and reappeared at intervals far below, working a tedious way downward. And emerging from the cut that opened upon the ledge, the black stallion halted short, snorting. Conan urged him on impatiently, and the horse snorted and threw his head up and down, quivering and straining as if against an invisible barrier.

Conan swore and swung off, lifting Yasmina down with him. He went forward, with a hand thrown out before him as if expecting to encounter unseen resistance, but there was nothing to hinder him, though when he tried to lead the horse, it neighed shrilly and jerked back. Then Yasmina cried out, and Conan wheeled, hand starting to knife-hilt.

Neither of them had seen him come, but he stood there, with his arms folded, a man in a camel-hair robe and a green turban. Conan grunted with surprize to recognize the man the stallion had spurned in the ravine outside the Wazuli village.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded.

The man did not answer. Conan noticed that his eyes were wide, fixed, and of a peculiar luminous quality. And those eyes held his like a magnet.

Khemsa's sorcery was based on hypnotism, as is the case with most Eastern magic. The way has been prepared for the hypnotist for untold centuries of generations who have lived and died in the firm conviction of the reality and power of hypnotism, building up, by mass thought and practise, a colossal though intangible atmosphere against which the individual, steeped in the traditions of the land, finds himself helpless.

But Conan was not a son of the East. Its traditions were meaningless to him; he was the product of an utterly alien atmosphere. Hypnotism was not even a myth in Cimmeria. The heritage that prepared a native of the East for submission to the mesmerist was not his.

He was aware of what Khemsa was trying to do to him; but he felt the impact of the man's uncanny power only as a vague impulsion, a tugging and pulling that he could shake off as a man shakes spider-webs from his garments.

Aware of hostility and black magic, he ripped out his long knife and lunged, as quick on his feet as a mountain lion.

But hypnotism was not all of Khemsa's magic. Yasmina, watching, did not see by what roguery of movement or illusion the man in the green turban avoided the terrible disemboweling thrust. But the keen blade whickered between side and lifted arm, and to Yasmina it seemed that Khemsa merely brushed his open palm lightly against Conan's bull-neck. But the Cimmerian went down like a slain ox.

Yet Conan was not dead; breaking his fall with his left hand, he slashed at Khemsa's legs even as he went down, and the Rakhsha avoided the scythe-like swipe only by a most unwizardly bound backward. Then Yasmina cried out sharply as she saw a woman she recognized as Gitara glide out from among the rocks and come up to the man. The greeting died in the Devi's throat as she saw the malevolence in the girl's beautiful face.

Conan was rising slowly, shaken and dazed by the cruel craft of that blow which, delivered with an art forgotten of men before Atlantis sank, would have broken like a rotten twig the neck of a lesser man. Khemsa gazed at him cautiously and a trifle uncertainly. The Rakhsha had learned the full flood of his own power when he faced at bay the knives of the maddened Wazulis in the ravine behind Khurum village; but the Cimmerian's resistance had perhaps shaken his new-found confidence a trifle. Sorcery thrives on success, not on failure.

He stepped forward, lifting his hand--then halted as if frozen, head tilted back, eyes wide open, hand raised. In spite of himself Conan followed his gaze, and so did the women--the girl cowering by the trembling stallion, and the girl beside Khemsa.

Down the mountain slopes, like a whirl of shining dust blown before the wind, a crimson, conoid cloud came dancing. Khemsa's dark face turned ashen; his hand began to tremble, then sank to his side. The girl beside him, sensing the change in him, stared at him inquiringly.

The crimson shape left the mountain slope and came down in a long arching sweep. It struck the ledge between Conan and Khemsa, and the Rakhsha gave back with a stifled cry. He backed away, pushing the girl Gitara back with groping, fending hands.

The crimson cloud balanced like a spinning top for an instant, whirling in a dazzling sheen on its point. Then without warning it was gone, vanished as a bubble vanishes when burst. There on the ledge stood four men. It was miraculous, incredible, impossible, yet it was true. They were not ghosts or phantoms. They were four tall men, with shaven, vulture-like heads, and black robes that hid their feet. Their hands were concealed by their wide sleeves. They stood in silence, their naked heads nodding slightly in unison. They were facing Khemsa, but behind them Conan felt his own blood turning to ice in his veins. Rising, he backed stealthily away, until he could feel the stallion's shoulder trembling against his back, and the Devi crept into the shelter of his arm. There was no word spoken. Silence hung like a stifling pall.

All four of the men in black robes stared at Khemsa. Their vulture-like faces were immobile, their eyes introspective and contemplative. But Khemsa shook like a man in an ague. His feet were braced on the rock, his calves straining as if in physical combat. Sweat ran in streams down his dark face. His right hand locked on something under his brown robe so

desperately that the blood ebbed from that hand and left it white. His left hand fell on the shoulder of Gitara and clutched in agony like the grasp of a drowning man. She did not flinch or whimper, though his fingers dug like talons into her firm flesh.

Conan had witnessed hundreds of battles in his wild life, but never one like this, wherein four diabolical wills sought to beat down one lesser but equally devilish will that opposed them. But he only faintly sensed the monstrous quality of that hideous struggle. With his back to the wall, driven to bay by his former masters, Khemsa was fighting for his life with all the dark power, all the frightful knowledge they had taught him through long, grim years of neophytism and vassalage.

He was stronger than even he had guessed, and the free exercise of his powers in his own behalf had tapped unsuspected reservoirs of forces. And he was nerved to super-energy by frantic fear and desperation. He reeled before the merciless impact of those hypnotic eyes, but he held his ground. His features were distorted into a bestial grin of agony, and his limbs were twisted as on a rack. It was a war of souls, of frightful brains steeped in lore forbidden to men for a million years, of mentalities which had plumbed the abysses and explored the dark stars where spawn the shadows.

Yasmina understood this better than did Conan. And she dimly understood why Khemsa could withstand the concentrated impact of those four hellish wills which might have blasted into atoms the very rock on which he stood. The reason was the girl that he clutched with the strength of his despair. She was like an anchor to his staggering soul, battered by the waves of those psychic emanations. His weakness was now his strength. His love for the girl, violent and evil though it might be, was yet a tie that bound him to the rest of humanity, providing an earthly leverage for his will, a chain that his inhuman enemies could not break; at least not break through Khemsa.

They realized that before he did. And one of them turned his gaze from the Rakhsha full upon Gitara. There was no battle there. The girl shrank and wilted like a leaf in the drought. Irresistibly impelled, she tore herself from her lover's arms before he realized what was happening. Then a hideous thing came to pass. She began to back toward the precipice, facing her tormentors, her eyes wide and blank as dark gleaming glass from behind which a lamp has been blown out. Khemsa groaned and staggered toward her, falling into the trap set for him. A divided mind could not maintain the unequal battle. He was beaten, a straw in their hands. The girl went backward, walking like an automaton, and Khemsa reeled drunkenly after her, hands vainly outstretched, groaning, slobbering in his pain, his feet moving heavily like dead things.

On the very brink she paused, standing stiffly, her heels on the edge, and he fell on his knees and crawled whimpering toward her, groping for her, to drag her back from destruction. And just before his clumsy fingers touched her, one of the wizards laughed, like the sudden, bronze note of a bell in hell. The girl reeled suddenly and, consummate climax of exquisite cruelty, reason and understanding flooded back into her eyes, which flared with awful fear. She screamed, clutched wildly at her lover's straining hand, and then, unable to save herself, fell headlong with a moaning cry.

Khemsa hauled himself to the edge and stared over, haggardly, his lips working as he mumbled to himself. Then he turned and stared for a long minute at his torturers, with wide eyes that held no human light. And then with a cry that almost burst the rocks, he reeled up and came rushing toward them, a knife lifted in his hand.

One of the Rakhshas stepped forward and stamped his foot, and as he stamped, there came a rumbling that grew swiftly to a grinding roar. Where his foot struck, a crevice opened in the solid rock that widened instantly. Then, with a deafening crash, a whole section of the ledge gave way. There was a last glimpse of Khemsa, with arms wildly upflung, and then he vanished amidst the roar of the avalanche that thundered down into the abyss.

The four looked contemplatively at the ragged edge of rock that formed the new rim of the precipice, and then turned suddenly. Conan, thrown off his feet by the shudder of the mountain, was rising, lifting Yasmina. He seemed to move as slowly as his brain was working. He was befogged and stupid. He realized that there was a desperate need for him to lift the Devi on the black stallion and ride like the wind, but an unaccountable sluggishness weighted his every thought and action.

And now the wizards had turned toward him; they raised their arms, and to his horrified sight, he saw their outlines fading, dimming, becoming hazy and nebulous, as a crimson smoke billowed around their feet and rose about them. They were blotted out by a sudden whirling cloud--and then he realized that he too was enveloped in a blinding crimson mist--he heard Yasmina scream, and the stallion cried out like a woman in pain. The Devi was torn from his arm, and as he lashed out with his knife blindly, a terrific blow like a gust of storm wind knocked him sprawling against a rock. Dazedly he saw a crimson conoid cloud spinning up and over the mountain slopes. Yasmina was gone, and so were the four men in black. Only the terrified stallion shared the ledge with him.

Chapter VII

: On to Yimsha

As mists vanish before a strong wind, the cobwebs vanished from Conan's brain. With a searing curse he leaped into the saddle and the stallion reared neighing beneath him. He glared up the slopes, hesitated, and then turned down the trail in the direction he had been going when halted by Khemsa's trickery. But now he did not ride at a measured gait. He shook loose the reins and the stallion went like a thunderbolt, as if frantic to lose hysteria in violent physical exertion. Across the ledge and around the crag and down the narrow trail threading the great steep they plunged at breakneck speed. The path followed a fold of rock, winding interminably down from tier to tier of striated escarpment, and once, far below, Conan got a glimpse of the ruin that had fallen--a mighty pile of broken stone and boulders at the foot of a gigantic cliff.

The valley floor was still far below him when he reached a long and lofty ridge that led out from the slope like a natural causeway. Out upon this he rode, with an almost sheer drop on either hand. He could trace ahead of him the trail and made a great horseshoe back into the riverbed at his left hand. He cursed the necessity of traversing those miles, but it was the only way. To try to descend to the lower lap of the trail here would be to attempt the impossible. Only a bird could get to the riverbed with a whole neck.

So he urged on the wearying stallion, until a clink of hoofs reached his ears, welling up from below. Pulling up short and reining to the lip of the cliff, he stared down into the dry riverbed that wound along the foot of the ridge. Along that gorge rode a motley throng--bearded men on half-wild horses, five hundred strong, bristling with weapons. And Conan shouted suddenly, leaning over the edge of the cliff, three hundred feet above them.

At his shout they reined back, and five hundred bearded faces were tilted up towards him; a deep, clamorous roar filled the canyon. Conan did not waste words.

"I was riding for Ghor!" he roared. "I had not hoped to meet you dogs on the trail. Follow me as fast as your nags can push! I'm going to Yimsha, and-"

"Traitor!" The howl was like a dash of ice-water in his face.

"What?" He glared down at them, jolted speechless. He saw wild eyes blazing up at him, faces contorted with fury, fists brandishing blades.

"Traitor!" they roared back, wholeheartedly. "Where are the seven chiefs held captive in Peshkhauri?"

"Why, in the governor's prison, I suppose," he answered.

A bloodthirsty yell from a hundred throats answered him, with such a waving of weapons and a clamor that he could not understand what they were saying. He beat down the din with a bull-like roar, and bellowed: "What devil's play is this? Let one of you speak, so I can understand what you mean!"

A gaunt old chief elected himself to this position, shook his tulwar at Conan as a preamble, and shouted accusingly: "You would not let us go raiding Peshkhauri to rescue our brothers!"

"No, you fools!" roared the exasperated Cimmerian. "Even if you'd breached the wall, which is unlikely, they'd have hanged the prisoners before you could reach them."

"And you went alone to traffic with the governor!" yelled the Afghuli, working himself into a frothing frenzy.

"Well?"

"Where are the seven chiefs?" howled the old chief, making his tulwar into a glimmering wheel of steel about his head. "Where are they? Dead!"

"What!" Conan nearly fell off his horse in his surprize.

"Aye, dead!" five hundred bloodthirsty voices assured him.

The old chief brandished his arms and got the floor again. "They were not hanged!" he screeched. "A Wazuli in another cell saw them die! The governor sent a wizard to slay them by craft!"

"That must be a lie," said Conan. "The governor would not dare. Last night I talked with him-"

The admission was unfortunate. A yell of hate and accusation split the skies.

"Aye! You went to him alone! To betray us! It is no lie. The Wazuli escaped through the doors the wizard burst in his entry, and told the tale to our scouts whom he met in Zhaibar. They had been sent forth to search for you, when you did not return. When they heard the Wazuli's tale, they returned with all haste to Ghor, and we saddled our steeds and girt our swords!"

"And what do you fools mean to do?" demanded the Cimmerian.

"To avenge our brothers!" they howled. "Death to the Kshatriyas! Slay him, brothers, he is a traitor!"

Arrows began to rattle around him. Conan rose in his stirrups, striving to make himself heard above the tumult, and then, with a roar of mingled rage, defiance and disgust, he wheeled and galloped back up the trail. Behind him and below him the Afghulis came pelting, mouthing their rage, too furious even to remember that the only way they could reach the height whereon he rode was to traverse the riverbed in the other direction, make the broad bend and follow the twisting trail up over the ridge. When they did remember this, and turned back, their repudiated chief had almost reached the point where the ridge joined the escarpment.

At the cliff he did not take the trail by which he had descended, but turned off on another, a mere trace along a rockfault, where the stallion scrambled for footing. He had not ridden far when the stallion snorted and shied back from something lying in the trail. Conan stared down on the travesty of a man, a broken, shredded, bloody heap that gibbered and gnashed splintered teeth.

Impelled by some obscure reason, Conan dismounted and stood looking down at the ghastly shape, knowing that he was witness of a thing miraculous and opposed to nature. The Rakhsha lifted his gory head, and his strange eyes, glazed with agony and approaching death, rested on Conan with recognition.

"Where are they?" It was a racking croak not even remotely resembling a human voice.

"Gone back to their damnable castle on Yimsha," grunted Conan. "They took the Devi with them."

"I will go!" muttered the man. "I will follow them! They killed Gitara; I will kill them--the acolytes, the Four of the Black Circle, the Master himself? Kill--kill them all!" He strove to drag his mutilated frame along the rock, but not even his indomitable will could animate that gory mass longer, where the splintered bones hung together only by torn tissue and ruptured fibre.

"Follow them!" raved Khemsa, drooling a bloody slaver. "Follow!"

"I'm going to," growled Conan. "I went to fetch my Afghulis, but they've turned on me. I'm going on to Yimsha alone. I'll have the Devi back if I have to tear down that damned mountain with my bare hands. I didn't think the governor would dare kill my headmen, when I had the Devi, but it seems he did. I'll have his head for that. She's no use to me now as a hostage, but-"

"The curse of Yizil on them!" gasped Khemsa. "Go! I am dying. Wait--take my girdle."

He tried to fumble with a mangled hand at his tatters, and Conan, understanding what he sought to convey, bent and drew from about his gory waist a girdle of curious aspect.

"Follow the golden vein through the abyss," muttered Khemsa. "Wear the girdle. I had it from a Stygian priest. It will aid you, though it failed me at last. Break the crystal globe with the four golden pomegranates. Beware of the Master's transmutations--I am going to Gitara--she is waiting for me in hell--aie, ya Skelos yar!" And so he died.

Conan stared down at the girdle. The hair of which it was woven was not horsehair. He was convinced that it was woven of the thick black tresses of a woman. Set in the thick mesh were tiny jewels such as he had never seen before. The buckle was strangely made, in the form of a golden serpent-head, flat, wedge-shaped and scaled with curious art. A strong shudder shook Conan as he handled it, and he turned as though to cast it over the precipice; then he hesitated, and finally buckled it about his waist, under the Bakhariot girdle. Then he mounted and pushed on.

The sun had sunk behind the crags. He climbed the trail in the vast shadow of the cliffs that was thrown out like a dark blue mantle over valleys and ridges far below. He was not far from the crest when, edging around the shoulder of a jutting crag, he heard the clink of shod hoofs ahead of him. He did not turn back. Indeed, so narrow was the path that the stallion could not have wheeled his great body upon it. He rounded the jut of the rock and came upon a portion of the path that broadened somewhat. A chorus of threatening yells broke on his ear, but his stallion pinned a terrified horse hard against the rock, and Conan caught the arm of the rider in an iron grip, checking the lifted sword in midair.

"Kerim Shah!" muttered Conan, red glints smoldering luridly in his eyes. The Turanian did not struggle; they sat their horses almost breast to breast, Conan's fingers locking the other's sword-arm. Behind Kerim Shah filed a group of lean Irakzai on gaunt horses. They glared like wolves, fingering bows and knives, but rendered uncertain because of the narrowness of the path and the perilous proximity of the abyss that yawned beneath them.

"Where is the Devi?" demanded Kerim Shah.

"What's it to you, you Hyrkanian spy?" snarled Conan.

"I know you have her," answered Kerim Shah. "I was on my way northward with some tribesmen when we were ambushed by enemies in Shalizah Pass. Many of my men were slain, and the rest of us harried through the hills like jackals. When we had beaten off our pursuers, we turned westward, toward Amir Jehun Pass, and this morning we came upon a Wazuli wandering through the hills. He was quite mad, but I learned much from his incoherent gibberings before he died. I learned that he was the sole survivor of a band which followed a chief of the Afghulis and a captive Kshatriya woman into a gorge behind Khurum village. He babbled much of a man in a green turban whom the Afghuh rode down, but who, when attacked by the Wazulis who pursued, smote them with a nameless doom that wiped them out as a gust of wind-driven fire wipes out a cluster of locusts.

"How that one man escaped, I do not know, nor did he; but I knew from his maunderings that Conan of Ghor had been in Khurum with his royal captive. And as we made our way through the hills, we overtook a naked Galzai girl bearing a gourd of water, who told us a tale of having been stripped and ravished by a giant foreigner in the garb of an Afghuli chief, who, she said, gave her garments to a Vendhyan woman who accompanied him. She said you rode westward."

Kerim Shah did not consider it necessary to explain that he had been on his way to keep his rendezvous with the expected troops from Secunderam when he found his way barred by hostile tribesmen. The road to Gurashah valley through Shalizah Pass was longer than the road that wound through Amir Jehun Pass, but the latter traversed part of the Afghuli country, which Kerim Shah had been anxious to avoid until he came with an army. Barred from the Shalizah road, however, he had turned to the forbidden route, until news that Conan had not yet reached Afghulistan with his captive had caused him to turn southward and push on recklessly in the hope of overtaking the Cimmerian in the hills.

"So you had better tell me where the Devi is," suggested Kerim Shah. "We outnumber you-"

"Let one of your dogs nock a shaft and I'll throw you over the cliff," Conan promised. "It wouldn't do you any good to kill me, anyhow. Five hundred Afghulis are on my trail, and if they find you've cheated them, they'll flay you alive. Anyway, I haven't got the Devi. She's in the hands of the Black Seers of Yimsha."

"Tarim!" swore Kerim Shah softly, shaken out of his poise for the first time. "Khemsa--"

"Khemsa's dead," grunted Conan. "His masters sent him to hell on a landslide. And now get out of my way. I'd be glad to kill you if I had the time, but I'm on my way to Yimsha."

"I'll go with you," said the Turanian abruptly.

Conan laughed at him. "Do you think I'd trust you, you Hyrkanian dog?"

"I don't ask you to," returned Kerim Shah. "We both want the Devi. You know my reason; King Yezdigerd desires to add her kingdom to his empire, and herself in his seraglio. And I knew you, in the days when you were a hetman of the kozak steppes; so I know your ambition is wholesale plunder. You want to loot Vendhya, and to twist out a huge ransom for Yasmina. Well, let us for the time being, without any illusion about each other, unite our forces, and try to rescue the Devi from the Seers. If we succeed, and live, we can fight it out to see who keeps her."

Conan narrowly scrutinized the other for a moment, and then nodded, releasing the Turanian's arm. "Agreed; what about your men?"

Kerim Shah turned to the silent Irakzai and spoke briefly: "This chief and I are going to Yimsha to fight the wizards. Will you go with us, or stay here to be flayed by the Afghulis who are following this man?"

They looked at him with eyes grimly fatalistic. They were doomed and they knew it--had known it ever since the singing arrows of the ambushed Dagozai had driven them back from the pass of Shalizah. The men of the lower Zhaibar had too many reeking bloodfeuds among the crag-dwellers. They were too small a band to fight their way back through the hills to the villages of the border, without the guidance of the crafty Turanian. They counted themselves as dead already, so they made the reply that only dead men would make: "We will go with thee and die on Yimsha."

"Then in Crom's name let us be gone," grunted Conan, fidgeting with impatience as he started into the blue gulfs of the deepening twilight. "My wolves were hours behind me, but we've lost a devilish lot of time."

Kerim Shah backed his steed from between the black stallion and the cliff, sheathed his sword and cautiously turned the horse. Presently the band was filing up the path as swiftly as they dared. They came out upon the crest nearly a mile east of the spot where Khemsa had halted the Cimmerian and the Devi. The path they had traversed was a perilous one, even for hill-men, and for that reason Conan had avoided it that day when carrying Yasmina, though Kerim Shah, following him, had taken it supposing the Cimmerian had done likewise. Even Conan sighed with relief when the horses scrambled up over the last rim. They moved like phantom riders through an enchanted realm of shadows. The soft creak of leather, the clink of steel marked their passing, then again the dark mountain slopes lay naked and silent in the starlight.

Chapter VIII

: Yasmina Knows Stark Terror

Yasmina had time but for one scream when she felt herself enveloped in that crimson whirl and torn from her protector with appalling force. She screamed once, and then she had no breath to scream. She was blinded, deafened, rendered mute and eventually senseless by the terrific rushing of the air about her. There was a dazed consciousness of dizzy height and numbing speed, a confused impression of natural sensations gone mad, and then vertigo and oblivion.

A vestige of these sensations clung to her as she recovered consciousness; so she cried out and clutched wildly as though to stay a headlong and involuntary flight. Her fingers closed on soft fabric, and a relieving sense of stability pervaded her. She took cognizance of her surroundings.

She was lying on a dais covered with black velvet. This dais stood in a great, dim room whose walls were hung with dusky tapestries across which crawled dragons reproduced with repellent realism. Floating shadows merely hinted at the lofty ceiling, and gloom that lent itself to illusion lurked in the corners. There seemed to be neither windows nor doors in the walls, or else they were concealed by the nighted tapestries. Where the dim light came from, Yasmina could not determine. The great room was a realm of mysteries, or shadows, and shadowy shapes in which she could not have sworn to observe movement, yet which invaded her mind with a dim and formless terror.

But her gaze fixed itself on a tangible object. On another, smaller dais of jet, a few feet away, a man sat cross-legged, gazing contemplatively at her. His long black velvet robe, embroidered with gold thread, fell loosely about him, masking his figure. His hands were folded in his sleeves. There was a velvet cap upon his head. His face was calm, placid, not unhandsome, his eyes lambent and slightly oblique. He did not move a muscle as he sat regarding her, nor did his expression alter when he saw she was conscious.

Yasmina felt fear crawl like a trickle of ice-water down her supple spine. She lifted herself on her elbows and stared apprehensively at the stranger.

"Who are you?" she demanded. Her voice sounded brittle and inadequate.

"I am the Master of Yimsha." The tone was rich and resonant, like the mellow tones of a temple bell.

"Why did you bring me here?" she demanded.

"Were you not seeking me?"

"If you are one of the Black Seers--yes!" she answered recklessly, believing that he could read her thoughts anyway.

He laughed softly, and chills crawled up and down her spine again.

"You would turn the wild children of the hills against the Seers of Yimsha!" He smiled. "I have read it in your mind, princess. Your weak, human mind, filled with petty dreams of hate and revenge."

"You slew my brother!" A rising tide of anger was vying with her fear; her hands were clenched, her lithe body rigid. "Why did you persecute him? He never harmed you. The priests say the Seers are above meddling in human affairs. Why did you destroy the king of Vendhya?"

"How can an ordinary human understand the motives of a Seer?" returned the Master calmly. "My acolytes in the temples of Turan, who are the priests behind the priests of Tarim, urged me to bestir myself in behalf of Yezdigerd. For reasons of my own, I complied. How can I explain my mystic reasons to your puny intellect? You could not understand."

"I understand this: that my brother died!" Tears of grief and rage shook in her voice. She rose upon her knees and stared at him with wide blazing eyes, as supple and dangerous in that moment as a she-panther.

"As Yezdigerd desired," agreed the Master calmly. "For a while it was my whim to further his ambitions."

"Is Yezdigerd your vassal?" Yasmina tried to keep the timbre of her voice unaltered. She had felt her knee pressing something hard and symmetrical under a fold of velvet. Subtly she shifted her position, moving her hand under the fold.

"Is the dog that licks up the offal in the temple yard the vassal of the god?" returned the Master.

He did not seem to notice the actions she sought to dissemble. Concealed by the velvet, her fingers closed on what she knew was the golden hilt of a dagger. She bent her head to hide the light of triumph in her eyes.

"I am weary of Yezdigerd," said the Master. "I have turned to other amusements--ha!"

With a fierce cry Yasmina sprang like a jungle cat, stabbing murderously. Then she stumbled and slid to the floor, where she cowered, staring up at the man on the dais. He had not moved; his cryptic smile was unchanged. Tremblingly she lifted her hand and stared at it with dilated eyes. There was no dagger in her fingers; they grasped a stalk of golden lotus, the crushed blossoms drooping on the bruised stem.

She dropped it as if it had been a viper, and scrambled away from the proximity of her tormenter. She returned to her own dais, because that was at least more dignified for a queen than groveling on the floor at the feet of a sorcerer, and eyed him apprehensively, expecting reprisals.

But the Master made no move.

"All substance is one to him who holds the key of the cosmos," he said cryptically. "To an adept nothing is immutable. At will, steel blossoms bloom in unnamed gardens, or flower-swords flash in the moonlight."

"You are a devil," she sobbed.

"Not I!" he laughed. "I was born on this planet, long ago. Once I was a common man, nor have I lost all human attributes in the numberless eons of my adeptship. A human steeped in the dark arts is greater than a devil. I am of human origin, but I rule demons. You have seen the Lords of the Black Circle--it would blast your soul to hear from what far realm I summoned them and from what doom I guard them with ensorcelled crystal and golden serpents.

"But only I can rule them. My foolish Khemsa thought to make himself great--poor fool, bursting material doors and hurtling himself and his mistress through the air from hill to hill! Yet if he had not been destroyed his power might have grown to rival mine."

He laughed again. "And you, poor, silly thing! Plotting to send a hairy hill chief to storm Yimsha! It was such a jest that I myself could have designed, had it occurred to me, that you should fall in his hands. And I read in your childish mind an intention to seduce by your feminine wiles to attempt your purpose, anyway.

"But for all your stupidity, you are a woman fair to look upon. It is my whim to keep you for my slave."

The daughter of a thousand proud emperors gasped with shame and fury at the word.

"You dare not!"

His mocking laughter cut her like a whip across her naked shoulders.

"The king dares not trample a worm in the road? Little fool, do you not realize that your royal pride is no more than a straw blown on the wind? I, who have known the kisses of the queens of Hell! You have seen how I deal with a rebel!"

Cowed and awed, the girl crouched on the velvet-covered dais. The light grew dimmer and more phantom-like. The features of the Master became shadowy. His voice took on a newer tone of command.

"I will never yield to you!" Her voice trembled with fear but it carried a ring of resolution.

"You will yield," he answered with horrible conviction. "Fear and pain shall teach you. I will lash you with horror and agony to the last quivering ounce of your endurance, until you become as melted wax to be bent and molded in my hands as I desire. You shall know such discipline as no mortal woman ever knew, until my slightest command is to you as the unalterable will of the gods. And first, to humble your pride, you shall travel back through the lost ages, and view all the shapes that have been you. Aie, yil la khosa!"

At these words the shadowy room swam before Yasmina's affrighted gaze. The roots of her hair prickled her scalp, and her tongue clove to her palate. Somewhere a gong sounded a deep, ominous note. The dragons on the tapestries glowed like blue fire, and then faded out. The Master on his dais was but a shapeless shadow. The dim light gave way to soft, thick darkness, almost tangible, that pulsed with strange radiations. She could no longer see the Master. She could see nothing. She had a strange sensation that the walls and ceiling had withdrawn immensely from her.

Then somewhere in the darkness a glow began, like a firefly that rhythmically dimmed and quickened. It grew to a golden ball, and as it expanded its light grew more intense, flaming whitely. It burst suddenly, showering the darkness with white sparks that did not illumine the shadows. But like an impression left in the gloom, a faint luminance remained, and revealed a slender dusky shaft shooting up from the shadowy floor. Under the girl's dilated gaze it spread, took shape; stems and broad leaves appeared, and great black poisonous blossoms that towered above her as she cringed against the velvet. A subtle perfume pervaded the atmosphere. It was the dread figure of the black lotus that had grown up as she watched, as it grows in the haunted, forbidden jungles of Khitai.

The broad leaves were murmurous with evil life. The blossoms bent toward her like sentient things, nodding serpentlike on pliant stems. Etched against soft, impenetrable darkness it loomed over her, gigantic, blackly visible in some mad way. Her brain reeled with the drugging scent and she sought to crawl from the dais. Then she clung to it as it seemed to be pitching at an impossible slant. She cried out with terror and clung to the velvet, but she felt her fingers ruthlessly torn away. There was a sensation as of all sanity and stability crumbling and vanishing. She was a quivering atom of sentiency driven through a black, roaring, icy void by a thundering wind that threatened to extinguish her feeble flicker of animate life like a candle blown out in a storm.

Then there came a period of blind impulse and movement, when the atom that was she mingled and merged with myriad other atoms of spawning life in the yeasty morass of existence, molded by formative forces until she emerged again a conscious individual, whirling down an endless spiral of lives.

In a mist of terror she relived all her former existences, recognized and was again all the bodies that had carried her ego throughout the changing ages. She bruised her feet again over the long, weary road of life that stretched out behind her into the immemorial past. Back beyond the dimmest dawns of Time she crouched shuddering in primordial jungles, hunted by slavering beasts of prey. Skin-clad, she waded thigh-deep in rice swamps, battling with squawking water-fowl for the precious grains. She labored with the oxen to drag the pointed stick through the stubborn soil, and she crouched endlessly over looms in peasant huts.

She saw walled cities burst into flame, and fled screaming before the slayers. She reeled naked and bleeding over burning sands, dragged at the slaver's stirrup, and she knew the grip of hot, fierce hands on her writhing flesh, the shame and agony of brutal lust. She screamed under the bite of the lash, and moaned on the rack; mad with terror she fought against the hands that forced her head inexorably down on the bloody block.

She knew the agonies of childbirth, and the bitterness of love betrayed. She suffered all the woes and wrongs and brutalities that man has inflicted on woman throughout the eons; and she endured all the spite and malice of women for woman. And like the flick of a fiery whip throughout was the consciousness she retained of her Devi-ship. She was all the women she had ever been, yet in her knowing she was Yasmina. This consciousness was not lost in the throes of reincarnation. At one and the same time she was a naked slave-wench groveling under the whip, and the proud Devi of Vendhya. And she suffered not only as the slave-girl suffered, but as Yasmina, to whose pride the whip was like a white-hot brand.

Life merged into life in flying chaos, each with its burden of woe and shame and agony, until she dimly heard her own voice screaming unbearably, like one long-drawn cry of suffering echoing down the ages.

Then she awakened on the velvet-covered dais in the mystic room.

In a ghostly gray light she saw again the dais and the cryptic robed figure seated upon it. The hooded head was bent, the high shoulders faintly etched against the uncertain dimness. She could make out no details clearly, but the hood, where the velvet cap had been, stirred a formless uneasiness in her. As she stared, there stole over her a nameless fear that froze her tongue to her palate--a feeling that it was not the Master who sat so silently on that black dais.

Then the figure moved and rose upright, towering above her. It stooped over her and the long arms in their wide black sleeves bent about her. She fought against them in speechless fright, surprized by their lean hardness. The hooded head bent down toward her averted face. And she screamed, and screamed again in poignant fear and loathing. Bony arms gripped her lithe body, and from that hood looked forth a countenance of death and decay--features like rotting parchment on a moldering skull.

She screamed again, and then, as those champing, grinning jaws bent toward her lips, she lost consciousness . . .

Chapter IX
: The Castle of the Wizard

The sun had risen over the white Himelian peaks. At the foot of a long slope a group of horsemen halted and stared upward. High above them a stone tower poised on the pitch of the mountainside. Beyond and above that gleamed the walls of a greater keep, near the line where the snow began that capped Yimsha's pinnacle. There was a touch of unreality about the whole--purple slopes pitching up to that fantastic castle, toylike with distance, and above it the white glistening peak shouldering the cold blue.

"We'll leave the horses here," grunted Conan. "That treacherous slope is safer for a man on foot. Besides, they're done."

He swung down from the black stallion which stood with wide-braced legs and drooping head. They had pushed hard throughout the night, gnawing at scraps from saddle-bags, and pausing only to give the horses the rests they had to have.

"That first tower is held by the acolytes of the Black Seers," said Conan. "Or so men say; watch-dogs for their masters--lesser sorcerers. They won't sit sucking their thumbs as we climb this slope."

Kerim Shah glanced up the mountain, then back the way they had come; they were already far up Yimsha's side, and a vast expanse of lesser peaks and crags spread out beneath them. Among these labyrinths the Turanian sought in vain for a movement of color that would betray men. Evidently the pursuing Afghulis had lost their chief's trail in the night.

"Let us go, then." They tied the weary horses in a clump of tamarisk and without further comment turned up the slope. There was no cover. It was a naked incline, strewn with boulders not big enough to conceal a man. But they did conceal something else.

The party had not gone fifty steps when a snarling shape burst from behind a rock. It was one of the gaunt savage dogs that infested the hill villages, and its eyes glared redly, its jaws dripped foam. Conan was leading, but it did not attack him. It dashed past him and leaped at Kerim Shah. The Turanian leaped aside, and the great dog flung itself upon the Irakzai behind him. The man yelled and threw up his arm, which was torn by the brute's fangs as it bore him backward, and the next instant half a dozen tulwars were hacking at the beast. Yet not until it was literally dismembered did the hideous creature cease its efforts to seize and rend its attackers.

Kerim Shah bound up the wounded warrior's gashed arm, looked at him narrowly, and then turned away without a word. He rejoined Conan, and they renewed the climb in silence.

Presently Kerim Shah said: "Strange to find a village dog in this place."

"There's no offal here," grunted Conan.

Both turned their heads to glance back at the wounded warrior toiling after them among his companions. Sweat glistened on his dark face and his lips were drawn back from his teeth in a grimace of pain. Then both looked again at the stone tower squatting above them.

A slumberous quiet lay over the uplands. The tower showed no sign of life, nor did the strange pyramidal structure beyond it. But the men who toiled upward went with the tenseness of men walking on the edge of a crater. Kerim Shah had unslung the powerful Turanian bow that killed at five hundred paces, and the Irakzai looked to their own lighter and less lethal bows.

But they were not within bow-shot of the tower when something shot down out of the sky without warning. It passed so close to Conan that he felt the wind of rushing wings, but it was an Irakzai who staggered and fell, blood jetting from a severed jugular. A hawk with wings like burnished steel shot up again, blood dripping from the scimitar-beak, to reel against the sky as Kerim Shah's bowstring twanged. It dropped like a plummet, but no man saw where it struck the earth.

Conan bent over the victim of the attack, but the man was already dead. No one spoke; useless to comment on the fact that never before had a hawk been known to swoop on a man. Red rage began to vie with fatalistic lethargy in the wild souls of the Irakzai. Hairy fingers nocked arrows and men glared vengefully at the tower whose very silence mocked them.

But the next attack came swiftly. They all saw it--a white puffball of smoke that tumbled over the tower-rim and came drifting and rolling down the slope toward them. Others followed it. They seemed harmless, mere woolly globes of cloudy foam, but Conan stepped aside to avoid contact with the first. Behind him one of the Irakzai reached out and thrust his sword into the unstable mass. Instantly a sharp report shook the mountainside. There was a burst of blinding flame, and then the puffball had vanished, and the too-curious warrior remained only a heap of charred and blackened bones. The crisped hand still gripped the ivory sword-hilt, but the blade was gone melted and destroyed by that awful heat. Yet men standing almost within reach of the victim had not suffered except to be dazzled and half blinded by the sudden flare.

"Steel touches it off," grunted Conan. "Look out--here they come!"

The slope above them was almost covered by the billowing spheres. Kerim Shah bent his bow and sent a shaft into the mass, and those touched by the arrow burst like bubbles in spurting flame. His men followed his example and for the next few minutes it was as if a thunderstorm raged on the mountain slope, with bolts of lightning striking and bursting in showers of flame. When the barrage ceased, only a few arrows were left in the quivers of the archers.

They pushed on grimly, over soil charred and blackened, where the naked rock had in places been turned to lava by the explosion of those diabolical bombs.

Now they were almost within arrow-flight of the silent tower, and they spread their line, nerves taut, ready for any horror that might descend upon them.

On the tower appeared a single figure, lifting a ten-foot bronze horn. Its strident bellow roared out across the echoing slopes, like the blare of trumpets on judgment Day. And it began to be fearfully answered. The ground trembled under the feet of the invaders, and rumblings and grindings welled up from the subterranean depths.

The Irakzai screamed, reeling like drunken men on the shuddering slope, and Conan, eyes glaring, charged recklessly up the incline, knife in hand, straight at the door that showed in the tower-wall. Above him the great horn roared and bellowed in brutish mockery. And then Kerim Shah drew a shaft to his ear and loosed.

Only a Turanian could have made that shot. The bellowing of the horn ceased suddenly, and a high, thin scream shrilled in its place. The green-robed figure on the tower staggered, clutching at the long shaft which quivered in its bosom, and then pitched across the parapet. The great horn tumbled upon the battlement and hung precariously, and another robed figure rushed to seize it, shrieking in horror. Again the Turanian bow twanged, and again it was answered by a death-howl. The second acolyte, in falling, struck the horn with his elbow and knocked it clattering over the parapet to shatter on the rocks far below.

At such headlong speed had Conan covered the ground that before the clattering echoes of that fall had died away, he was hacking at the door. Warned by his savage instinct, he gave back suddenly as a tide of molten lead splashed down from above. But the next instant he was back again, attacking the panels with redoubled fury. He was galvanized by the fact that his enemies had resorted to earthly weapons. The sorcery of the acolytes was limited. Their necromantic resources might well be exhausted.

Kerim Shah was hurrying up the slope, his hill-men behind him in a straggling crescent. They loosed as they ran, their arrows splintering against the walls or arching over the parapet.

The heavy teak portal gave way beneath the Cimmerian's assault, and he peered inside warily, expecting anything. He was looking into a circular chamber from which a stair wound upward. On the opposite side of the chamber a door gaped open, revealing the outer slope--and the backs of half a dozen green-robed figures in full retreat.

Conan yelled, took a step into the tower, and then native caution jerked him back, just as a great block of stone fell crashing to the floor where his foot had been an instant before. Shouting to his followers, he raced around the tower.

The acolytes had evacuated their first line of defence. As Conan rounded the tower he saw their green robes twinkling up the mountain ahead of him. He gave chase, panting with earnest blood-lust, and behind him Kerim Shah and the Irakzai came pelting, the latter yelling like wolves at the flight of their enemies, their fatalism momentarily submerged by temporary triumph.

The tower stood on the lower edge of a narrow plateau whose upward slant was barely perceptible. A few hundred yards away this plateau ended abruptly in a chasm which had been invisible farther down the mountain. Into this chasm the acolytes apparently leaped without checking their speed. Their pursuers saw the green robes flutter and disappear over the edge.

A few moments later they themselves were standing on the brink of the mighty moat that cut them off from the castle of the Black Seers. It was a sheer-walled ravine that extended in either direction as far as they could see, apparently girdling the mountain, some four hundred yards in width and five hundred feet deep. And in it, from rim to rim, a strange, translucent mist sparkled and shimmered.

Looking down, Conan grunted. Far below him, moving across the glimmering floor, which shone like burnished silver, he saw the forms of the green-robed acolytes. Their outline was wavering and indistinct, like figures seen under deep water. They walked in single file, moving toward the opposite wall.

Kerim Shah nocked an arrow and sent it singing downward. But when it struck the mist that filled the chasm it seemed to lose momentum and direction, wandering widely from its course.

"If they went down, so can we!" grunted Conan, while Kerim Shah stared after his shaft in amazement. "I saw them last at this spot-"

Squinting down he saw something shining like a golden thread across the canyon floor far below. The acolytes seemed to be following this thread, and there suddenly came to him Khemsa's cryptic words--"Follow the golden vein!" On the brink, under his very hand as he crouched, he found it, a thin vein of sparkling gold running from an outcropping of ore to the edge and down across the silvery floor. And he found something else, which had before been invisible to him because of the peculiar refraction of the light. The gold vein followed a narrow ramp which slanted down into the ravine, fitted with niches for hand and foot hold.

"Here's where they went down," he grunted to Kerim Shah. "They're no adepts, to waft themselves through the air! We'll follow them-"

It was at that instant that the man who had been bitten by the mad dog cried out horribly and leaped at Kerim Shah, foaming and gnashing his teeth. The Turanian, quick as a cat on his feet, sprang aside and the madman pitched head-first over the brink. The others rushed to the edge and glared after him in amazement. The maniac did not fall plummet-like. He floated slowly down through the rosy haze like a man sinking in deep water. His limbs moved like a man trying to swim, and his features were purple and convulsed beyond the contortions of his madness. Far down at last on the shining floor his body settled and lay still.

"There's death in that chasm," muttered Kerim Shah, drawing back from the rosy mist that shimmered almost at his feet. "What now, Conan?"

"On!" answered the Cimmerian grimly. "Those acolytes are human; if the mist doesn't kill them, it won't kill me."

He hitched his belt, and his hands touched the girdle Khemsa had given him; he scowled, then smiled bleakly. He had forgotten that girdle; yet thrice had death passed him by to strike another victim.

The acolytes had reached the farther wall and were moving up it like great green flies. Letting himself upon the ramp, he descended warily. The rosy cloud lapped about his ankles, ascending as he lowered himself. It reached his knees, his thighs, his waist, his arm-pits. He felt as one feels a thick heavy fog on a damp night. With it lapping about his chin he hesitated, and then ducked under. Instantly his breath ceased; all air was shut off from him and he felt his ribs caving in on his vitals. With a frantic effort he heaved himself up, fighting for life. His head rose above the surface and he drank air in great gulps.

Kerim Shah leaned down toward him, spoke to him, but Conan neither heard nor heeded. Stubbornly, his mind fixed on what the dying Khemsa had told him, the Cimmerian groped for the gold vein, and found that he had moved off it in his descent. Several series of hand-holds were niched in the ramp. Placing himself directly over the thread, he began climbing down once more. The rosy mist rose about him, engulfed him. Now his head was under, but he was still drinking pure air. Above him he saw his companions staring down at him, their features blurred by the haze that shimmered over his head. He gestured for them to follow, and went down swiftly, without waiting to see whether they complied or not.

Kerim Shah sheathed his sword without comment and followed, and the Irakzai, more fearful of being left alone than of the terrors that might lurk below, scrambled after him. Each man clung to the golden thread as they saw the Cimmerian do.

Down the slanting ramp they went to the ravine floor and moved out across the shining level, treading the gold vein like rope-walkers. It was as if they walked along an invisible tunnel through which air circulated freely. They felt death pressing in on them above and on either hand, but it did not touch them.

The vein crawled up a similar ramp on the other wall up which the acolytes had disappeared, and up it they went with taut nerves, not knowing what might be waiting for them among the jutting spurs of rock that fanged the lip of the precipice.

It was the green-robed acolytes who awaited them, with knives in their hands. Perhaps they had reached the limits to which they could retreat. Perhaps the Stygian girdle about Conan's waist could have told why their necromantic spells had proven so weak and so quickly exhausted. Perhaps it was knowledge of death decreed for failure that sent them leaping from among the rocks, eyes glaring and knives glittering, resorting in their desperation to material weapons.

There among the rocky fangs on the precipice lip was no war of wizard craft. It was a whirl of blades, where real steel bit and real blood spurted, where sinewy arms dealt forthright blows that severed quivering flesh, and men went down to be trodden under foot as the fight raged over them.

One of the Irakzai bled to death among the rocks, but the acolytes were down--slashed and hacked asunder or hurled over the edge to float sluggishly down to the silver floor that shone so far below.

Then the conquerors shook blood and sweat from their eyes, and looked at one another. Conan and Kerim Shah still stood upright, and four of the Irakzai.

They stood among the rocky teeth that serrated the precipice brink, and from that spot a path wound up a gentle slope to a broad stair, consisting of half a dozen steps, a hundred feet across, cut out of a green jade-like substance. They led up to a broad stage or roofless gallery of the same polished stone, and above it rose, tier upon tier, the castle of the Black Seers. It seemed to have been carved out of the sheer stone of the mountain. The architecture was faultless, but unadorned. The many casements were barred and masked with curtains within. There was no sign of life, friendly or hostile.

They went up the path in silence, and warily as men treading the lair of a serpent. The Irakzai were dumb, like men marching to a certain doom. Even Kerim Shah was silent. Only Conan seemed unaware what a monstrous dislocating and uprooting of accepted thought and action their invasion constituted, what an unprecedented violation of tradition. He was not of the East; and he came of a breed who fought devils and wizards as promptly and matter-of-factly as they battled human foes.

He strode up the shining stairs and across the wide green gallery straight toward the great golden-bound teak door that opened upon it. He cast but a single glance upward at the higher tiers of the great pyramidal structure towering above him. He reached a hand for the bronze prong that jutted like a handle from the door--then checked himself, grinning hardly. The handle was made in the shape of a serpent, head lifted on arched neck; and Conan had a suspicion that that metal head would come to grisly life under his hand.

He struck it from the door with one blow, and its bronze clink on the glassy floor did not lessen his caution. He flipped it aside with his knife-point, and again turned to the door. Utter silence reigned over the towers. Far below them the mountain slopes fell away into a purple haze of distance. The sun glittered on snow-clad peaks on either hand. High above, a vulture hung like a black dot in the cold blue of the sky. But for it, the men before the gold-bound door were the only evidence of life, tiny figures on a green jade gallery poised on the dizzy height, with that fantastic pile of stone towering above them.

A sharp wind off the snow slashed them, whipping their tatters about. Conan's long knife splintering through the teak panels roused the startled echoes. Again and again he struck, hewing through polished wood and metal bands alike. Through the sundered ruins he glared into the interior, alert and suspicious as a wolf. He saw a broad chamber, the polished stone walls untapestried, the mosaic floor uncarpeted. Square, polished ebon stools and a stone dais formed the only furnishings. The room was empty of human life. Another door showed in the opposite wall.

"Leave a man on guard outside," grunted Conan. "I'm going in."

Kerim Shah designated a warrior for that duty, and the man fell back toward the middle of the gallery, bow in hand. Conan strode into the castle, followed by the Turanian and the three remaining Irakzai. The one outside spat, grumbled in his beard, and started suddenly as a low mocking laugh reached his ears.

He lifted his head and saw, on the tier above him, a tall, blackrobed figure, naked head nodding slightly as he stared down. His whole attitude suggested mockery and malignity. Quick as a flash the Irakzai bent his bow and loosed, and the arrow streaked upward to strike full in the black-robed breast. The mocking smile did not alter. The Seer plucked out the missile and threw it back at the bowman, not as a weapon is hurled, but with a contemptuous gesture. The Irakzai dodged, instinctively throwing up his arm. His fingers closed on the revolving shaft.

Then he shrieked. In his hand the wooden shaft suddenly writhed. Its rigid outline became pliant, melting in his grasp. He tried to throw it from him, but it was too late. He held a living serpent in his naked hand, and already it had coiled about his wrist and its wicked wedge-shaped head darted at his muscular arm. He screamed again and his eyes became distended, his features purple. He went to his knees shaken by an awful convulsion, and then lay still.

The men inside had wheeled at his first cry. Conan took a swift stride toward the open doorway, and then halted short, baffled. To the men behind him it seemed that he strained against empty air. But though he could see nothing, there was a slick, smooth, hard surface under his hands, and he knew that a sheet of crystal had been let down in the doorway. Through it he saw the Irakzai lying motionless on the glassy gallery, an ordinary arrow sticking in his arm.

Conan lifted his knife and smote, and the watchers were dumbfounded to see his blow checked apparently in midair, with the loud clang of steel that meets an unyielding substance. He wasted no more effort. He knew that not even the legendary tulwar of Amir Khurum could shatter that invisible curtain.

In a few words he explained the matter to Kerim Shah, and the Turanian shrugged his shoulders. "Well, if our exit is barred, we must find another. In the meanwhile our way lies forward, does it not?"

With a grunt the Cimmerian turned and strode across the chamber to the opposite door, with a feeling of treading on the threshold of doom. As he lifted his knife to shatter the door, it swung silently open as if of its own accord. He strode into the great hall, flanked with tall glassy columns. A hundred feet from the door began the broad jade-green steps of a stair that tapered toward the top like the side of a pyramid. What lay beyond that stair he could not tell. But between him and its shimmering foot stood a curious altar of gleaming black jade. Four great golden serpents twined their tails about this altar and reared their wedge-shaped heads in the air, facing the four quarters of the compass like the enchanted guardians of a fabled treasure. But on the altar, between the arching necks, stood only a crystal globe filled with a cloudy smoke-like substance, in which floated four golden pomegranates.

The sight stirred some dim recollection in his mind; then Conan heeded the altar no longer, for on the lower steps of the stair stood four black-robed figures. He had not seen them come. They were simply there, tall, gaunt, their vulture-heads nodding in unison, their feet and hands hidden by their flowing garments.

One lifted his arm and the sleeve fell away revealing his hand--and it was not a hand at all. Conan halted in mid-stride, compelled against his will. He had encountered a force differing subtly from Khemsa's mesmerism, and he could not advance, though he felt it in his power to retreat if he wished. His companions had likewise halted, and they seemed even more helpless than he, unable to move in either direction.

The seer whose arm was lifted beckoned to one of the Irakzai, and the man moved toward him like one in a trance, eyes staring and fixed, blade hanging in limp fingers. As he pushed past Conan, the Cimmerian threw an arm across his breast to arrest him. Conan was so much stronger than the Irakzai that in ordinary circumstances he could have broken his spine between his hands. But now the muscular arm was brushed aside like straw and the Irakzai moved toward the stair, treading jerkily and mechanically. He reached the steps and knelt stiffly, proffering his blade and bending his head. The Seer took the sword. It flashed as he swung it up and down. The Irakzai's head tumbled from his shoulders and thudded heavily on the black marble floor. An arch of blood jetted from the severed arteries and the body slumped over and lay with arms spread wide.

Again a malformed hand lifted and beckoned, and another Irakzai stumbled stiffly to his doom. The ghastly drama was reenacted and another headless form lay beside the first.

As the third tribesman clumped his way past Conan to his death, the Cimmerian, his veins bulging in his temples with his efforts to break past the unseen barrier that held him, was suddenly aware of allied forces, unseen, but waking into life about him. This realization came without warning, but so powerfully that he could not doubt his instinct. His left hand slid involuntarily under his Bakhariot belt and closed on the Stygian girdle. And as he gripped it he felt new strength flood his numbed limbs; the will to live was a pulsing white-hot fire, matched by the intensity of his burning rage.

The third Irakzai was a decapitated corpse, and the hideous finger was lifting again when Conan felt the bursting of the invisible barrier. A fierce, involuntary cry burst from his lips as he leaped with the explosive suddenness of pent-up ferocity. His left hand gripped the sorcerer's girdle as a drowning man grips a floating log, and the long knife was a sheen of light in his right. The men on the steps did not move. They watched calmly, cynically; if they felt surprise they did not show it. Conan did not allow himself to think what might chance when he came within knife-reach of them. His blood was pounding in his temples, a mist of crimson swam before his sight. He was afire with the urge to kill--to drive his knife deep into flesh and bone, and twist the blade in blood and entrails.

Another dozen strides would carry him to the steps where the sneering demons stood. He drew his breath deep, his fury rising redly as his charge gathered momentum. He was hurtling past the altar with its golden serpents when like a levin-flash there shot across his mind again as vividly as if spoken in his external ear, the cryptic words of Khemsa: "Break the crystal ball."

His reaction was almost without his own volition. Execution followed impulse so spontaneously that the greatest sorcerer of the age would not have had time to read his mind and prevent his action. Wheeling like a cat from his headlong charge, he brought his knife crashing down upon the crystal. Instantly the air vibrated with a peal of terror, whether from the stairs, the altar, or the crystal itself he could not tell. Hisses filled his ears as the golden serpents, suddenly vibrant with hideous life, writhed and smote at him. But he was fired to the speed of a maddened tiger. A whirl of steel sheared through the hideous trunks that waved toward him, and he smote the crystal sphere again and yet again. And the globe burst with a noise like a thunderclap, raining fiery shards on the black marble, and the gold pomegranates, as if released from captivity, shot upward toward the lofty roof and were gone.

A mad screaming, bestial and ghastly, was echoing through the great hall. On the steps writhed four black-robed figures, twisting in convulsions, froth dripping from their livid mouths. Then with one frenzied crescendo of inhuman ululation they stiffened and lay still, and Conan knew that they were dead. He stared down at the altar and the crystal shards. Four headless golden serpents still coiled about the altar, but no alien life now animated the dully gleaming metal.

Kerim Shah was rising slowly from his knees, whither he had been dashed by some unseen force. He shook his head to clear the ringing from his ears.

"Did you hear that crash when you struck? It was as if a thousand crystal panels shattered all over the castle as that globe burst. Were the souls of the wizards imprisoned in those golden balls?--Ha!"

Conan wheeled as Kerim Shah drew his sword and pointed.

Another figure stood at the head of the stair. His robe, too, was black, but of richly embroidered velvet, and there was a velvet cap on his head. His face was calm, and not unhandsome.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Conan, staring up at him, knife in hand.

"I am the Master of Yimsha!" His voice was like the chime of a temple bell, but a note of cruel mirth ran through it.

"Where is Yasmina?" demanded Kerim Shah.

The Master laughed down at him.

"What is that to you, dead man? Have you so quickly forgotten my strength, once lent to you, that you come armed against me, you poor fool? I think I will take your heart, Kerim Shah!"

He held out his hand as if to receive something, and the Turanian cried out sharply like a man in mortal agony. He reeled drunkenly, and then, with a splintering of bones, a rending of flesh and muscle and a snapping of mail-links, his breast burst outward with a shower of blood, and through the ghastly aperture something red and dripping shot through the air into the Master's outstretched hand, as a bit of steel leaps to the magnet. The Turanian slumped to the floor and lay motionless, and the Master laughed and hurled the object to fall before Conan's feet--a still-quivering human heart.

With a roar and a curse Conan charged the stair. From Khemsa's girdle he felt strength and deathless hate flow into him to combat the terrible emanation of power that met him on the steps. The air filled with a shimmering steely haze through which he plunged like a swimmer, head lowered, left arm bent about his face, knife gripped low in his right hand. His half-blinded eyes, glaring over the crook of his elbow, made out the hated shape of the Seer before and above him, the outline wavering as a reflection wavers in disturbed water.

He was racked and torn by forces beyond his comprehension, but he felt a driving power outside and beyond his own lifting him inexorably upward and onward, despite the wizard's strength and his own agony.

Now he had reached the head of the stairs, and the Master's face floated in the steely haze before him, and a strange fear shadowed the inscrutable eyes. Conan waded through the mist as through a surf, and his knife lunged upward like a live thing. The keen point ripped the Master's robe as he sprang back with a low cry. Then before Conan's gaze, the wizard vanished--simply disappeared like a burst bubble, and something long and undulating darted up one of the smaller stairs that led up to left and right from the landing.

Conan charged after it, up the left-hand stair, uncertain as to just what he had seen whip up those steps, but in a berserk mood that drowned the nausea and horror whispering at the back of his consciousness.

He plunged out into a broad corridor whose uncarpeted floor and untapestried walls were of polished jade, and something long and swift whisked down the corridor ahead of him, and into a curtained door. From within the chamber rose a scream of urgent terror. The sound lent wings to Conan's flying feet and he hurtled through the curtains and headlong into the chamber within.

A frightful scene met his glare. Yasmina cowered on the farther edge of a velvet-covered dais, screaming her loathing and horror, an arm lifted as if to ward off attack, while before her swayed the hideous head of a giant serpent, shining neck arching up from dark-gleaming coils. With a choked cry Conan threw his knife.

Instantly the monster whirled and was upon him like the rush of wind through tall grass. The long knife quivered in its neck, point and a foot of blade showing on one side, and the hilt and a hand's-breadth of steel on the other, but it only seemed to madden the giant reptile. The great head towered above the man who faced it, and then darted down, the venom-dripping jaws gaping wide. But Conan had plucked a dagger from his girdle and he stabbed upward as the head dipped down. The point tore through the lower jaw and transfixed the upper, pinning them together. The next instant the great trunk had looped itself about the Cimmerian as the snake, unable to use its fangs, employed its remaining form of attack.

Conan's left arm was pinioned among the bone-crushing folds, but his right was free. Bracing his feet to keep upright, he stretched forth his hand, gripped the hilt of the long knife jutting from the serpent's neck, and tore it free in a shower of blood. As if divining his purpose with more than bestial intelligence, the snake writhed and knotted, seeking to cast its loops about his right arm. But with the speed of light the long knife rose and fell, shearing halfway through the reptile's giant trunk.

Before he could strike again, the great pliant loops fell from him and the monster dragged itself across the floor, gushing blood from its ghastly wounds. Conan sprang after it, knife lifted, but his vicious swipe cut empty air as the serpent writhed away from him and struck its blunt nose against a paneled screen of sandalwood. One of the panels gave inward and the long, bleeding barrel whipped through it and was gone.

Conan instantly attacked the screen. A few blows rent it apart and he glared into the dim alcove beyond. No horrific shape coiled there; there was blood on the marble floor, and bloody tracks led to a cryptic arched door. Those tracks were of a man's bare feet . . .

"Conan!" He wheeled back into the chamber just in time to catch the Devi of Vendhya in his arms as she rushed across the room and threw herself upon him, catching him about the neck with a frantic clasp, half hysterical with terror and gratitude and relief.

His wild blood had been stirred to its uttermost by all that had passed. He caught her to him in a grasp that would have made her wince at another time, and crushed her lips with his. She made no resistance; the Devi was drowned in the elemental woman. She closed her eyes and drank in his fierce, hot, lawless kisses with all the abandon of passionate thirst. She was panting with his violence when he ceased for breath, and glared down at her lying limp in his mighty arms.

"I knew you'd come for me," she murmured. "You would not leave me in this den of devils."

At her words recollection of their environment came to him suddenly. He lifted his head and listened intently. Silence reigned over the castle of Yimsha, but it was a silence impregnated with menace. Peril crouched in every corner, leered invisibly from every hanging.

"We'd better go while we can," he muttered. "Those cuts were enough to kill any common beast--or man--but a wizard has a dozen lives. Wound one, and he writhes away like a crippled snake to soak up fresh venom from some source of sorcery."

He picked up the girl and carrying her in his arms like a child, he strode out into the gleaming jade corridor and down the stairs, nerves tautly alert for any sign or sound.

"I met the Master," she whispered, clinging to him and shuddering. "He worked his spells on me to break my will. The most awful thing was a moldering corpse which seized me in its arms--I fainted then and lay as one dead, I do not know how long. Shortly after I regained consciousness I heard sounds of strife below, and cries, and then that snake came slithering through the curtains--ah!" She shook at the memory of that horror. "I knew somehow that it was not an illusion, but a real serpent that sought my life."

"It was not a shadow, at least," answered Conan cryptically. "He knew he was beaten, and chose to slay you rather than let you be rescued."

"What do you mean, he?" she asked uneasily, and then shrank against him, crying out, and forgetting her question. She had seen the corpses at the foot of the stairs. Those of the Seers were not good to look at; as they lay twisted and contorted, their hands and feet were exposed to view, and at the sight Yasmina went livid and hid her face against Conan's powerful shoulder.

Chapter X

: Yasmina and Conan

Conan passed through the hall quickly enough, traversed the outer chamber and approached the door that led upon the gallery. Then he saw the floor sprinkled with tiny, glittering shards. The crystal sheet that had covered the doorway had been shivered to bits, and he remembered the crash that had accompanied the shattering of the crystal globe. He believed that every piece of crystal in the castle had broken at that instant, and some dim instinct or memory of esoteric lore vaguely suggested the truth of the monstrous connection between the Lords of the Black Circle and the golden pomegranates. He felt the short hair bristle chilly at the back of his neck and put the matter hastily out of his mind.

He breathed a deep sigh of relief as he stepped out upon the green jade gallery. There was still the gorge to cross, but at least he could see the white peaks glistening in the sun, and the long slopes falling away into the distant blue hazes.

The Irakzai lay where he had fallen, an ugly blotch on the glassy smoothness. As Conan strode down the winding path, he was surprised to note the position of the sun. It had not yet passed its zenith; and yet it seemed to him that hours had passed since he plunged into the castle of the Black Seers.

He felt an urge to hasten, not a mere blind panic, but an instinct of peril growing behind his back. He said nothing to Yasmina, and she seemed content to nestle her dark head against his arching breast and find security in the clasp of his iron arms. He paused an instant on the brink of the chasm, frowning down. The haze which danced in the gorge was no longer rose-hued and sparkling. It was smoky, dim, ghostly, like the life-tide that flickered thinly in a wounded man. The thought came vaguely to Conan that the spells of magicians were more closely bound to their personal beings than were the actions of common men to the actors.

But far below, the floor shone like tarnished silver, and the gold thread sparkled undimmed. Conan shifted Yasmina across his shoulder, where she lay docilely, and began the descent. Hurriedly he descended the ramp, and hurriedly he fled across the echoing floor. He had a conviction that they were racing with time, that their chances of survival depended upon crossing that gorge of horrors before the wounded Master of the castle should regain enough power to loose some other doom upon them.

When he toiled up the farther ramp and came out upon the crest, he breathed a gusty sigh of relief and stood Yasmina upon her feet.

"You walk from here," he told her; "it's downhill all the way."

She stole a glance at the gleaming pyramid across the chasm; it reared up against the snowy slope like the citadel of silence and immemorial evil.

"Are you a magician, that you have conquered the Black Seers of Yimsha, Conan of Ghor?" she asked, as they went down the path, with his heavy arm about her supple waist.

"It was a girdle Khemsa gave me before he died," Conan answered. "Yes, I found him on the trail. It is a curious one, which I'll show you when I have time. Against some spells it was weak, but against others it was strong, and a good knife is always a hearty incantation."

"But if the girdle aided you in conquering the Master," she argued, "why did it not aid Khemsa?"

He shook his head. "Who knows? But Khemsa had been the Master's slave; perhaps that weakened its magic. He had no hold on me as he had on Khemsa. Yet I can't say that I conquered him. He retreated, but I have a feeling that we haven't seen the last of him. I want to put as many miles between us and his lair as we can."

He was further relieved to find horses tethered among the tamarisks as he had left them. He loosed them swiftly and mounted the black stallion, swinging the girl up before him. The others followed, freshened by their rest.

"And what now?" she asked. "To Afghulistan?"

"Not just now!" He grinned hardly. "Somebody--maybe the governor--killed my seven headmen. My idiotic followers think I had something to do with it, and unless I am able to convince them otherwise, they'll hunt me like a wounded jackal."

"Then what of me? If the headmen are dead, I am useless to you as a hostage. Will you slay me, to avenge them?"

He looked down at her, with eyes fiercely aglow, and laughed at the suggestion.

"Then let us ride to the border," she said. "You'll be safe from the Afghulis there-"

"Yes, on a Vendhyan gibbet."

"I am Queen of Vendhya," she reminded him with a touch of her old imperiousness. "You have saved my life. You shall be rewarded."

She did not intend it as it sounded, but he growled in his throat, ill pleased.

"Keep your bounty for your city-bred dogs, princess! If you're a queen of the plains, I'm a chief of the hills, and not one foot toward the border will I take you!"

"But you would be safe--" she began bewilderedly.

"And you'd be the Devi again," he broke in. "No, girl; I prefer you as you are now--a woman of flesh and blood, riding on my saddle-bow."

"But you can't keep me!" she cried. "You can't-"

"Watch and see!" he advised grimly.

"But I will pay you a vast ransom-"

"Devil take your ransom!" he answered roughly, his arms hardening about her supple figure. "The kingdom of Vendhya could give me nothing I desire half so much as I desire you. I took you at the risk of my neck; if your courtiers want you back, let them come up the Zhaibar and fight for you."

"But you have no followers now!" she protested. "You are hunted! How can you preserve your own life, much less mine?"

"I still have friends in the hills," he answered. "There is a chief of the Khurakzai who will keep you safely while I bicker with the Afghulis. If they will have none of me, by Crom! I will ride northward with you to the steppes of the kozaki. I was a hetman among the Free Companions before I rode southward. I'll make you a queen on the Zaporoska River!"

"But I can not!" she objected. "You must not hold me-"

"If the idea's so repulsive," he demanded, "why did you yield your lips to me so willingly?"

"Even a queen is human," she answered, coloring. "But because I am a queen, I must consider my kingdom. Do not carry me away into some foreign country. Come back to Vendhya with me!"

"Would you make me your king?" he asked sardonically.

"Well, there are customs-" she stammered, and he interrupted her with a hard laugh.

"Yes, civilized customs that won't let you do as you wish. You'll marry some withered old king of the plains, and I can go my way with only the memory of a few kisses snatched from your lips. Ha!"

"But I must return to my kingdom!" she repeated helplessly.

"Why?" he demanded angrily. "To chafe your rump on gold thrones, and listen to the plaudits of smirking, velvet-skirted fools? Where is the gain? Listen: I was born in the Cimmerian hills where the people are all barbarians. I have been a mercenary soldier, a corsair, a kozak, and a hundred other things. What king has roamed the countries, fought the battles, loved the women, and won the plunder that I have?

"I came into Ghulistan to raise a horde and plunder the kingdoms to the south--your own among them. Being chief of the Afghulis was only a start. If I can conciliate them, I'll have a dozen tribes following me within a year. But if I can't I'll ride back to the steppes and loot the Turanian borders with the kozaki. And you'll go with me. To the devil with your kingdom; they fended for themselves before you were born."

She lay in his arms looking up at him, and she felt a tug at her spirit, a lawless, reckless urge that matched his own and was by it called into being. But a thousand generations of sovereignship rode heavy upon her.

"I can't! I can't!" she repeated helplessly.

"You haven't any choice," he assured her. "You--what the devil!"

They had left Yimsha some miles behind them, and were riding along a high ridge that separated two deep valleys. They had just topped a steep crest where they could gaze down into the valley on their right hand. And there was a running fight in progress. A strong wind was blowing away from them, carrying the sound from their ears, but even so the clashing of steel and thunder of hoofs welled up from far below.

They saw the glint of the sun on lance-tip and spired helmet. Three thousand mailed horsemen were driving before them a ragged band of turbaned riders, who fled snarling and striking like fleeing wolves.

"Turanians," muttered Conan. "Squadrons from Secunderam. What the devil are they doing here?"

"Who are the men they pursue?" asked Yasmina. "And why do they fall back so stubbornly? They can not stand against such odds."

"Five hundred of my mad Afghulis," he growled, scowling down into the vale. "They're in a trap, and they know it."

The valley was indeed a cul-de-sac at that end. It narrowed to a high-walled gorge, opening out further into a round bowl, completely rimmed with lofty, unscalable walls.

The turbaned riders were being forced into this gorge, because there was nowhere else for them to go, and they went reluctantly, in a shower of arrows and a whirl of swords. The helmeted riders harried them, but did not press in too rashly. They knew the desperate fury of the hill tribes, and they knew too that they had their prey in a trap from which there was no escape. They had recognized the hill-men as Afghulis, and they wished to hem them in and force a surrender. They needed hostages for the purpose they had in mind.

Their emir was a man of decision and initiative. When he reached the Gurashah valley, and found neither guides nor emissary waiting for him, he pushed on, trusting to his own knowledge of the country. All the way from Secunderam there had been fighting, and tribesmen were licking their wounds in many a crag-perched village. He knew there was a good chance that neither he nor any of his helmeted spearmen would ever ride through the gates of Secunderam again, for the tribes would all be up behind him now, but he was determined to carry out his orders--which were to take Yasmina Devi from the Afghulis at all costs, and to bring her captive to Secunderam, or if confronted by impossibility, to strike off her head before he himself died.

Of all this, of course, the watchers on the ridge were not aware. But Conan fidgeted with nervousness.

"Why the devil did they get themselves trapped?" he demanded of the universe at large. "I know what they're doing in these parts--they were hunting me, the dogs! Poking into every valley--and found themselves penned in before they knew it. The poor fools! They're making a stand in the gorge, but they can't hold out for long. When the Turanians have pushed them back into the bowl, they'll slaughter them at their leisure."

The din welling up from below increased in volume and intensity. In the strait of the narrow gut, the Afghulis, fighting desperately, were for the time holding their own against the mailed riders, who could not throw their whole weight against them.

Conan scowled darkly, moved restlessly, fingering his hilt, and finally spoke bluntly:"Devi, I must go down to them. I'll find a place for you to hide until I come back to you. You spoke of your kingdom--well, I don't pretend to look on those hairy devils as my children, but after all, such as they are, they're my henchmen. A chief should never desert his followers, even if they desert him first. They think they were right in kicking me out--hell, I won't be cast off! I'm still chief of the Afghulis, and I'll prove it! I can climb down on foot into the gorge."

"But what of me?" she queried. "You carried me away forcibly from my people; now will you leave me to die in the hills alone while you go down and sacrifice yourself uselessly?"

His veins swelled with the conflict of his emotions.

"That's right," he muttered helplessly. "Crom knows what I can do."

She turned her head slightly, a curious expression dawning on her beautiful face. Then:

"Listen!" she cried. "Listen!"

A distant fanfare of trumpets was borne faintly to their ears. They stared into the deep valley on the left, and caught a glint of steel on the farther side. A long line of lances and polished helmets moved along the vale, gleaming in the sunlight.

"The riders of Vendhya!" she cried exultingly.

"There are thousands of them!" muttered Conan. "It has been long since a Kshatriya host has ridden this far into the hills."

"They are searching for me!" she exclaimed. "Give me your horse! I will ride to my warriors! The ridge is not so precipitous on the left, and I can reach the valley floor. I will lead my horsemen into the valley at the upper end and fall upon the Turanians! We will crush them in the vise! Quick, Conan! Will you sacrifice your men to your own desire?"

The burning hunger of the steppes and the wintry forests glared out of his eyes, but he shook his head and swung off the stallion, placing the reins in her hands.

"You win!" he grunted. "Ride like the devil!"

She wheeled away down the left-hand slope and he ran swiftly along the ridge until he reached the long ragged cleft that was the defile in which the fight raged. Down the rugged wall he scrambled like an ape, clinging to projections and crevices, to fall at last, feet first, into the melee that raged in the mouth of the gorge. Blades were whickering and clanging about him, horses rearing and stamping, helmet plumes nodding among turbans that were stained crimson.

As he hit, he yelled like a wolf, caught a gold-worked rein, and dodging the sweep of a scimitar, drove his long knife upward through the rider's vitals. In another instant he was in the saddle, yelling ferocious orders to the Afghulis. They stared at him stupidly for an instant; then as they saw the havoc his steel was wreaking among their enemies, they fell to their work again, accepting him without comment. In that inferno of licking blades and spurting blood there was no time to ask or answer questions.

The riders in their spired helmets and gold-worked hauberks swarmed about the gorge mouth, thrusting and slashing, and the narrow defile was packed and jammed with horses and men, the warriors crushed breast to breast, stabbing with shortened blades, slashing murderously when there was an instant's room to swing a sword. When a man went down he did not get up from beneath the stamping, swirling hoofs. Weight and sheer strength counted heavily there, and the chief of the Afghulis did the work of ten. At such times accustomed habits sway men strongly, and the warriors, who were used to seeing Conan in their vanguard, were heartened mightily, despite their distrust of him.

But superior numbers counted too. The pressure of the men behind forced the horsemen of Turan deeper and deeper into the gorge, in the teeth of the flickering tulwars. Foot by foot the Afghulis were shoved back, leaving the defile-floor carpeted with dead, on which the riders trampled. As he hacked and smote like a man possessed, Conan had time for some chilling doubts--would Yasmina keep her word? She had but to join her warriors, turn southward and leave him and his band to perish.

But at last, after what seemed centuries of desperate battling, in the valley outside there rose another sound above the clash of steel and yells of slaughter. And then with a burst of trumpets that shook the walls, and rushing thunder of hoofs, five thousand riders of Vendhya smote the hosts of Secunderam.

That stroke split the Turanian squadrons asunder, shattered, tore and rent them and scattered their fragments all over the valley. In an instant the surge had ebbed back out of the gorge; there was a chaotic, confused swirl of fighting, horsemen wheeling and smiting singly and in clusters, and then the emir went down with a Kshatriya lance through his breast, and the riders in their spired helmets turned their horses down the valley, spurring like mad and seeking to slash a way through the swarms which had come upon them from the rear. As they scattered in flight, the conquerors scattered in pursuit, and all across the valley floor, and up on the slopes near the mouth and over the crests streamed the fugitives and the pursuers. The Afghulis, those left to ride, rushed out of the gorge and joined in the harrying of their foes, accepting the unexpected alliance as unquestioningly as they had accepted the return of their repudiated chief.

The sun was sinking toward the distant crags when Conan, his garments hacked to tatters and the mail under them reeking and clotted with blood, his knife dripping and crusted to the hilt, strode over the corpses to where Yasmina Devi sat her horse among her nobles on the crest of the ridge, near a lofty precipice.

"You kept your word, Devi!" he roared. "By Crom, though, I had some bad seconds down in that gorge--look out!"

Down from the sky swooped a vulture of tremendous size with a thunder of wings that knocked men sprawling from their horses.

The scimitar-like beak was slashing for the Devi's soft neck, but Conan was quicker--a short run, a tigerish leap, the savage thrust of a dripping knife, and the vulture voiced a horribly human cry, pitched sideways and went tumbling down the cliffs to the rocks and river a thousand feet below. As it dropped, its black wings thrashing the air, it took on the semblance, not of a bird, but of a black-robed human body that fell, arms in wide black sleeves thrown abroad.

Conan turned to Yasmina, his red knife still in his hand, his blue eyes smoldering, blood oozing from wounds on his thickly muscled arms and thighs.

"You are the Devi again," he said, grinning fiercely at the goldclasped gossamer robe she had donned over her hill-girl attire, and awed not at all by the imposing array of chivalry about him. "I have you to thank for the lives of some three hundred and fifty of my rogues, who are at least convinced that I didn't betray them. You have put my hands on the reins of conquest again."

"I still owe you my ransom," she said, her dark eyes glowing as they swept over him. "Ten thousand pieces of gold I will pay you-"

He made a savage, impatient gesture, shook the blood from his knife and thrust it back in its scabbard, wiping his hands on his mail.

"I will collect your ransom in my own way, at my own time," he said. "I will collect it in your palace at Ayodhya, and I will come with fifty thousand men to see that the scales are fair."

She laughed, gathering her reins into her hands. "And I will meet you on the shores of the Jhumda with a hundred thousand!"

His eyes shone with fierce appreciation and admiration, and stepping back, he lifted his hand with a gesture that was like the assumption of kingship, indicating that her road was clear before her.

THE END

Contents

RED NAILS

By Robert E. Howard

The Skull on the Crag

The woman on the horse reined in her weary steed. It stood with its legs wide-braced, its head drooping, as if it found even the weight of the gold-tassled, red-leather bridle too heavy. The woman drew a booted foot out of the silver stirrup and swung down from the gilt-worked saddle. She made the reins fast to the fork of a sapling, and turned about, hands on her hips, to survey her surroundings.

They were not inviting. Giant trees hemmed in the small pool where her horse had just drunk. Clumps of undergrowth limited the vision that quested under the somber twilight of the lofty arches formed by intertwining branches. The woman shivered with a twitch of her magnificent shoulders, and then cursed.

She was tall, full-bosomed, and large-limbed, with compact shoulders. Her whole figure reflected an unusual strength, without detracting from the femininity of her appearance. She was all woman, in spite of her bearing and her garments. The latter were incongruous, in view of her present environs. Instead of a skirt she wore short, wide-legged silk breeches, which ceased a hand's breadth short of her knees, and were upheld by a wide silken sash worn as a girdle. Flaring-topped boots of soft leather came almost to her knees, and a low-necked, wide-collared, wide-sleeved silk shirt completed her costume. On one shapely hip she wore a straight double-edged sword, and on the other a long dirk. Her unruly golden hair, cut square at her shoulders, was confined by a band of crimson satin.

Against the background of somber, primitive forest she posed with an unconscious picturesqueness, bizarre and out of place. She should have been posed against a background of sea clouds, painted masts, and wheeling gulls. There was the color of the sea in her wide eyes. And that was at it should have been, because this was Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, whose deeds are celebrated in song and ballad wherever seafarers gather.

She strove to pierce the sullen green roof of the arched branches and see the sky which presumably lay above it, but presently gave it up with a muttered oath.

Leaving her horse tied, she strode off toward the east, glancing back toward the pool from time to time in order to fix her route in her mind. The silence of the forest depressed her. No birds sang in the lofty boughs, nor did any rustling in the bushes indicate the presence of small animals. For leagues she had traveled in a realm of brooding stillness, broken only by the sounds of her own flight.

She had slaked her thirst at the pool, but now felt the gnawings of hunger and began looking about for some of the fruit on which she had sustained herself since exhausting the food originally in her saddlebags.

Ahead of her, presently, she saw an outcropping of dark, flintlike rock that sloped upward into what looked like a rugged crag rising among the trees. Its summit was lost to view amidst a cloud of encircling leaves. Perhaps its peak rose above the treetops, and from it she could see what lay beyond--if, indeed, anything lay beyond but more of this apparently illimitable forest through which she had ridden for so many days.

A narrow ridge formed a natural ramp that led up the steep face of the crag. After she had ascended some fifty feet, she came to the belt of leaves that surrounded the rock. The trunks of the trees did not crowd close to the crag, but the ends of their lower branches extended about it, veiling it with their foliage. She groped on in leafy obscurity, not able to see either above or below her; but presently she glimpsed blue sky, and a moment later came out in the clear, hot sunlight and saw the forest roof stretching away under her feet.

She was standing on a broad shelf which was about even with the treetops, and from it rose a spirelike jut that was the ultimate peak of the crag she had climbed. But something else caught her attention at the moment. Her foot had struck something in the litter of blown dead leaves which carpeted the shelf. She kicked them aside and looked down on the skeleton of a man. She ran an experienced eye over the bleached frame, but saw no broken bones nor any sign of violence. The man must have died a natural death; though why he should have climbed a tall crag to die she could not imagine.

She scrambled up to the summit of the spire and looked toward the horizons. The forest roof--which looked like a floor from her vantage point--was just as impenetrable as from below. She could not even see the pool by which she had left her horse. She glanced northward, in the direction from which she had come. She saw only the rolling green ocean stretching away and away, with just a vague blue line in the distance to hint of the hill range she had crossed days before, to plunge into this leafy waste.

West and east the view was the same; though the blue hill-line was lacking in those directions. But when she turned her eyes southward she stiffened and caught her breath. A mile away in that direction the forest thinned out and ceased abruptly, giving way to a cactus-dotted plain. And in the midst of that plain rose the walls and towers of a city. Valeria swore in amazement. This passed belief. She would not have been surprised to sight human habitations of another sort--the beehive-shaped huts of the black people, or the cliff-dwellings of the mysterious brown race which legends declared inhabited some country of this unexplored region. But it was a startling experience to come upon a walled city here so many long weeks' march from the nearest outposts of any sort of civilization.

Her hands tiring from clinging to the spirelike pinnacle, she let herself down on the shelf, frowning in indecision. She had come far--from the camp of the mercenaries by the border town of Sukhmet amidst the level grasslands, where desperate adventurers of many races guard the Stygian frontier against the raids that come up like a red wave from Darfar. Her flight had been blind, into a country of which she was wholly ignorant. And now she wavered between an urge to ride directly to that city in the plain, and the instinct of caution which prompted her to skirt it widely and continue her solitary flight.

Her thoughts were scattered by the rustling of the leaves below her. She wheeled catlike, snatched at her sword; and then she froze motionless, staring wide-eyed at the man before her.

He was almost a giant in stature, muscles rippling smoothly under his skin, which the sun had burned brown. His garb was similar to hers, except that he wore a broad leather belt instead of a girdle. Broadsword and poniard hung from his belt.

"Conan, the Cimmerian!" ejaculated the woman. "What are you doing on my trail?"

He grinned hardly, and his fierce blue eyes burned with a light any woman could understand as they ran over her magnificent figure, lingering on the swell of her splendid breasts beneath the light shirt, and the clear white flesh displayed between breeches and boot-tops.

"Don't you know?" he laughed. "Haven't I made my admiration for you plain ever since I first saw you?"

"A stallion could have made it no plainer," she answered disdainfully. "But I never expected to encounter you so far from the ale barrels and meatpots of Sukhmet. Did you really follow me from Zarallo's camp, or were you whipped forth for a rogue?"

He laughed at her insolence and flexed his mighty biceps.

"You know Zarallo didn't have enough knaves to whip me out of camp," he grinned. "Of course I followed you. Lucky thing for you, too, wench! When you knifed that Stygian officer, you forfeited Zarallo's favor, and protection, and you outlawed yourself with the Stygians."

"I know it," she replied sullenly. "But what else could I do? You know what my provocation was."

"Sure," he agreed. "If I'd been there, I'd have knifed him myself. But if a woman must live in the war camps of men, she can expect such things."

Valeria stamped her booted foot and swore.

"Why won't men let me life a man's life?"

"That's obvious!" Again his eager eyes devoured her. "But you were wise to run away. The Stygians would have had you skinned. That officer's brother followed you; faster than you thought, I don't doubt. He wasn't far behind you when I caught up with him. His horse was better than yours. He'd have caught you and cut your throat within a few more miles."

"Well?" she demanded.

"Well what?" He seemed puzzled.

"What of the Stygian?"

"Why, what do you suppose?" he returned impatiently. "I killed him, of course, and left his carcass for the vultures. That delayed me, though, and I almost lost your trail when you crossed the rocky spurs of the hills. Otherwise I'd have caught up with you long ago."

"And now you think you'll drag me back to Zarallo's camp?" she sneered.

"Don't talk like a fool," he grunted. "Come, girl, don't be such a spitfire. I'm not like that Stygian you knifed, and you know it."

"A penniless vagabond," she taunted.

He laughed at her.

"What do you call yourself? You haven't enough money to buy a new seat for your breeches. Your disdain doesn't deceive me. You know I've commanded bigger ships and more men than you ever did in your life. As for being penniless--what rover isn't, most of the time? I've squandered enough gold in the seaports of the world to fill a galleon. You know that, too."

"Where are the fine ships and the bold lads you commanded now?" she sneered.

"At the bottom of the sea, mostly," he replied cheerfully. "The Zingarans sank my last ship off the Shemite shore--that's why I joined Zarallo's Free Companions. But I saw I'd been stung when we marched to the Darfar border. The pay was poor and the wine was sour, and I don't like black women. And that's the only kind that came to our camp at Sukhmet--rings in their noses and their teeth filed--bah! Why did you join Zarallo? Sukhmet's a long way from salt water."

"Red Ortho wanted to make me his mistress," she answered sullenly. "I jumped overboard one night and swam ashore when we were anchored off the Kushite coast. Off Zabhela, it was. There was a Shemite trader told me that Zarallo had brought his Free Companies south to guard the Darfar border. No better employment offered. I joined an east-bound caravan and eventually came to Sukhmet."

"It was madness to plunge southward as you did," commented Conan, "but it was wise, too, for Zarallo's patrols never thought to look for you in this direction. Only the brother of the man you killed happened to strike your trail."

"And now what do you intend doing?" she demanded.

"Turn west," he answered. "I've been this far south, but not this far east. Many days' traveling to the west will bring us to the open savannas, where the black tribes graze their cattle. I have friends among them. We'll get to the coast and find a ship. I'm sick of the jungle."

"Then be on your way," she advised. "I have other plans."

"Don't be a fool!" He showed irritation for the first time. "You can't keep on wandering through this forest."

"I can if I choose."

"But what do you intend doing?"

"That's none of your affair," she snapped.

"Yes, it is," he answered calmly. "Do you think I've followed you this far, to turn around and ride off empty-handed? Be sensible, wench. I'm not going to harm you."

He stepped toward her, and she sprang back, whipping out her sword.

"Keep back, you barbarian dog! I'll spit you like a roast pig!"

He halted, reluctantly, and demanded: "Do you want me to take that toy away from you and spank you with it?"

"Words! Nothing but words!" she mocked, lights like the gleam of the sun on blue water dancing in her reckless eyes.

He knew it was the truth. No living man could disarm Valeria of the Brotherhood with his bare hands. He scowled, his sensations a tangle of conflicting emotions. He was angry, yet he was amused and filled with admiration for her spirit. He burned with eagerness to seize that splendid figure and crush it in his iron arms, yet he greatly desired not to hurt the girl. He was torn between a desire to shake her soundly, and a desire to caress her. He knew if he came any nearer her sword would be sheathed in his heart. He had seen Valeria kill too many men in border forays and tavern brawls to have any illusions about her. He knew she was as quick and ferocious as a tigress. He could draw his broadsword and disarm her, beat the blade out of her hand, but the thought of drawing a sword on a woman, even without intent of injury, was extremely repugnant to him.

"Blast your soul, you hussy!" he exclaimed in exasperation. "I'm going to take off your--"

He started toward her, his angry passion making him reckless, and she poised herself for a deadly thrust. Then came a startling interruption to a scene at once ludicrous and perilous.

"What's that?"

It was Valeria who exclaimed, but they both started violently, and Conan wheeled like a cat, his great sword flashing into his hand. Back in the forest had burst forth an appalling medley of screams--the screams of horses in terror and agony. Mingled with their screams there came the snap of splintering bones.

"Lions are slaying the horses!" cried Valeria.

"Lions, nothing!" snorted Conan, his eyes blazing. "Did you hear a lion roar? Neither did I! Listen to those bones snap--not even a lion could make that much noise killing a horse."

He hurried down the natural ramp and she followed, their personal feud forgotten in the adventurers' instinct to unite against common peril. The screams had ceased when they worked their way downward through the green veil of leaves that brushed the rock.

"I found your horse tied by the pool back there," he muttered, treading so noiselessly that she no longer wondered how he had surprised her on the crag. "I tied mine beside it and followed the tracks of your boots. Watch, now!"

They had emerged from the belt of leaves, and stared down into the lower reaches of the forest. Above them the green roof spread its dusky canopy. Below them the sunlight filtered in just enough to make a jade-tinted twilight. The giant trunks of trees less than a hundred yards away looked dim and ghostly.

"The horses should be beyond that thicket, over there," whispered Conan, and his voice might have been a breeze moving through the branches. "Listen!"

Valeria had already heard, and a chill crept through her veins; so she unconsciously laid her white hand on her companion's muscular brown arm. From beyond the thicket came the noisy crunching of bones and the loud rending of flesh, together with the grinding, slobbering sounds of a horrible feast.

"Lions wouldn't make that noise," whispered Conan. "Something's eating our horses, but it's not a lion--Crom!"

The noise stopped suddenly, and Conan swore softly. A suddenly risen breeze was blowing from them directly toward the spot where the unseen slayer was hidden.

"Here it comes!" muttered Conan, half lifting his sword.

The thicket was violently agitated, and Valeria clutched Conan's arm hard. Ignorant of jungle lore, she yet knew that no animal she had ever seen could have shaken the tall brush like that.

"It must be as big as an elephant," muttered Conan, echoing her thought. "What the devil--" His voice trailed away in stunned silence.

Through the thicket was thrust a head of nightmare and lunacy. Grinning jaws bared rows of dripping yellow tusks; above the yawning mouth wrinkled a saurian-like snout. Huge eyes, like those of a python a thousand times magnified, stared unwinkingly at the petrified humans clinging to the rock above it. Blood smeared the scaly, flabby lips and dripped from the huge mouth.

The head, bigger than that of a crocodile, was further extended on a long scaled neck on which stood up rows of serrated spikes, and after it, crushing down the briars and saplings, waddled the body of a titan, a gigantic, barrel-bellied torso on absurdly short legs. The whitish belly almost raked the ground, while the serrated backbone rose higher than Conan could have reached on tiptoe. A long spiked tail, like that of a gargantuan scorpion, trailed out behind.

"Back up the crag, quick!" snapped Conan, thrusting the girl behind him. "I don't think he can climb, but he can stand on his hind legs and reach us--"

With a snapping and rending of bushes and saplings, the monster came hurtling through the thickets, and they fled up the rock before him like leaves blown before a wind. As Valeria plunged into the leafy screen a backward glance showed her the titan rearing up fearsomely on his massive hind legs, even as Conan had predicted. The sight sent panic racing through her. As he reared, the beast seemed more gigantic than ever; his snouted head towered among the trees. Then Conan's iron hand closed on her wrist and she was jerked headlong into the blinding welter of the leaves, and out again into the hot sunshine above, just as the monster fell forward with his front feet on the crag with an impact that made the rock vibrate.

Behind the fugitives the huge head crashed through the twigs, and they looked down for a horrifying instant at the nightmare visage framed among the green leaves, eyes flaming, jaws gaping. Then the giant tusks clashed together futilely, and after that the head was withdrawn, vanishing from their sight as if it had sunk in a pool.

Peering down through broken branches that scraped the rock, they saw it squatting on its haunches at the foot of the crag, staring unblinkingly up at them.

Valeria shuddered.

"How long do you suppose he'll crouch there?"

Conan kicked the skull on the leaf-strewn shelf.

"That fellow must have climbed up here to escape him, or one like him. He must have died of starvation. There are no bones broken. That thing must be a dragon, such as the black people speak of in their legends. If so, it won't leave here until we're both dead."

Valeria looked at him blankly, her resentment forgotten. She fought down a surging of panic. She had proved her reckless courage a thousand times in wild battles on sea and land, on the blood-slippery decks of burning war ships, in the storming of walled cities, and on the trampled sandy beaches where the desperate men of the Red Brotherhood bathed their knives in one another's blood in their fights for leadership. But the prospect now confronting her congealed her blood. A cutlass stroke in the heat of battle was nothing; but to sit idle and helpless on a bare rock until she perished of starvation, besieged by a monstrous survival of an elder age--the thought sent panic throbbing through her brain.

"He must leave to eat and drink," she said helplessly.

"He won't have to go far to do either," Conan pointed out. "He's just gorged on horse meat and, like a real snake, he can go for a long time without eating or drinking again. But he doesn't sleep after eating, like a real snake, it seems. Anyway, he can't climb this crag."

Conan spoke imperturbably. He was a barbarian, and the terrible patience of the wilderness and its children was as much a part of him as his lusts and rages. He could endure a situation like this with a coolness impossible to a civilized person.

"Can't we get into the trees and get away, traveling like apes through the branches?" she asked desperately.

He shook his head. "I thought of that. The branches that touch the crag down there are too light. They'd break with our weight. Besides, I have an idea that devil could tear up any tree around here by its roots."

"Well, are we going to sit here on our rumps until we starve, like that?" she cried furiously, kicking the skull clattering across the ledge. "I won't do it! I'll go down there and cut his damned head off--"

Conan had seated himself on a rocky projection at the foot of the spire. He looked up with a glint of admiration at her blazing eyes and tense, quivering figure, but, realizing that she was in just the mood for any madness, he let none of his admiration sound in his voice.

"Sit down," he grunted, catching her by her wrist and pulling her down on his knee. She was too surprised to resist as he took her sword from her hand and shoved it back in its sheath. "Sit still and calm down. You'd only break your steel on his scales. He'd gobble you up at one gulp, or smash you like an egg with that spiked tail of his. We'll get out of this jam some way, but we shan't do it by getting chewed up and swallowed."

She made no reply, nor did she seek to repulse his arm from about her waist. She was frightened, and the sensation was new to Valeria of the Red Brotherhood. So she sat on her companion's--or captor's--knee with a docility that would have amazed Zarallo, who had anathematized her as a she-devil out of Hell's seraglio.

Conan played idly with her curly yellow locks, seemingly intent only upon his conquest. Neither the skeleton at his feet nor the monster crouching below disturbed his mind or dulled the edge of his interest.

The girl's restless eyes, roving the leaves below them, discovered splashes of color among the green. It was fruit, large, darkly crimson globes suspended from the boughs of a tree whose broad leaves were a peculiarly rich and vivid green. She became aware of both thirst and hunger, though thirst had not assailed her until she knew she could not descend from the crag to find food and water.

"We need not starve," she said. "There is fruit we can reach."

Conan glanced where she pointed.

"If we ate that we wouldn't need the bite of a dragon," he grunted. "That's what the black people of Kush call the Apples of Derketa. Derketa is the Queen of the Dead. Drink a little of that juice, or spill it on your flesh, and you'd be dead before you could tumble to the foot of this crag."

"Oh!"

She lapsed into dismayed silence. There seemed no way out of their predicament, she reflected gloomily. She saw no way of escape, and Conan seemed to be concerned only with her supple waist and curly tresses. If he was trying to formulate a plan of escape, he did not show it.

"If you'll take your hands off me long enough to climb up on that peak," she said presently, "you'll see something that will surprise you."

He cast her a questioning glance, then obeyed with a shrug of his massive shoulders. Clinging to the spirelike pinnacle, he stared out over the forest roof.

He stood a long moment in silence, posed like a bronze statue on the rock.

"It's a walled city, right enough," he muttered presently. "Was that where you were going, when you tried to send me off alone to the coast?"

"I saw it before you came. I knew nothing of it when I left Sukhmet."

"Who'd have thought to find a city here? I don't believe the Stygians ever penetrated this far. Could black people build a city like that? I see no herds on the plain, no signs of cultivation, or people moving about."

"How can you hope to see all that, at this distance?" she demanded.

He shrugged his shoulders and dropped down on the shelf.

"Well, the folk of the city can't help us just now. And they might not, if they could. The people of the Black Countries are generally hostile to strangers. Probably stick us full of spears--"

He stopped short and stood silent, as if he had forgotten what he was saying, frowning down at the crimson spheres gleaming among the leaves.

"Spears!" he muttered. "What a blasted fool I am not to have thought of that before! That shows what a pretty woman does to a man's mind."

"What are you talking about?" she inquired.

Without answering her question, he descended to the belt of leaves and looked down through them. The great brute squatted below, watching the crag with the frightful patience of the reptile folk. So might one of his breed have glared up at their troglodyte ancestors, treed on a high-flung rock, in the dim dawn ages. Conan cursed him without heat, and began cutting branches, reaching out and severing them as far from the end as he could reach. The agitation of the leaves made the monster restless. He rose from his haunches and lashed his hideous tail, snapping off saplings as if they had been toothpicks. Conan watched him warily from the corner of his eye, and just as Valeria believed the dragon was about to hurl himself up the crag again, the Cimmerian drew back and climbed up to the ledge with the branches he had cut. There were three of these, slender shafts about seven feet long, but not larger than his thumb. He had also cut several strands of tough, thin vine.

"Branches too light for spear-hafts, and creepers no thicker than cords," he remarked, indicating the foliage about the crag. "It won't hold our weight--but there's strength in union. That's what the Aquilonian renegades used to tell us Cimmerians when they came into the hills to raise an army to invade their own country. But we always fight by clans and tribes."

"What the devil has that got to do with those sticks?" she demanded.

"You wait and see."

Gathering the sticks in a compact bundle, he wedged his poniard hilt between them at one end. Then with the vines he bound them together and, when he had completed his task, he had a spear of no small strength, with a sturdy shaft seven feet in length.

"What good will that do?" she demanded. "You told me that a blade couldn't pierce his scales--"

"He hasn't got scales all over him," answered Conan. "There's more than one way of skinning a panther."

Moving down to the edge of the leaves, he reached the spear up and carefully thrust the blade through one of the Apples of Derketa, drawing aside to avoid the darkly purple drops that dripped from the pierced fruit. Presently he withdrew the blade and showed her the blue steel stained a dull purplish crimson.

"I don't know whether it will do the job or not," quoth he. "There's enough poison there to kill an elephant, but--well, we'll see."

Valeria was close behind him as he let himself down among the leaves. Cautiously holding the poisoned pike away from him, he thrust his head through the branches and addressed the monster.

"What are you waiting down there for, you misbegotten offspring of questionable parents?" was one of his more printable queries. "Stick your ugly head up here again, you long-necked brute--or do you want me to come down there and kick you loose from your illegitimate spine?"

There was more of it--some of it crouched in eloquence that made Valeria stare, in spite of her profane education among the seafarers. And it had its effect on the monster. Just as the incessant yapping of a dog worries and enrages more constitutionally silent animals, so the clamorous voice of a man rouses fear in some bestial bosoms and insane rage in others. Suddenly and with appalling quickness, the mastodonic brute reared up on its mighty hind legs and elongated its neck and body in a furious effort to reach this vociferous pigmy whose clamor was disturbing the primeval silence of its ancient realm.

But Conan had judged his distance with precision. Some five feet below him the mighty head crashed terribly but futilely through the leaves. And as the monstrous mouth gaped like that of a great snake, Conan drove his spear into the red angle of the jawbone hinge. He struck downward with all the strength of both arms, driving the long poniard blade to the hilt in flesh, sinew and bone.

Instantly the jaws clashed convulsively together, severing the triple-pieced shaft and almost precipitating Conan from his perch. He would have fallen but for the girl behind him, who caught his sword-belt in a desperate grasp. He clutched at a rocky projection, and grinned his thanks back at her.

Down on the ground the monster was wallowing like a dog with pepper in its eyes. He shook his head from side to side, pawed at it, and opened his mouth repeatedly to its widest extent. Presently he got a huge front foot on the stump of the shaft and managed to tear the blade out. Then he threw up his head, jaws wide and spouting blood, and glared up at the crag

with such concentrated and intelligent fury that Valeria trembled and drew her sword. The scales along his back and flanks turned from rusty brown to a dull lurid red. Most horribly the monster's silence was broken. The sounds that issued from his blood-streaming jaws did not sound like anything that could have been produced by an earthly creation.

With harsh, grating roars, the dragon hurled himself at the crag that was the citadel of his enemies. Again and again his mighty head crashed upward through the branches, snapping vainly on empty air. He hurled his full ponderous weight against the rock until it vibrated from base to crest. And rearing upright he gripped it with his front legs like a man and tried to tear it up by the roots, as if it had been a tree.

This exhibition of primordial fury chilled the blood in Valeria's veins, but Conan was too close to the primitive himself to feel anything but a comprehending interest. To the barbarian, no such gulf existed between himself and other men, and the animals, as existed in the conception of Valeria. The monster below them, to Conan, was merely a form of life differing from himself mainly in physical shape. He attributed to it characteristics similar to his own, and saw in its wrath a counterpart of his rages, in its roars and bellowings merely reptilian equivalents to the curses he had bestowed upon it. Feeling a kinship with all wild things, even dragons, it was impossible for him to experience the sick horror which assailed Valeria at the sight of the brute's ferocity.

He sat watching it tranquilly, and pointed out the various changes that were taking place in its voice and actions.

"The poison's taking hold," he said with conviction.

"I don't believe it." To Valeria it seemed preposterous to suppose that anything, however lethal, could have any effect on that mountain of muscle and fury.

"There's pain in his voice," declared Conan. "First he was merely angry because of the stinging in his jaw. Now he feels the bite of the poison. Look! He's staggering. He'll be blind in a few more minutes. What did I tell you?"

For suddenly the dragon had lurched about and went crashing off through the bushes.

"Is he running away?" inquired Valeria uneasily.

"He's making for the pool!" Conan sprang up, galvanized into swift activity. "The poison makes him thirsty. Come on! He'll be blind in a few moments, but he can smell his way back to the foot of the crag, and if our scent's here still, he'll sit there until he dies. And others of his kind may come at his cries. Let's go!"

"Down there?" Valeria was aghast.

"Sure! We'll make for the city! They may cut our heads off there, but it's our only chance. We may run into a thousand more dragons on the way, but it's sure death to stay here. If we wait until he dies, we may have a dozen more to deal with. After me, in a hurry!"

He went down the ramp as swiftly as an ape, pausing only to aid his less agile companion, who, until she saw the Cimmerian climb, had fancied herself the equal of any man in the rigging of a ship or on the sheer face of a cliff.

They descended into the gloom below the branches and slid to the ground silently, though Valeria felt as if the pounding of her heart must surely be heard from far away. A noisy gurgling and lapping beyond the dense thicket indicated that the dragon was drinking at the pool.

"As soon as his belly is full he'll be back," muttered Conan. "It may take hours for the poison to kill him--if it does at all."

Somewhere beyond the forest the sun was sinking to the horizon. The forest was a misty twilight place of black shadows and dim vistas. Conan gripped Valeria's wrist and glided away from the foot of the crag. He made less noise than a breeze blowing among the tree trunks, but Valeria felt as if her soft boots were betraying their flight to all the forest.

"I don't think he can follow a trail," muttered Conan. "But if a wind blew our body scent to him, he could smell us out."

"Mitra, grant that the wind blow not!" Valeria breathed.

Her face was a pallid oval in the gloom. She gripped her sword in her free hand, but the feel of the shagreen-bound hilt inspired only a feeling of helplessness in her.

They were still some distance from the edge of the forest when they heard a snapping and crashing behind them. Valeria bit her lip to check a cry.

"He's on our trail!" she whispered fiercely.

Conan shook his head.

"He didn't smell us at the rock, and he's blundering about through the forest trying to pick up our scent. Come on! It's the city or nothing now! He could tear down any tree we'd climb. If only the wind stays down--"

They stole on until the trees began to thin out ahead of them. Behind them the forest was a black impenetrable ocean of shadows. The ominous crackling still sounded behind them, as the dragon blundered in his erratic course.

"There's the plain ahead," breathed Valeria. "A little more and we'll--"

"Crom!" swore Conan.

"Mitra!" whispered Valeria.

Out of the south a wind had sprung up.

It blew over them directly into the black forest behind them. Instantly a horrible roar shook the woods. The aimless snapping and crackling of the bushes changed to a sustained crashing as the dragon came like a hurricane straight toward the spot from which the scent of his enemies was wafted.

"Run!" snarled Conan, his eyes blazing like those of a trapped wolf. "It's all we can do!"

Sailor's boots are not made for sprinting, and the life of a pirate does not train one for a runner. Within a hundred yards Valeria was panting and reeling in her gait, and behind them the crashing gave way to a rolling thunder as the monster broke out of the thickets and into the more open ground.

Conan's iron arm about the woman's waist half lifted her; her feet scarcely touched the earth as she was borne along at a speed she could never have attained herself. If he could keep out of the beast's way for a bit, perhaps that betraying wind would shift--but the wind held, and a quick glance over his shoulder showed Conan that the monster was almost upon them, coming like a war-galley in front of a hurricane. He thrust Valeria from him with a force that sent her reeling a dozen feet to fall in a crumpled heap at the foot of the nearest tree, and the Cimmerian wheeled in the path of the thundering titan.

Convinced that his death was upon him, the Cimmerian acted according to his instinct, and hurled himself full at the awful face that was bearing down on him. He leaped, slashing like a wildcat, felt his sword cut deep into the scales that sheathed the mighty snout--and then a terrific impact knocked him rolling and tumbling for fifty feet with all the wind and half the life battered out of him.

How the stunned Cimmerian regained his feet, not even he could have ever told. But the only thought that filled his brain was of the woman lying dazed and helpless almost in the path of the hurtling fiend, and before the breath came whistling back into his gullet he was standing over her with his sword in his hand.

She lay where he had thrown her, but she was struggling to a sitting posture. Neither tearing tusks nor trampling feet had touched her. It had been a shoulder or front leg that struck Conan, and the blind monster rushed on, forgetting the victims whose scent it had been following, in the sudden agony of its death throes. Headlong on its course it thundered until its low-hung head crashed into a gigantic tree in its path. The impact tore the tree up by the roots and must have dashed the brains from the misshapen skull. Tree and monster fell together, and the dazed humans saw the branches and leaves shaken by the convulsions of the creature they covered--and then grow quiet.

Conan lifted Valeria to her feet and together they started away at a reeling run. A few moments later they emerged into the still twilight of the treeless plain.

Conan paused an instant and glanced back at the ebon fastness behind them. Not a leaf stirred, nor a bird chirped. It stood as silent as it must have stood before Man was created.

"Come on," muttered Conan, taking his companion's hand. "It's touch and go now. If more dragons come out of the woods after us--"

He did not have to finish the sentence.

The city looked very far away across the plain, farther than it had looked from the crag. Valeria's heart hammered until she felt as if it would strangle her. At every step she expected to hear the crashing of the bushes and see another colossal nightmare bearing down upon them. But nothing disturbed the silence of the thickets.

With the first mile between them and the woods, Valeria breathed more easily. Her buoyant self-confidence began to thaw out again. The sun had set and darkness was gathering over the plain, lightened a little by the stars that made stunted ghosts out of the cactus growths.

"No cattle, no plowed fields," muttered Conan. "How do these people live?"

"Perhaps the cattle are in pens for the night," suggested Valeria, "and the fields and grazing-pastures are on the other side of the city."

"Maybe," he grunted. "I didn't see any from the crag, though."

The moon came up behind the city, etching walls and towers blackly in the yellow glow. Valeria shivered. Black against the moon the strange city had a somber, sinister look.

Perhaps something of the same feeling occurred to Conan, for he stopped, glanced about him, and grunted: "We'll stop here. No use coming to their gates in the night. They probably wouldn't let us in. Besides, we need rest, and we don't know how they'll receive us. A few hours' sleep will put us in better shape to fight or run."

He led the way to a bed of cactus which grew in a circle--a phenomenon common to the southern desert. With his sword he chopped an opening, and motioned Valeria to enter.

"We'll be safe from the snakes here, anyhow."

She glanced fearfully back toward the black line that indicated the forest some six miles away.

"Suppose a dragon comes out of the woods?"

"We'll keep watch," he answered, though he made no suggestion as to what they would do in such an event. He was staring at the city, a few miles away. Not a light shone from spire or tower. A great black mass of mystery, it reared cryptically against the moonlit sky.

"Lie down and sleep. I'll keep the first watch."

She hesitated, glancing at him uncertainly, but he sat down cross-legged in the opening, facing toward the plain, his sword across his knees, his back to her. Without further comment she lay down on the sand inside the spiky circle.

"Wake me when the moon is at its zenith," she directed.

He did not reply nor look toward her. Her last impression, as she sank into slumber, was of his muscular figure, immobile as a statue hewn out of bronze, outlined against the low-hanging stars.

By the Blaze of the Fire Jewels

Valeria awoke with a start, to the realization that a grey dawn was stealing over the plain.

She sat up, rubbing her eyes. Conan squatted beside the cactus, cutting off the thick pears and dexterously twitching out the spikes.

"You didn't awake me," she accused. "You let me sleep all night!"

"You were tired," he answered. "Your posterior must have been sore, too, after that long ride. You pirates aren't used to horseback."

"What about yourself?" she retorted.

"I was a kozak before I was a pirate," he answered. "They live in the saddle. I snatch naps like a panther watching beside the trail for a deer to come by. My ears keep watch while my eyes sleep."

And indeed the giant barbarian seemed as much refreshed as if he had slept the whole night on a golden bed. Having removed the thorns, and peeled off the tough skin, he handed the girl a thick, juicy cactus leaf.

"Skin your teeth in that pear. It's food and drink to a desert man. I was a chief of the Zuagirs once--desert men who live by plundering the caravans."

"Is there anything you haven't done?" inquired the girl, half in derision and half in fascination.

"I've never been king of an Hyborean kingdom," he grinned, taking an enormous mouthful of cactus. "But I've dreamed of being even that. I may be too, some day. Why shouldn't I?"

She shook her head in wonder at his calm audacity, and fell to devouring her pear. She found it not unpleasing to the palate, and full of cool and thirst-satisfying juice. Finishing his meal, Conan wiped his hands in the sand, rose, ran his fingers through his thick black mane, hitched up his sword belt and said:

"Well, let's go. If the people in that city are going to cut our throats they may as well do it now, before the heat of the day begins."

His grim humor was unconscious, but Valeria reflected that it might be prophetic. She too hitched her sword belt as she rose. Her terrors of the night were past. The roaring dragons of the distant forest were like a dim dream. There was a swagger in her stride as she moved off beside the Cimmerian. Whatever perils lay ahead of them, their foes would be men. And Valeria of the Red Brotherhood had never seen the face of the man she feared.

Conan glanced down at her as she strode along beside him with her swinging stride that matched his own.

"You walk more like a hillman than a sailor," he said. "You must be an Aquilonian. The suns of Darfar never burnt your white skin brown. Many a princess would envy you."

"I am from Aquilonia," she replied. His compliments no longer irritated her. His evident admiration pleased her. For another man to have kept her watch while she slept would have angered her; she had always fiercely resented any man's attempting to shield or protect her because of her sex. But she found a secret pleasure in the fact that this man had done so. And he had not taken advantage of her fright and the weakness resulting from it. After all, she reflected, her companion was no common man.

The sun rose up behind the city, turning the towers to a sinister crimson.

"Black last night against the moon," grunted Conan, his eyes clouding with the abysmal superstition of the barbarian. "Blood-red as a threat of blood against the sun this dawn. I do not like this city."

But they went on, and as they went Conan pointed out the fact that no road ran to the city from the north.

"No cattle have trampled the plain on this side of the city," said he. "No plowshare has touched the earth for years, maybe centuries. But look: once this plain was cultivated."

Valeria saw the ancient irrigation ditches he indicated, half filled in places, and overgrown with cactus. She frowned with perplexity as her eyes swept over the plain that stretched on all sides of the city to the forest edge, which marched in a vast, dim ring. Vision did not extend beyond that ring.

She looked uneasily at the city. No helmets or spearheads gleamed on battlements, no trumpets sounded, no challenge rang from the towers. A silence as absolute as that of the forest brooded over the walls and minarets.

The sun was high above the eastern horizon when they stood before the great gate in the northern wall, in the shadow of the lofty rampart. Rust flecked the iron bracings of the mighty bronze portal. Spiderwebs glistened thickly on hinge and sill and bolted panel.

"It hasn't been opened for years!" exclaimed Valeria.

"A dead city," grunted Conan. "That's why the ditches were broken and the plain untouched."

"But who built it? Who dwelt here? Where did they go? Why did they abandon it?"

"Who can say? Maybe an exiled clan of Stygians built it. Maybe not. It doesn't look like Stygian architecture. Maybe the people were wiped out by enemies, or a plague exterminated them."

"In that case their treasures may still be gathering dust and cobwebs in there," suggested Valeria, the acquisitive instincts of her profession waking in her; prodded, too, by feminine curiosity. "Can we open the gate? Let's go in and explore a bit."

Conan eyed the heavy portal dubiously, but placed his massive shoulder against it and thrust with all the power of his muscular calves and thighs. With a rasping screech of rusty hinges the gate moved ponderously inward, and Conan straightened and drew his sword. Valeria stared over his shoulder, and made a sound indicative of surprise.

They were not looking into an open street or court as one would have expected. The opened gate, or door, gave directly into a long, broad hall which ran away and away until its vista grew indistinct in the distance. It was of heroic proportions, and the floor of a curious red stone, cut in square tiles, that seemed to smolder as if with the reflection of flames. The walls were of a shiny green material.

"Jade, or I'm a Shemite!" swore Conan.

"Not in such quantity!" protested Valeria.

"I've looted enough from the Khitan caravans to know what I'm talking about," he asserted. "That's jade!"

The vaulted ceiling was of lapis lazuli, adorned with clusters of great green stones that gleamed with a poisonous radiance.

"Green fire-stones," growled Conan. "That's what the people of Punt call them. They're supposed to be the petrified eyes of those prehistoric snakes the ancients called Golden Serpents. They glow like a cat's eyes in the dark. At night this hall would be lighted by them, but it would be a hellishly weird illumination. Let's look around. We might find a cache of jewels."

"Shut the door," advised Valeria. "I'd hate to have to outrun a dragon down this hall."

Conan grinned, and replied: "I don't believe the dragons ever leave the forest."

But he complied, and pointed out the broken bolt on the inner side.

"I thought I heard something snap when I shoved against it. That bolt's freshly broken. Rust has eaten nearly through it. If the people ran away, why should it have been bolted on the inside?"

"They undoubtedly left by another door," suggested Valeria.

She wondered how many centuries had passed since the light of outer day had filtered into that great hall through the open door. Sunlight was finding its way somehow into the hall, and they quickly saw the source. High up in the vaulted ceiling skylights were set in slot-like openings--translucent sheets of some crystalline substance. In the splotches of shadow between them, the green jewels winked like the eyes of angry cats. Beneath their feet the dully lurid floor smoldered with changing hues and colors of flame. It was like treading the floors of Hell with evil stars blinking overhead.

Three balustraded galleries ran along on each side of the hall, one above the other.

"A four-storied house," grunted Conan, "and this hall extends to the roof. It's long as a street. I seem to see a door at the other end."

Valeria shrugged her white shoulders.

"Your eyes are better than mine, then, though I'm accounted sharp-eyed among the sea-rovers."

They turned into an open door at random, and traversed a series of empty chambers, floored like the hall, and with walls of the same green jade, or of marble or ivory or chalcedony, adorned with friezes of bronze, gold, or silver. In the ceilings the green fire-gems were set, and their light was as ghostly and illusive as Conan had predicted. Under the witch-fire glow the intruders moved like specters.

Some of the chambers lacked this illumination, and their doorways showed black as the mouth of the Pit. These Conan and Valeria avoided, keeping always to the lighted chambers.

Cobwebs hung in the corners, but there was no perceptible accumulation of dust on the floor, or on the tables and seats of marble, jade, or carnelian which occupied the chambers. Here and there were rugs of that silk known as Khitan which is practically indestructible. Nowhere did they find any windows, or doors opening into streets or courts. Each door merely opened into another chamber or hall.

"Why don't we come to a street?" grumbled Valeria. "This palace or whatever we're in must be as big as the king of Turan's seraglio."

"They must not have perished of plague," sad Conan, meditating upon the mystery of the empty city. "Otherwise we'd find skeletons. Maybe it became haunted, and everybody got up and left. Maybe--"

"Maybe, hell!" broke in Valeria rudely. "We'll never know. Look at these friezes. They portray men. What race do they belong to?"

Conan scanned them and shook his head.

"I never saw people exactly like them. But there's the smack of the East about them--Vendhya, maybe, or Kosala."

"Were you a king in Kosala?" she asked, masking her keen curiosity with derision.

"No. But I was a war chief of the Afghulis who live in the Himelian mountains above the borders of Vendhya. These people favor the Kosalans. But why should Kosalans be building a city this far to the west?"

The figures portrayed were those of slender, olive-skinned men and women, with finely chiseled, exotic features. They wore filmy robes and many delicate jeweled ornaments, and were depicted mostly in attitudes of feasting, dancing, or lovemaking.

"Easterners, all right," grunted Conan, "but from where I don't know. They must have lived a disgustingly peaceful life, though, or they'd have scenes of wars and fights. Let's go up those stairs."

It was an ivory spiral that wound up from the chamber in which they were standing. They mounted three flights and came into a broad chamber on the fourth floor, which seemed to be the highest tier in the building. Skylights in the ceiling illuminated the room, in which light the fire-gems winked pallidly. Glancing through the doors they saw, except on one side, a series of similarly lighted chambers. This other door opened upon a balustraded gallery that overhung a hall much smaller than the one they had recently explored on the lower floor.

"Hell!" Valeria sat down disgustedly on a jade bench. "The people who deserted this city must have taken all their treasures with them. I'm tired of wandering through these bare rooms at random."

"All these upper chambers seem to be lighted," said Conan. "I wish we could find a window that overlooked the city. Let's have a look through that door over there."

"You have a look," advised Valeria. "I'm going to sit here and rest my feet."

Conan disappeared through the door opposite that one opening upon the gallery, and Valeria leaned back with her hands clasped behind her head, and thrust her booted legs out in front of her. These silent rooms and halls with their gleaming green clusters of ornaments and burning crimson floors were beginning to depress her. She wished they could find their way out of the maze into which they had wandered and emerge into a street. She wondered idly what furtive, dark feet had glided over those flaming floors in past centuries, how many deeds of cruelty and mystery those winking ceiling-gems had blazed down upon.

It was a faint noise that brought her out of her reflections. She was on her feet with her sword in her hand before she realized what had disturbed her. Conan had not returned, and she knew it was not he that she had heard.

The sound had come from somewhere beyond the door that opened on to the gallery. Soundlessly in her soft leather boots she glided through it, crept across the balcony and peered down between the heavy balustrades.

A man was stealing along the hall.

The sight of a human being in this supposedly deserted city was a startling shock. Crouching down behind the stone balusters, with every nerve tingling, Valeria glared down at the stealthy figure.

The man in no way resembled the figures depicted on the friezes. He was slightly above middle height, very dark, though not Negroid. He was naked but for a scanty silk clout that only partly covered his muscular hips, and a leather girdle, a hand's breadth broad, about his lean waist. His long black hair hung in lank strands about his shoulders, giving him a wild appearance. He was gaunt, but knots and cords of muscles stood out on his arms and legs, without that fleshy padding that presents a pleasing symmetry of contour. He was built with an economy that was almost repellent.

Yet it was not so much his physical appearance as his attitude that impressed the woman who watched him. He slunk along, stooped in a semi-crouch, his head turning from side to side. He grasped a wide-tipped blade in his right hand and she saw it shake with the intensity of the emotion that gripped him. He was afraid, trembling in the grip of some dire terror. When he turned his head she caught the blaze of wild eyes among the lank strands of black hair.

He did not see her. On tiptoe he glided across the hall and vanished through an open door. A moment later she heard a choking cry, and then silence fell again.

Consumed with curiosity, Valeria glided along the gallery until she came to a door above the one through which the man had passed. It opened into another, smaller gallery that encircled a large chamber.

This chamber was on the third floor, and its ceiling was not so high as that of the hall. It was lighted only by the fire-stones, and their weird green glow left the spaces under the balcony in shadows.

Valeria's eyes widened. The man she had seen was still in the chamber.

He lay face down on a dark crimson carpet in the middle of the room. His body was limp, his arms spread wide. His curved sword lay near him.

She wondered why he should lie there so motionless. Then her eyes narrowed as she stared down at the rug on which he lay. Beneath and about him the fabric showed a slightly different color, a deeper, brighter crimson.

Shivering slightly, she crouched down closer behind the balustrade, intently scanning the shadows under the overhanging gallery. They gave up no secret.

Suddenly another figure entered the grim drama. He was a man similar to the first, and he came in by a door opposite that which gave upon the hall.

His eyes glared at the sight of the man on the floor, and he spoke something in a staccato voice that sounded like "Chicmec!" The other did not move.

The man stepped quickly across the floor, bent, gripped the fallen man's shoulder and turned him over. A choking cry escaped him as the head fell back limply, disclosing a throat that had been severed from ear to ear.

The man let the corpse fall back upon the blood-stained carpet, and sprang to his feet, shaking like a windblown leaf. His face was an ashy mask of fear. But with one knee flexed for flight, he froze suddenly, became as immobile as an image, staring across the chamber with dilated eyes.

In the shadows beneath the balcony a ghostly light began to glow and grow, a light that was not part of the fire-stone gleam. Valeria felt her hair stir as she watched it; for, dimly visible in the throbbing radiance, there floated a human skull, and it was from this skull--human yet appallingly misshapen--that the spectral light seemed to emanate. It hung there like a disembodied head, conjured out of night and the shadows, growing more and more distinct; human, and yet not human as she knew humanity.

The man stood motionless, an embodiment of paralyzed horror, staring fixedly at the apparition. The thing moved out from the wall and a grotesque shadows moved with it. Slowly the shadow became visible as a man-like figure whose naked torso and limbs shone whitely, with the hue of bleached bones. The bare skull on its shoulders grinned eyelessly, in the midst of its unholy nimbus, and the man confronting it seemed unable to take his eyes from it. He stood still, his sword dangling from nerveless fingers, on his face the expression of a man bound by the spells of a mesmerist.

Valeria realized that it was not fear alone that paralyzed him. Some hellish quality of that throbbing glow had robbed him of his power to think and act. She herself, safely above the scene, felt the subtle impact of a nameless emanation that was a threat to sanity.

The horror swept toward its victim and he moved at last, but only to drop his sword and sink to his knees, covering his eyes with his hands. Dumbly he awaited the stroke of the blade that now gleamed in the apparition's hand as it reared above him like Death triumphant over mankind.

Valeria acted according to the first impulse of her wayward nature. With one tigerish movement she was over the balustrade and dropping to the floor behind the awful shape. It wheeled at the thud of her soft boots on the floor, but even as it turned, her keen blade lashed down and a fierce exultation swept her as she felt the edge cleave solid flesh and mortal bone.

The apparition cried out gurglingly and went down, severed through the shoulder, breastbone and spine, and as it fell the burning skull rolled clear, revealing a lank mop of black hair and a dark face twisted in the convulsions of death. Beneath the horrific masquerade there was a human being, a man similar to the one kneeling supinely on the floor.

The latter looked up at the sound of the blow and the cry, and now he glared in wild-eyed amazement at the whiteskinned woman who stood over the corpse with a dripping sword in her hand.

He staggered up, yammering as if the sight had almost unseated his reason. She was amazed to realize that she understood him. He was gibbering in the Stygian tongue, though in a dialect unfamiliar to her.

"Who are you? Whence come you? What do you in Xuchotl?" Then rushing on, without waiting for her to reply: "But you are a friend--goddess or devil, it makes no difference! You have slain the Burning Skull! It was but a man beneath it, after all! We deemed it a demon they conjured up out of the catacombs! Listen!"

He stopped short in his ravings and stiffened, straining his ears with painful intensity. The girl heard nothing.

"We must hasten!" he whispered. "They are west of the Great Hall! They may be all around us here! They may be creeping upon us even now!"

He seized her wrist in a convulsive grasp she found hard to break.

"Whom do you mean by 'they'?" she demanded.

He stared at her uncomprehendingly for an instant, as if he found her ignorance hard to understand.

"They?" he stammered vaguely. "Why--why, the people of Xotalanc! The clan of the man you slew. They who dwell by the eastern gate."

"You mean to say this city is inhabited?" she exclaimed.

"Aye! Aye!" He was writhing in the impatience of apprehension. "Come away! Come quick! We must return to Tecuhltli!"

"Where is that?" she demanded.

"The quarter by the western gate!" He had her wrist again and was pulling her toward the door through which he had first come. Great beads of perspiration dripped from his dark forehead, and his eyes blazed with terror.

"Wait a minute!" she growled, flinging off his hand. "Keep your hands off me, or I'll split your skull. What's all this about? Who are you? Where would you take me?"

He took a firm grip on himself, casting glances to all sides, and began speaking so fast his words tripped over each other.

"My name is Techotl. I am of Techultli. I and this man who lies with his throat cut came into the Halls of Silence to try and ambush some of the Xotalancas. But we became separated and I returned here to find him with his gullet slit. The Burning Skull did it, I know, just as he would have slain me had you not killed him. But perhaps he was not alone. Others may be stealing from Xotalanc! The gods themselves blench at the fate of those they take alive!"

At the thought he shook as with an ague and his dark skin grew ashy. Valeria frowned puzzledly at him. She sensed intelligence behind this rigmarole, but it was meaningless to her.

She turned toward the skull, which still glowed and pulsed on the floor, and was reaching a booted toe tentatively toward it, when the man who called himself Techotl sprang forward with a cry.

"Do not touch it! Do not even look at it! Madness and death lurk in it. The wizards of Xotalanc understand its secret--they found it in the catacombs, where lie the bones of terrible kings who ruled in Xuchotl in the black centuries of the past. To gaze upon it freezes the blood and withers the brain of a man who understands not its mystery. To touch it causes madness and destruction."

She scowled at him uncertainly. He was not a reassuring figure, with his lean, muscle-knotted frame, and snaky locks. In his eyes, behind the glow of terror, lurked a weird light she had never seen in the eyes of a man wholly sane. Yet he seemed sincere in his protestations.

"Come!" he begged, reaching for her hand, and then recoiling as he remembered her warning. "You are a stranger. How you came here I do not know, but if you were a goddess or a demon, come to aid Tecuhltli, you would know all the things you have asked me. You must be from beyond the great forest, whence our ancestors came. But you are our friend, or you would not have slain my enemy. Come quickly, before the Xotalancas find us and slay us!"

From his repellent, impassioned face she glanced to the sinister skull, smoldering and glowing on the floor near the dead man. It was like a skull seen in a dream, undeniably human, yet with disturbing distortions and malformations of contour and outline. In life the wearer of that skull must have presented an alien and monstrous aspect. Life? It seemed to possess some sort of life of its own. Its jaws yawned at her and snapped together. Its radiance grew brighter, more vivid, yet the impression of nightmare grew too; it was a dream; all life was a dream--it was Techotl's urgent voice which snapped Valeria back from the dim gulfs whither she was drifting.

"Do not look at the skull! Do not look at the skull!" It was a far cry from across unreckoned voids.

Valeria shook herself like a lion shaking his mane. Her vision cleared. Techotl was chattering: "In life it housed the awful brain of a king of magicians! It holds still the life and fire of magic drawn from outer spaces!"

With a curse Valeria leaped, lithe as a panther, and the skull crashed to flaming bits under her swinging sword. Somewhere in the room, or in the void, or in the dim reaches of her consciousness, an inhuman voice cried out in pain and rage.

Techotl's hand was plucking at her arm and he was gibbering: "You have broken it! You have destroyed it! Not all the black arts of Xotalanc can rebuild it! Come away! Come away quickly, now!"

"But I can't go," she protested. "I have a friend somewhere near by--"

The flare of his eyes cut her short as he stared past her with an expression grown ghastly. She wheeled just as four men rushed through as many doors, converging on the pair in the center of the chamber.

They were like the others she had seen, the same knotted muscles bulging on otherwise gaunt limbs, the same lank blue-black hair, the same mad glare in their wild eyes. They were armed and clad like Techotl, but on the breast of each was painted a white skull.

There were no challenges or war cries. Like blood-mad tigers the men of Xotalanc sprang at the throats of their enemies. Techotl met them with the fury of desperation, ducked the swipe of a wide-headed blade, and grappled with the wielder, and bore him to the floor where they rolled and wrestled in murderous silence.

The other three swarmed on Valeria, their weird eyes red as the eyes of mad dogs.

She killed the first who came within reach before he could strike a blow, her long straight blade splitting his skull even as his own sword lifted for a stroke. She side-stepped a thrust, even as she parried a slash. Her eyes danced and her lips smiled without mercy. Again she was Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, and the hum of her steel was like a bridal song in her

ears.

Her sword darted past a blade that sought to parry, and sheathed six inches of its point in a leather-guarded midriff. The man gasped agonizedly and went to his knees, but his tall mate lunged in, in ferocious silence, raining blow on blow so furiously that Valeria had no opportunity to counter. She stepped back coolly, parrying the strokes and watching for her chance to thrust home. He could not long keep up that flailing whirlwind. His arm would tire, his wind would fail; he would weaken, falter, and then her blade would slide smoothly into his heart. A sidelong glance showed her Techotl kneeling on the breast of his antagonist and striving to break the other's hold on his wrist and to drive home a dagger.

Sweat beaded the forehead of the man facing her, and his eyes were like burning coals. Smite as he would, he could not break past nor beat down her guard. His breath came in gusty gulps, his blows began to fall erratically. She stepped back to draw him out--and felt her thighs locked in an iron grip. She had forgotten the wounded man on the floor.

Crouching on his knees, he held her with both arms locked about her legs, and his mate croaked in triumph and began working his way around to come at her from the left side. Valeria wrenched and tore savagely, but in vain. She could free herself of this clinging menace with a downward flick of her sword, but in that instant the curved blade of the tall warrior would crash through her skull. The wounded man began to worry at her bare thigh with his teeth like a wild beast.

She reached down with her left hand and gripped his long hair, forcing his head back so that his white teeth and rolling eyes gleamed up at her. The tall Xotalanc cried out fiercely and leaped in, smiting with all the fury of his arm. Awkwardly she parried the stroke, and it beat the flat of her blade down on her head so that she saw sparks flash before her eyes, and staggered. Up went the sword again, with a low, beast-like cry of triumph--and then a giant form loomed behind the Xotalanc and steel flashed like a jet of blue lightning. The cry of the warrior broke short and he went down like an ox beneath the pole-ax, his brains gushing from his skull that had been split to the throat.

"Conan!" gasped Valeria. In a gust of passion she turned on the Xotalanc whose long hair she still gripped in her left hand. "Dog of Hell!" Her blade swished as it cut the air in an upswinging arc with a blur in the middle, and the headless body slumped down, spurting blood. She hurled the severed head across the room.

"What the devil's going on here?" Conan bestrode the corpse of the man he had killed, broadsword in hand, glaring about him in amazement.

Techotl was rising from the twitching figure of the last Xotalanc, shaking red drops from his dagger. He was bleeding from the stab deep in the thigh. He stared at Conan with dilated eyes.

"What is all this?" Conan demanded again, not yet recovered from the stunning surprise of finding Valeria engaged in a savage battle with this fantastic figures in a city he had thought empty and uninhabited. Returning from an aimless exploration of the upper chambers to find Valeria missing from the room where he had left her, he had followed the sounds of strife that burst on his dumfounded ears.

"Five dead dogs!" exclaimed Techotl, his flaming eyes reflecting a ghastly exultation. "Five slain! Five crimson nails for the black pillar! The gods of blood be thanked!"

He lifted quivering hands on high, and then, with the face of a fiend, he spat on the corpses and stamped on their faces, dancing in his ghoulish glee. His recent allies eyed him in amazement, and Conan asked, in the Aquilonian tongue: "Who is this madman?"

Valeria shrugged her shoulders.

"He says his name's Techotl. From his babblings I gather that his people live at one end of this crazy city, and these others at the other end. Maybe we'd better go with him. He seems friendly, and it's easy to see that the other clan isn't."

Techotl had ceased his dancing and was listening again, his head tilted sidewise, dog-like, triumph struggling with fear in his repellent countenance.

"Come away, now!" he whispered. "We have done enough! Five dead dogs! My people will welcome you! They will honor you! But come! It is far to Tecuhltli. At any moment the Xotalancs may come on us in numbers too great even for your swords."

"Lead the way," grunted Conan.

Techotl instantly mounted a stair leading up to the gallery, beckoning them to follow him, which they did, moving rapidly to keep on his heels. Having reached the gallery, he plunged into a door that opened toward the west, and hurried through chamber after chamber, each lighted by skylights or green fire-jewels.

"What sort of place can this be?" muttered Valeria under her breath.

"Crom knows!" answered Conan. "I've seen his kind before, though. They live on the shores of Lake Zuad, near the border of Kush. They're a sort of mongrel Stygians, mixed with another race that wandered into Stygia from the east some centuries ago and were absorbed by them. They're called Tlazitlans. I'm willing to bet it wasn't they who built this city, though."

Techotl's fear did not seem to diminish as they drew away from the chamber where the dead men lay. He kept twisting his head on his shoulder to listen for sounds of pursuit, and stared with burning intensity into every doorway they passed.

Valeria shivered in spite of herself. She feared no man. But the weird floor beneath her feet, the uncanny jewels over her head, dividing the lurking shadows among them, the stealth and terror of their guide, impressed her with a nameless apprehension, a sensation of lurking, inhuman peril.

"They may be between us and Tecuhltli!" he whispered once. "We must beware lest they be lying in wait!"

"Why don't we get out of this infernal palace, and take to the streets?" demanded Valeria.

"There are no streets in Xuchotl," he answered. "No squares nor open courts. The whole city is built like one giant palace under one great roof. The nearest approach to a street is the Great Hall which traverses the city from the north gate to the south gate. The only doors opening into the outer world are the city gates, through which no living man has passed for fifty years."

"How long have you dwelt here?" asked Conan.

"I was born in the castle of Tecuhltli thirty-five years ago. I have never set foot outside the city. For the love of the gods, let us go silently! These halls may be full of lurking devils. Olmec shall tell you all when we reach Tecuhltli."

So in silence they glided on with the green fire-stones blinking overhead and the flaming floors smoldering under their feet, and it seemed to Valeria as if they fled through Hell, guided by a dark-faced lank-haired goblin.

Yet it was Conan who halted them as they were crossing an unusually wide chamber. His wilderness-bred ears were keener even than the ears of Techotl, whetted though his were by a lifetime of warfare in this silent corridors.

"You think some of your enemies may be ahead of us, lying in ambush?"

"They prowl through these rooms at all hours," answered Techotl, "as do we. The halls and chambers between Tecuhltli and Xotalanc are a disputed region, owned by no man. We call it the Halls of Silence. Why do you ask?"

"Because men are in the chambers ahead of us," answered Conan. "I heard steel clink against stone."

Again a shaking seized Techotl, and he clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering.

"Perhaps they are your friends," suggested Valeria.

"We dare not chance it," he panted, and moved with frenzied activity. He turned aside and glided through a doorway on the left which led into a chamber from which an ivory staircase wound down into darkness.

"This leads to an unlighted corridor below us!" he hissed, great beads of perspiration standing out on his brow. "They may be lurking there, too. It may all be a trick to draw us into it. But we must take the chance that they have laid their ambush in the rooms above. Come swiftly now!"

Softly as phantoms they descended the stair and came to the mouth of a corridor black as night. They crouched there for a moment, listening, and then melted into it. As they moved along, Valeria's flesh crawled between her shoulders in momentary expectation of a sword-thrust in the dark. But for Conan's iron fingers gripping her arm she had no physical cognizance of her companions. Neither made as much noise as a cat would have made. The darkness was absolute. One hand, outstretched, touched a wall, and occasionally she felt a door under her fingers. The hallway seemed interminable.

Suddenly they were galvanized by a sound behind them. Valeria's flesh crawled anew, for she recognized it as the soft opening of a door. Men had come into the corridor behind them. Even with the thought she stumbled over something that felt like a human skull. It rolled across the floor with an appalling clatter.

"Run!" yelped Techotl, a note of hysteria in his voice, and was away down the corridor like a flying ghost.

Again Valeria felt Conan's hand bearing her up and sweeping her along as they raced after their guide. Conan could see in the dark no better than she, but he possessed a sort of instinct that made his course unerring. Without his support and guidance she would have fallen or stumbled against the wall. Down the corridor they sped, while the swift patter of flying feet drew closer and closer, and then suddenly Techotl panted: "Here is the stair! After me, quick! Oh, quick!"

His hand came out of the dark and caught Valeria's wrist as she stumbled blindly on the steps. She felt herself half dragged, half lifted up the winding stair, while Conan released her and turned on the steps, his ears and instincts telling him their foes were hard at their backs. And the sounds were not all those of human feet.

Something came writhing up the steps, something that slithered and rustled and brought a chill in the air with it. Conan lashed down with his great sword and felt the blade shear through something that might have been flesh and bone, and cut deep into the stair beneath. Something touched his foot that chilled like the touch of frost, and then the darkness beneath him was disturbed by a frightful thrashing and lashing, and a man cried out in agony.

The next moment Conan was racing up the winding staircase, and through a door that stood open at the head.

Valeria and Techotl were already through, and Techotl slammed the door and shot a bolt across it--the first Conan had seen since they had left the outer gate.

Then he turned and ran across the well-lighted chamber into which they had come, and as they passed through the farther door, Conan glanced back and saw the door groaning and straining under heavy pressure violently applied from the other side.

Though Techotl did not abate either his speed or his caution, he seemed more confident now. He had the air of a man who had come into familiar territory, within call of friends.

But Conan renewed his terror by asking: "What was that thing I fought on the stairs?"

"The men of Xotalanc," answered Techotl, without looking back. "I told you the halls were full of them."

"This wasn't a man," grunted Conan. "It was something that crawled, and it was as cold as ice to the touch. I think I cut it asunder. It fell back on the men who were following us, and must have killed one of them in its death throes."

Techotl's head jerked back, his face ashy again. Convulsively he quickened his pace.

"It was the Crawler! A monster they have brought out of the catacombs to aid them! What it is, we do not know, but we have found our people hideously slain by it. In Set's name, hasten! If they put it on our trail, it will follow us to the very doors of Tecuhltli!"

"I doubt it," grunted Conan. "That was a shrewd cut I dealt it on the stair."

"Hasten! Hasten!" groaned Techotl.

They ran through a series of green-lit chambers, traversed a broad hall, and halted before a giant bronze door.

Techotl said: "This is Tecuhltli!"

The People of the Feud

Techotl smote on the bronze door with his clenched hand, and then turned sidewise, so that he could watch back along the hall.

"Men have been smitten down before this door, when they thought they were safe," he said.

"Why don't they open the door?" asked Conan.

"They are looking at us through the Eye," answered Techotl. "They are puzzled at the sight of you." He lifted his voice and called: "Open the door, Excelan! It is I, Techotl, with friends from the great world beyond the forest!--They will open," he assured his allies.

"They'd better do it in a hurry, then," said Conan grimly. "I hear something crawling along the floor beyond the hall."

Techotl went ashy again and attacked the door with his fists, screaming: "Open, you fools, open! The Crawler is at our heels!"

Even as he beat and shouted, the great bronze door swung noiselessly back, revealing a heavy chain across the entrance, over which spearheads bristled and fierce countenances regarded them intently for an instant. Then the chain was dropped and Techotl grasped the arms of his friends in a nervous frenzy and fairly dragged them over the threshold. A glance over his shoulder just as the door was closing showed Conan the long dim vista of the hall, and dimly framed at the other end an ophidian shape that writhed slowly and painfully into view, flowing in a dull-hued length from a chamber door, its hideous bloodstained head wagging drunkenly. Then the closing door shut off the view.

Inside the square chamber into which they had come heavy bolts were drawn across the door, and the chain locked into place. The door was made to stand the battering of a siege. Four men stood on guard, of the same lank-haired, dark-skinned breed as Techotl, with spears in their hands and swords at their hips. In the wall near the door there was a complicated contrivance of mirrors which Conan guessed was the Eye Techotl had mentioned, so arranged that a narrow, crystal-paned slot in the wall could be looked through from within without being discernible from without. The four guardsmen stared at the strangers with wonder, but asked no question, nor did Techotl vouchsafe any information. He moved with easy confidence now, as if he had shed his cloak of indecision and fear the instant he crossed the threshold.

"Come!" he urged his new-found friends, but Conan glanced toward the door.

"What about those fellows who were following us? Won't they try to storm that door?"

Techotl shook his head.

"They know they cannot break down the Door of the Eagle. They will flee back to Xotalanc, with their crawling fiend. Come! I will take you to the rulers of Tecuhltli."

One of the four guards opened the door opposite the one by which they had entered, and they passed through into a hallway which, like most of the rooms on that level, was lighted by both the slot-like skylights and the clusters of winking fire-gems. But unlike the other rooms they had traversed, this hall showed evidences of occupation. Velvet tapestries adorned the glossy jade walls, rich rugs were on the crimson floors, and the ivory seats, benches and divans were littered with satin cushions.

The hall ended in an ornate door, before which stood no guard. Without ceremony Techotl thrust the door open and ushered his friends into a broad chamber, where some thirty dark-skinned men and women lounged on satin-covered couches sprang up with exclamations of amazement.

The men, all except one, were of the same type as Techotl, and the women were equally dark and strange-eyed, though not unbeautiful in a weird dark way. They wore sandals, golden breastplates, and scanty silk skirts supported by gem-crusted girdles, and their black manes, cut square at their naked shoulders, were bound with silver circlets.

On a wide ivory seat on a jade dais sat a man and a woman who differed subtly from the others. He was a giant, with an enormous sweep of breast and the shoulders of a bull. Unlike the others, he was bearded, with a thick, blue-black beard which fell almost to his broad girdle. He wore a robe of purple silk which reflected changing sheens of color with his every movement, and one wide sleeve, drawn back to his elbow, revealed a forearm massive with corded muscles. The band which confined his blue-black locks was set with glittering jewels.

The woman beside him sprang to her feet with a startled exclamation as the strangers entered, and her eyes, passing over Conan, fixed themselves with burning intensity on Valeria. She was tall and lithe, by far the most beautiful woman in the room. She was clad more scantily even than the others; for instead of a skirt she wore merely a broad strip of gilt-worked purple cloth fastened to the middle of her girdle which fell below her knees. Another strip at the back of her girdle completed that part of her costume, which she wore with a cynical indifference. Her breast-plates and the circlet about her temples were adorned with gems. In her eyes alone of all the dark-skinned people there lurked no brooding gleam of madness. She spoke no word after her first exclamation; she stood tensely, her hands clenched, staring at Valeria.

The man on the ivory seat had not risen.

"Prince Olmec," spoke Techotl, bowing low, with arms outspread and the palms of his hands turned upward, "I bring allies from the world beyond the forest. In the Chamber of Techotl the Burning Skull slew Chicmec, my companion--"

"The Burning Skull!" It was a shuddering whisper of fear from the people of Tecuhltli.

"Aye! Then came I, and found Chicmec lying with his throat cut. Before I could flee, the Burning Skull came upon me, and when I looked upon it my blood became as ice and the marrow of my bones melted. I could neither fight nor run. I could only await the stroke. Then came this white-skinned woman and struck him down with her sword; and lo, it was only a dog of Xotalanc with white paint upon his skin and the living skull of an ancient wizard upon his head! Now that skull lies in many pieces, and the dog who wore it is a dead man!"

An indescribably fierce exultation edged the last sentence, and was echoed in the low, savage exclamations from the crowding listeners.

"But wait!" exclaimed Techotl. "There is more! While I talked with the woman, four Xotalancs came upon us! One I slew--there is the stab in my thigh to prove how desperate was the fight. Two the woman killed. But we were hard pressed when this man came into the fray and split the skull of the fourth! Aye! Five crimson nails there are to be driven into the pillar of vengeance!"

He pointed to a black column of ebony which stood behind the dais. Hundreds of red dots scarred its polished surface--the bright scarlet heads of heavy copper nails driven into the black wood.

"Five red nails for five Xotalanca lives!" exulted Techotl, and the horrible exultation in the faces of the listeners made them inhuman.

"Who are these people?" asked Olmec, and his voice was like the low, deep rumble of a distant bull. None of the people of Xuchotl spoke loudly. It was as if they had absorbed into their souls the silence of the empty halls and deserted chambers.

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian," answered the barbarian briefly. "This woman is Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, an Aquilonian pirate. We are deserters from an army on the Darfar border, far to the north, and are trying to reach the coast."

The woman on the dais spoke loudly, her words tripping in her haste.

"You can never reach the coast! There is no escape from Xuchotl! You will spend the rest of your lives in this city!"

"What do you mean," growled Conan, clapping his hand to his hilt and stepping about so as to face both the dais and the rest of the room. "Are you telling us we're prisoners?"

"She did not mean that," interposed Olmec. "We are your friends. We would not restrain you against your will. But I fear other circumstances will make it impossible for you to leave Xuchotl."

His eyes flickered to Valeria, and he lowered them quickly.

"This woman is Tascela," he said. "She is a princess of Tecuhltli. But let food and drink be brought our guests. Doubtless they are hungry, and weary from their long travels."

He indicated an ivory table, and after an exchange of glances, the adventurers seated themselves. The Cimmerian was suspicious. His fierce blue eyes roved about the chamber, and he kept his sword close to his hand. But an invitation to eat and drink never found him backward. His eyes kept wandering to Tascela, but the princess had eyes only for his white-skinned companion.

Techotl, who had bound a strip of silk about his wounded thigh, placed himself at the table to attend to the wants of his friends, seeming to consider it a privilege and honor to see after their needs. He inspected the food and drink the others brought in gold vessels and dishes, and tasted each before he placed it before his guests. While they ate, Olmec sat in silence on his ivory seat, watching them from under his broad black brows. Tascela sat beside him, chin cupped in her hands and her elbows resting on her knees. Her dark, enigmatic eyes, burning with a mysterious light, never left Valeria's supple figure. Behind her seat a sullen handsome girl waved an ostrich-plume fan with a slow rhythm.

The food was fruit of an exotic kind unfamiliar to the wanderers, but very palatable, and the drink was a light crimson wine that carried a heady tang.

"You have come from afar," said Olmec at last. "I have read the books of our fathers. Aquilonia lies beyond the lands of the Stygians and the Shemites, beyond Argos and Zingara; and Cimmeria lies beyond Aquilonia."

"We have each a roving foot," answered Conan carelessly.

"How you won through the forest is a wonder to me," quoth Olmec. "In bygone days a thousand fighting men scarcely were able to carve a road through its perils."

"We encountered a bench-legged monstrosity about the size of a mastodon," said Conan casually, holding out his wine goblet which Techutl filled with evident pleasure. "But when we'd killed it we had no further trouble."

The wine vessel slipped from Techotl's hand to crash on the floor. His dusky skin went ashy. Olmec started to his feet, an image of stunned amazement, and a low gasp of awe or terror breathed up from the others. Some slipped to their knees as if their legs would not support them. Only Tascela seemed not to have heard. Conan glared about him bewilderedly.

"What's the matter? What are you gaping about?"

"You--you slew the dragon-god?"

"God? I killed a dragon. Why not? It was trying to gobble us up."

"But dragons are immortal!" exclaimed Olmec. "They slay each other, but no man ever killed a dragon! The thousand fighting men of our ancestors who fought their way to Xuchotl could not prevail against them! Their swords broke like twigs against their scales!"

"If your ancestors had thought to dip their spears in the poisonous juice of Derketa's Apples," quoth Conan, with his mouth full, "and jab them in the eyes or mouth or somewhere like that, they'd have seen that dragons are no more immortal than any other chunk of beef. The carcass lies at the edge of the trees, just within the forest. If you don't believe me, go and look for yourself."

Olmec shook his head, not in disbelief but in wonder.

"It was because of the dragons that our ancestors took refuge in Xuchotl," said he. "They dared not pass through the plain and plunge into the forest beyond. Scores of them were seized and devoured by the monsters before they could reach the city."

"Then your ancestors didn't build Xuchotl?" asked Valeria.

"It was ancient when they first came into the land. How long it had stood here, not even its degenerate inhabitants knew."

"Your people came from Lake Zuad?" questioned Conan.

"Aye. More than half a century ago a tribe of the Tlazitlans rebelled against the Stygian king, and, being defeated in battle, fled southward. For many weeks they wandered over grasslands, desert and hills, and at last they came into the great forest, a thousand fighting men with their women and children.

"It was in the forest that the dragons fell upon them and tore many to pieces; so the people fled in a frenzy of fear before them, and at last came into the plain and saw the city of Xuchotl in the midst of it.

"They camped before the city, not daring to leave the plain, for the night was made hideous with the noise of the battling monsters through the forest. They made war incessantly upon one another. Yet they came not into the plain.

"The people of the city shut their gates and shot arrows at our people from the walls. The Tlazitlans were imprisoned on the plain, as if the ring of the forest had been a great wall; for to venture into the woods would have been madness.

"That night there came secretly to their camp a slave from the city, one of their own blood, who with a band of exploring soldiers had wandered into the forest long before, when he was a young man. The dragons had devoured all his companions, but he had been taken into the city to dwell in servitude. His name was Tolkemec." A flame lighted the dark eyes at mention of the name, and some of the people muttered obscenely and spat. "He promised to open the gates to the warriors. He asked only that all captives taken be delivered into his hands.

"At dawn he opened the gates. The warriors swarmed in and the halls of Xuchotl ran red. Only a few hundred folk dwelt there, decaying remnants of a once great race. Tolkemec said they came from the east, long ago, from Old Kosala, when the ancestors of those who now dwell in Kosala came up from the south and drove forth the original inhabitants of the land. They wandered far westward and finally found this forest-girdled plain, inhabited then by a tribe of black people.

"These they enslaved and set to building a city. From the hills to the east they brought jade and marble and lapis lazuli, and gold, silver, and copper. Herds of elephants provided them with ivory. When their city was completed, they slew all the black slaves. And their magicians made a terrible magic to guard the city; for by their necromantic arts they re-created the dragons which had once dwelt in this lost land, and whose monstrous bones they found in the forest. Those bones they clothed in flesh and life, and the living beasts walked the earth as they walked it when time was young. But the wizards wove a spell that kept them in the forest and they came not into the plain.

"So for many centuries the people of Xuchotl dwelt in their city, cultivating the fertile plain, until their wise men learned how to grow fruit within the city--fruit which is not planted in soil, but obtains its nourishment out of the air--and then they let the irrigation ditches run dry and dwelt more and more in luxurious sloth, until decay seized them. They were a dying race when our ancestors broke through the forest and came into the plain. Their wizards had died, and the people had forgot their ancient necromancy. They could fight neither by sorcery nor the sword.

"Well, our fathers slew the people of Xuchotl, all except a hundred which were given living into the hands of Tolkemec, who had been their slave; and for many days and nights the halls re-echoed to their screams under the agony of his tortures.

"So the Tlazitlans dwelt here, for a while in peace, ruled by the brothers Tecuhltli and Xotalanc, and by Tolkemec. Tolkemec took a girl of the tribe to wife, and because he had opened the gates, and because he knew many of the arts of the Xuchotlans, he shared the rule of the tribe with the brothers who had led the rebellion and the flight.

"For a few years, then, they dwelt at peace within the city, doing little but eating, drinking, and making love, and raising children. There was no necessity to till the plain, for Tolkemec taught them how to cultivate the air-devouring fruits. Besides, the slaying of the Xuchotlans broke the spell that held the dragons in the forest, and they came nightly and bellowed about the gates of the city. The plain ran red with the blood of their eternal warfare, and it was then that--" He bit his tongue in the midst of the sentence, then presently continued, but Valeria and Conan felt that he had checked an admission he had considered unwise.

"Five years they dwelt in peace. Then"--Olmec's eyes rested briefly on the silent woman at his side--"Xotalanc took a woman to wife, a woman whom both Tecuhltli and old Tolkemec desired. In his madness, Tecuhltli stole her from her husband. Aye, she went willingly enough. Tolkemec, to spite Xotalanc, aided Tecuhltli. Xotalanc demanded that she be given back to him, and the council of the tribe decided that the matter should be left to the woman. She chose to remain with Tecuhltli. In wrath Xotalanc sought to take her back by force, and the retainers of the brothers came to blows in the Great Hall.

"There was much bitterness. Blood was shed on both sides. The quarrel became a feud, the feud an open war. From the welter three factions emerged--Tecuhltli, Xotalanc, and Tolkemec. Already, in the days of peace, they had divided the city between them. Tecuhltli dwelt in the western quarter of the city, Xotalanc in the eastern, and Tolkemec with his family by the southern gate.

"Anger and resentment and jealousy blossomed into bloodshed and rape and murder. Once the sword was drawn there was no turning back; for blood called for blood, and vengeance followed swift on the heels of atrocity. Tecuhltli fought with Xotalanc, and Tolkemec aided first one and then the other, betraying each faction as it fitted his purposes. Tecuhltli and his people withdrew into the quarter of the western gate, where we now sit. Xuchotl is built in the shape of an oval. Tecuhltli, which took its name from its prince, occupies the western end of the oval. The people blocked up all doors connecting the quarter with the rest of the city, except one on each floor, which could be defended easily. They went into the pits below the city and built a wall cutting off the western end of the catacombs, where lie the bodies of the ancient Xuchotlans, and of those Tlazitlans slain in the feud. They dwelt as in a besieged castle, making sorties and forays on their enemies.

"The people of Xotalanc likewise fortified the eastern quarter of the city, and Tolkemec did likewise with the quarter by the southern gate. The central part of the city was left bare and uninhabited. Those empty halls and chambers became a battleground, and a region of brooding terror.

"Tolkemec warred on both clans. He was a fiend in the form of a human, worse than Xotalanc. He knew many secrets of the city he never told the others. From the crypts of the catacombs he plundered the dead of their grisly secrets--secrets of ancient kings and wizards, long forgotten by the degenerate Xuchotlans our ancestors slew. But all his magic did not aid him the night we of Tecuhltli stormed his castle and butchered all his people. Tolkemec we tortured for many days."

His voice sank to a caressing slur, and a faraway look grew in his eyes, as if he looked back over the years to a scene which caused him intense pleasure.

"Aye, we kept the life in him until he screamed for death as for a bride. At last we took him living from the torture chamber and cast him into a dungeon for the rats to gnaw as he died. From that dungeon, somehow, he managed to escape, and dragged himself into the catacombs. There without doubt he died, for the only way out of the catacombs beneath Tecuhltli is through Tecuhltli, and he never emerged by that way. His bones were never found and the superstitious among our people swear that his ghost haunts the crypts to this day, wailing among the bones of the dead. Twelve years ago we butchered the people of Tolkemec, but the feud raged on between Tecuhltli and Xotalanc, as it will rage until the last man, the last woman is dead.

"It was fifty years ago that Tecuhltli stole the wife of Xotalanc. Half a century the feud has endured. I was born in it. All in this chamber, except Tascela, were born in it. We expect to die in it.

"We are a dying race, even as were those Xuchotlans our ancestors slew. When the feud began there were hundreds in each faction. Now we of Tecuhltli number only these you see before you, and the men who guard the four doors: forty in all. How many Xotalancas there are we do not know, but I doubt if they are much more numerous than we. For fifteen years no children have been born to us, and we have seen none among the Xotalancas.

"We are dying, but before we die we will slay as many of the men of Xotalanc as the gods permit."

And with his weird eyes blazing, Olmec spoke long of that grisly feud, fought out in silent chambers and dim halls under the blaze of the green fire-jewels, on floors smoldering with the flames of hell and splashed with deeper crimson from severed veins. In that long butchery a whole generation had perished. Xotalanc was dead, long ago, slain in a grim battle on an ivory stair. Tecuhltli was dead, flayed alive by the maddened Xotalancas who had captured him.

Without emotion Olmec told of hideous battles fought in black corridors, of ambushes on twisting stairs, and red butcheries. With a redder, more abysmal gleam in his deep dark eyes he told of men and women flayed alive, mutilated and dismembered, of captives howling under tortures so ghastly that even the barbarous Cimmerian grunted. No wonder Techotl had trembled with the terror of capture! Yet he had gone forth to slay if he could, driven by hate that was stronger than his fear. Olmec spoke further, of dark and mysterious matters, of black magic and wizardry conjured out of the black night of the catacombs, of weird creatures invoked out of darkness for horrible allies. In these things the Xotalancas had the advantage, for it was in the eastern catacombs where lay the bones of the greatest wizards of the ancient Xuchotlans, with their immemorial secrets.

Valeria listened with morbid fascination. The feud had become a terrible elemental power driving the people of Xuchotl inexorably on to doom and extinction. It filled their whole lives. They were born in it, and they expected to die in it. They never left their barricaded castle except to steal forth into the Halls of Silence that lay between the opposing fortresses, to slay and be slain. Sometimes the raiders returned with frantic captives, or with grim tokens of victory in fight. Sometimes they did not return at all, or returned only as severed limbs cast down before the bolted bronze doors. It was a ghastly, unreal nightmare existence these people lived, shut off from the rest of the world, caught together like rabid rats in the same trap, butchering one another through the years, crouching and creeping through the sunless corridors to maim and torture and murder.

While Olmec talked, Valeria felt the blazing eyes of Tascela fixed upon her. The princess seemed not to hear what Olmec was saying. Her expression, as he narrated victories or defeats, did not mirror the wild rage or fiendish exultation that alternated on the faces of the other Tecuhltli. The feud that was an obsession to her clansmen seemed meaningless to her. Valeria found her indifferent callousness more repugnant than Olmec's naked ferocity.

"And we can never leave the city," said Olmec. "For fifty years on one has left it except those--" Again he checked himself.

"Even without the peril of the dragons," he continued, "we who were born and raised in the city would not dare leave it. We have never set foot outside the walls. We are not accustomed to the open sky and the naked sun. No; we were born in Xuchotl, and in Xuchotl we shall die."

"Well," said Conan, "with your leave we'll take our chances with the dragons. This feud is none of our business. If you'll show us to the west gate we'll be on our way."

Tascela's hands clenched, and she started to speak, but Olmec interrupted her: "It is nearly nightfall. If you wander forth into the plain by night, you will certainly fall prey to the dragons."

"We crossed it last night, and slept in the open without seeing any," returned Conan.

Tascela smiled mirthlessly. "You dare not leave Xuchotl!"

Conan glared at her with instinctive antagonism; she was not looking at him, but at the woman opposite him.

"I think they dare," stated Olmec. "But look you, Conan and Valeria, the gods must have sent you to us, to cast victory into the laps of the Tecuhltli! You are professional fighters--why not fight for us? We have wealth in abundance--precious jewels are as common in Xuchotl as cobblestones are in the cities of the world. Some the Xuchotlans brought with them from Kosala. Some, like the firestones, they found in the hills to the east. Aid us to wipe out the Xotalancas, and we will give you all the jewels you can carry."

"And will you help us destroy the dragons?" asked Valeria. "With bows and poisoned arrows thirty men could slay all the dragons in the forest."

"Aye!" replied Olmec promptly. "We have forgotten the use of the bow, in years of hand-to-hand fighting, but we can learn again."

"What do you say?" Valeria inquired of Conan.

"We're both penniless vagabonds," he grinned hardily. "I'd as soon kill Xotalancas as anybody."

"Then you agree?" exclaimed Olmec, while Techotl fairly hugged himself with delight.

"Aye. And now suppose you show us chambers where we can sleep, so we can be fresh tomorrow for the beginning of the slaying."

Olmec nodded, and waved a hand, and Techotl and a woman led the adventurers into a corridor which led through a door off to the left of the jade dais. A glance back showed Valeria Olmec sitting on his throne, chin on knotted fist, staring after them. His eyes burned with a weird flame. Tascela leaned back in her seat, whispering to the sullen-faced maid, Yasala, who leaned over her shoulder, her ear to the princess's moving lips.

The hallway was not so broad as most they had traversed, but it was long. Presently the woman halted, opened a door, and drew aside for Valeria to enter.

"Wait a minute," growled Conan. "Where do I sleep?"

Techotl pointed to a chamber across the hallway, but one door farther down. Conan hesitated, and seemed inclined to raise an objection, but Valeria smiled spitefully at him and shut the door in his face. He muttered something uncomplimentary about women in general, and strode off down the corridor after Techotl.

In the ornate chamber where he was to sleep, he glanced up at the slot-like skylights. Some were wide enough to admit the body of a slender man, supposing the glass were broken.

"Why don't the Xotalancas come over the roofs and shatter those skylights?" he asked.

"They cannot be broken," answered Techotl. "Besides, the roofs would be hard to clamber over. They are mostly spires and domes and steep ridges."

He volunteered more information about the "castle" of Tecuhltli. Like the rest of the city it contained four stories, or tiers of chambers, with towers jutting up from the roof. Each tier was named; indeed, the people of Xuchotl had a name for each chamber, hall, and stair in the city, as people of more normal cities designate streets and quarters. In Tecuhltli the floors were named The Eagle's Tier, The Ape's Tier, The Tiger's Tier and The Serpent's Tier, in the order as enumerated, The Eagle's Tier being the highest, or fourth, floor.

"Who is Tascela?" asked Conan. "Olmec's wife?"

Techotl shuddered and glanced furtively about him before answering.

"No. She is--Tascela! She was the wife of Xotalanc--the woman Tecuhltli stole, to start the feud."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Conan. "That woman is beautiful and young. Are you trying to tell me that she was a wife fifty years ago?"

"Aye! I swear it! She was a full-grown woman when the Tlazitlans journeyed from Lake Zuad. It was because the king of Stygia desired her for a concubine that Xotalanc and his brother rebelled and fled into the wilderness. She is a witch, who possesses the secret of perpetual youth."

"What's that?" asked Conan.

Techotl shuddered again.

"Ask me not! I dare not speak. It is too grisly, even for Xuchotl!"

And touching his finger to his lips, he glided from the chamber.

Scent of Black Lotus

Valeria unbuckled her sword belt and laid it with the sheathed weapon on the couch where she meant to sleep. She noted that the doors were supplied with bolts, and asked where they led.

"Those lead to adjoining chambers," answered the woman, indicating the doors on right and left. "That one?"--pointing to a copper-bound door opposite that which opened into the corridor--"leads to a corridor which runs to a stair that descends into the catacombs. Do not fear; naught can harm you here."

"Who spoke of fear?" snapped Valeria. "I just like to know what sort of harbor I'm dropping anchor in. No, I don't want you to sleep at the foot of my couch. I'm not accustomed to being waited on--not by women, anyway. You have my leave to go."

Alone in the room, the pirate shot the bolts on all the doors, kicked off her boots and stretched luxuriously out on the couch. She imagined Conan similarly situated across the corridor, but her feminine vanity prompted her to visualize him as scowling and muttering with chagrin as he cast himself on his solitary couch, and she grinned with gleeful malice as she prepared herself for slumber.

Outside, night had fallen. In the halls of Xuchotl the green fire-jewels blazed like the eyes of prehistoric cats. Somewhere among the dark towers, a night wind moaned like a restless spirit. Through the dim passages, stealthy figures began stealing, like disembodied shadows.

Valeria awoke suddenly on her couch. In the dusky emerald glow of the fire-gems she saw a shadowy figure bending over her. For a bemused instant the apparition seemed part of the dream she had been dreaming. She had seemed to lie on the couch in the chamber as she was actually lying, while over her pulsed and throbbed a gigantic black blossom so enormous that it hid the ceiling. Its exotic perfume pervaded her being, inducing a delicious, sensuous languor that was something more and less than sleep. She was sinking into scented billows of insensible bliss, when something touched her face. So supersensitive were her drugged senses, that the light touch was like a dislocating impact, jolting her rudely into full wakefulness. Then it was that she saw, not a gargantuan blossom, but a dark-skinned woman standing above her.

With the realization came anger and instant action. The woman turned lithely, but before she could run Valeria was on her feet and had caught her arm. She fought like a wildcat for an instant, and then subsided as she felt herself crushed by the superior strength of her captor. The pirate wrenched the woman around to face her, caught her chin with her free hand and forced her captive to meet her gaze. It was the sullen Yasala, Tascela's maid.

"What the devil were you doing bending over me? What's that in your hand?"

The woman made no reply, but sought to cast away the object. Valeria twisted her arm around in front of her, and the thing fell to the floor--a great black exotic blossom on a jade-green stem, large as a woman's head, to be sure, but tiny beside the exaggerated vision she had seen.

"The black lotus!" said Valeria between her teeth. "The blossom whose scent brings deep sleep. You were trying to drug me! If you hadn't accidentally touched my face with the petals, you'd have--why did you do it? What's your game?"

Yasala maintained a sulky silence, and with an oath Valeria whirled her around, forced her to her knees and twisted her arm up behind her back.

"Tell me, or I'll tear your arm out of its socket!"

Yasala squirmed in anguish as her arm was forced excruciatingly up between her shoulder blades, but a violent shaking of her head was the only answer she made.

"Slut!" Valeria cast her from her to sprawl on the floor. The pirate glared at the prostrate figure with blazing eyes. Fear and the memory of Tascela's burning eyes stirred in her, rousing all her tigerish instincts of self-preservation. These people were decadent; any sort of perversity might be expected to be encountered among them. But Valeria sensed here something that moved behind the scenes, some secret terror fouler than common degeneracy. Fear and revulsion of this weird city swept her. These people were neither sane nor normal; she began to doubt if they were even human. Madness smoldered in the eyes of them all--all except the cruel, cryptic eyes of Tascela, which held secrets and mysteries more abysmal than madness.

She lifted her head and listened intently. The halls of Xuchotl were as silent as if it were in reality a dead city. The green jewels bathed the chamber in a nightmare glow, in which the eyes of the woman on the floor glittered eerily up at her. A thrill of panic throbbed through Valeria, driving the last vestige of mercy from her fierce soul.

"Why did you try to drug me?" she muttered, grasping the woman's black hair, and forcing her head back to glare into her sullen, long-lashed eyes. "Did Tascela send you?"

No answer. Valeria cursed venomously and slapped the woman first on one cheek and then the other. The blows resounded through the room, but Yasala made no outcry.

"Why don't you scream?" demanded Valeria savagely. "Do you fear someone will hear you? Whom do you fear? Tascela? Olmec? Conan?"

Yasala made no reply. She crouched, watching her captor with eyes baleful as those of a basilisk. Stubborn silence always fans anger. Valeria turned and tore a handful of cords from a near-by hanging.

"You sulky slut!" she said between her teeth. "I'm going to strip you stark naked and tie you across that couch and whip you until you tell me what you were doing here, and who sent you!"

Yasala made no verbal protest, nor did she offer any resistance, as Valeria carried out the first part of her thereat with a fury that her captive's obstinacy only sharpened. Then for a space there was no sound in the chamber except the whistle and crackle of hard-woven silken cords on naked flesh. Yasala could not move her fast-bound hands or feet. Her body writhed and quivered under the chastisement, her head swayed from side to side in rhythm with the blows. Her teeth were sunk into her lower lip and a trickle of blood began as the punishment continued. But she did not cry out.

The pliant cords made no great sound as they encountered the quivering body of the captive; only a sharp crackling snap, but each cord left a red streak across Yasala's dark flesh. Valeria inflicted the punishment with all the strength of her war-hardened arm, with all the mercilessness acquired during a life where pain and torment were daily happenings, and with all the cynical ingenuity which only a woman displays toward a woman. Yasala suffered more, physically and mentally, than she would have suffered under a lash wielded by a man, however strong.

It was the application of this feminine cynicism which at last tamed Yasala.

A low whimper escaped from her lips, and Valeria paused, arm lifted, and raked back a damp yellow lock. "Well, are you going to talk?" she demanded. "I can keep this up all night, if necessary."

"Mercy!" whispered the woman. "I will tell."

Valeria cut the cords from her wrists and ankles, and pulled her to her feet. Yasala sank down on the couch, half reclining on one bare hip, supporting herself on her arm, and writhing at the contact of her smarting flesh with the couch. She was trembling in every limb.

"Wine!" she begged, dry-lipped, indicating with a quivering hand a gold vessel on an ivory table. "Let me drink. I am weak with pain. Then I will tell you all."

Valeria picked up the vessel, and Yasala rose unsteadily to receive it. She took it, raised it toward her lips--then dashed the contents full into the Aquilonian's face. Valeria reeled backward, shaking and clawing the stinging liquid out of her eyes. Through a smarting mist she saw Yasala dart across the room, fling back a bolt, throw open the copper-bound door and run down the hall. The pirate was after her instantly, sword out and murder in her heart.

But Yasala had the start, and she ran with the nervous agility of a woman who has just been whipped to the point of hysterical frenzy. She rounded a corner in the corridor, yards ahead of Valeria, and when the pirate turned it, she saw only an empty hall, and at the other end a door that gaped blackly. A damp moldy scent reeked up from it, and Valeria shivered. That must be the door that led to the catacombs. Yasala had taken refuge among the dead.

Valeria advanced to the door and looked down a flight of stone steps that vanished quickly into utter blackness. Evidently it was a shaft that led straight to the pits below the city, without opening upon any of the lower floors. She shivered slightly at the thought of the thousands of corpses lying in their stone crypts down there, wrapped in their moldering cloths. She had no intention of groping her way down those stone steps. Yasala doubtless knew every turn and twist of the subterranean tunnels.

She was turning back, baffled and furious, when a sobbing cry welled up from the blackness. It seemed to come from a great depth, but human words were faintly distinguishable, and the voice was that of a woman. "Oh, help! Help, in Set's name! Ahhh!" It trailed away, and Valeria thought she caught the echo of a ghostly tittering.

Valeria felt her skin crawl. What had happened to Yasala down there in the thick blackness? There was no doubt that it had been she who had cried out. But what peril could have befallen her? Was a Xotalanca lurking down there? Olmec had assured them that the catacombs below Tecuhltli were walled off from the rest, too securely for their enemies to break through. Besides, that tittering had not sounded like a human being at all.

Valeria hurried back down the corridor, not stopping to close the door that opened on the stair. Regaining her chamber, she closed the door and shot the bolt behind her. She pulled on her boots and buckled her sword-belt about her. She was determined to make her way to Conan's room and urge him, if he still lived, to join her in an attempt to fight their way out of that city of devils.

But even as she reached the door that opened into the corridor, a long-drawn scream of agony rang through the halls, followed by the stamp of running feet and the loud clangor of swords.

Twenty Red Nails

Two warriors lounged in the guardroom on the floor known as the Tier of the Eagle. Their attitude was casual, though habitually alert. An attack on the great bronze door from without was always a possibility, but for many years no such assault had been attempted on either side.

"The strangers are strong allies," said one. "Olmec will move against the enemy tomorrow, I believe."

He spoke as a soldier in a war might have spoken. In the miniature world of Xuchotl each handful of feudists was an army, and the empty halls between the castles was the country over which they campaigned.

The other meditated for a space.

"Suppose with their aid we destroy Xotalanc," he said. "What then, Xatmec?"

"Why," returned Xatmec, "we will drive red nails for them all. The captives we will burn and flay and quarter."

"But afterward?" pursued the other. "After we have slain them all? Will it not seem strange to have no foe to fight? All my life I have fought and hated the Xotalancas. With the feud ended, what is left?"

Xatmec shrugged his shoulders. His thoughts had never gone beyond the destruction of their foes. They could not go beyond that.

Suddenly both men stiffened at a noise outside the door.

"To the door, Xatmec!" hissed the last speaker. "I shall look through the Eye--"

Xatmec, sword in hand, leaned against the bronze door, straining his ear to hear through the metal. His mate looked into the mirror. He started convulsively. Men were clustered thickly outside the door; grim, dark-faced men with swords gripped in their teeth--and their fingers thrust into their ears. One who wore a feathered headdress had a set of pipes which he set to his lips, and even as the Tecuhltli started to shout a warning, the pipes began to skirl.

The cry died in the guard's throat as the thin, weird piping penetrated the metal door and smote on his ears. Xatmec leaned frozen against the door, as if paralyzed in that position. His face was that of a wooden image, his expression one of horrified listening. The other guard, farther removed from the source of the sound, yet sensed the horror of what was taking place, the grisly threat that lay in that demoniac fifing. He felt the weird strains plucking like unseen fingers at the tissues of his brain, filling him with alien emotions and impulses of madness. But with a soul-tearing effort he broke the spell, and shrieked a warning in a voice he did not recognize as his own.

But even as he cried out, the music changed to an unbearable shrilling that was like a knife in the eardrums. Xatmec screamed in sudden agony, and all the sanity went out of his face like a flame blown out in a wind. Like a madman he ripped loose the chain, tore open the door and rushed out into the hall, sword lifted before his mate could stop him. A dozen blades struck him down, and over his mangled body the Xotalancas surged into the guardroom, with a long-drawn, blood-mad yell that sent the unwonted echoes reverberating.

His brain reeling from the shock of it all, the remaining guard leaped to meet them with goring spear. The horror of the sorcery he had just witnessed was submerged in the stunning realization that the enemy were in Tecuhltli. And as his spearhead ripped through a dark-skinned belly he knew no more, for a swinging sword crushed his skull, even as wild-eyed warriors came pouring in from the chambers behind the guardroom.

It was the yelling of men and the clanging of steel that brought Conan bounding from his couch, wide awake and broadsword in hand. In an instant he had reached the door and flung it open, and was glaring out into the corridor just as Techotl rushed up it, eyes blazing madly.

"The Xotalancas!" he screamed, in a voice hardly human. "They are within the door!"

Conan ran down the corridor, even as Valeria emerged from her chamber.

"What the devil is it?" she called.

"Techotl says the Xotalancas are in," he answered hurriedly. "That racket sounds like it."

With the Tecuhltli on their heels they burst into the throne room and were confronted by a scene beyond the most frantic dream of blood and fury. Twenty men and women, their black hair streaming, and the white skulls gleaming on their breasts, were locked in combat with the people of Tecuhltli. The women on both sides fought as madly as the men, and already the room and the hall beyond were strewn with corpses.

Olmec, naked but for a breech-clout, was fighting before his throne, and as the adventurers entered, Tascela ran from an inner chamber with a sword in her hand.

Xatmec and his mate were dead, so there was none to tell the Tecuhltli how their foes had found their way into their citadel. Nor was there any to say what had prompted that mad attempt. But the losses of the Xotalancas had been greater, their position more desperate, than the Tecuhltli had known. The maiming of their scaly ally, the destruction of the Burning Skull, and the news, gasped by a dying man, that mysterious white-skin allies had joined their enemies, had driven them to the frenzy of desperation and the wild determination to die dealing death to their ancient foes.

The Tecuhltli, recovering from the first stunning shock of the surprise that had swept them back into the throne room and littered the floor with their corpses, fought back with an equally desperate fury, while the doorguards from the lower floors came racing to hurl themselves into the fray. It was the deathfight of rabid wolves, blind, panting, merciless. Back and forth it surged, from door to dais, blades whickering and striking into flesh, blood spurting, feet stamping the crimson floor where redder pools were forming. Ivory tables crashed over, seats were splintered, velvet hangings torn down were stained red. It was the bloody climax of a bloody half-century, and every man there sensed it.

But the conclusion was inevitable. The Tecuhltli outnumbered the invaders almost two to one, and they were heartened by that fact and by the entrance into the melee of their light-skinned allies.

These crashed into the fray with the devastating effect of a hurricane plowing through a grove of saplings. In sheer strength no three Tlazitlans were a match for Conan, and in spite of his weight he was quicker on his feet than any of them. He moved through the whirling, eddying mass with the surety and destructiveness of a gray wolf amidst a pack of alley curs, and he strode over a wake of crumpled figures.

Valeria fought beside him, her lips smiling and her eyes blazing. She was stronger than the average man, and far quicker and more ferocious. Her sword was like a living thing in her hand. Where Conan beat down opposition by the sheer weight and power of his blows, breaking spears, splitting skulls and cleaving bosoms to the breastbone, Valeria brought into action a finesse of swordplay that dazzled and bewildered her antagonists before it slew them. Again and again a warrior, heaving high his heavy blade, found her point in his jugular before he could strike. Conan, towering above the field, strode through the welter smiting right and left, but Valeria moved like an illusive phantom, constantly shifting, and thrusting and slashing as she shifted. Swords missed her again and again as the wielders flailed the empty air and died with her point in their hearts or throats, and her mocking laughter in their ears.

Neither sex nor condition was considered by the maddened combatants. The five women of the Xotalancas were down with their throats cut before Conan and Valeria entered the fray, and when a man or woman went down under the stamping feet, there was always a knife ready for the helpless throat, or a sandaled foot eager to crush the prostrate skull.

From wall to wall, from door to door rolled the waves of combat, spilling over into adjoining chambers. And presently only Tecuhltli and their white-skinned allies stood upright in the great throne room. The survivors stared bleakly and blankly at each other, like survivors after Judgement Day or the destruction of the world. On legs wide-braced, hands gripping notched and dripping swords, blood trickling down their arms, they stared at one another across the mangled corpses of friends and foes. They had no breath left to shout, but a bestial mad howling rose from their lips. It was not a human cry of triumph. It was the howling of a rabid wolf-pack stalking among the bodies of its victims.

Conan caught Valeria's arm and turned her about.

"You've got a stab in the calf of your leg," he growled.

She glanced down, for the first time aware of a stinging in the muscles of her leg. Some dying man on the floor had fleshed his dagger with his last effort.

"You look like a butcher yourself," she laughed.

He shook a red shower from his hands.

"Not mine. Oh, a scratch here and there. Nothing to bother about. But that calf ought to be bandaged."

Olmec came through the litter, looking like a ghoul with his naked massive shoulders splashed with blood, and his black beard dabbled in crimson. His eyes were red, like the reflection of flame on black water.

"We have won!" he croaked dazedly. "The feud is ended! The dogs of Xotalanc lie dead! Oh, for a captive to flay alive! Yet it is good to look upon their dead faces. Twenty dead dogs! Twenty red nails for the black column!"

"You'd best see to your wounded," grunted Conan, turning away from him. "Here, girl, let me see that leg."

"Wait a minute!" she shook him off impatiently. The fire of fighting still burned brightly in her soul. "How do we know these are all of them? These might have come on a raid of their own."

"They would not split the clan on a foray like this," said Olmec, shaking his head, and regaining some of his ordinary intelligence. Without his purple robe the man seemed less like a prince than some repellent beast of prey. "I will stake my head upon it that we have slain them all. There were less of them than I dreamed, and they must have been desperate. But how came they in Tecuhltli?"

Tascela came forward, wiping her sword on her naked thigh, and holding in her other hand an object she had taken from the body of the feathered leader of the Xotalancas.

"The pipes of madness," she said. "A warrior tells me that Xatmec opened the door to the Xotalancas and was cut down as they stormed into the guardroom. This warrior came to the guardroom from the inner hall just in time to see it happen and to hear the last of a weird strain of music which froze his very soul. Tolkemec used to talk of these pipes, which the Xuchotlans swore were hidden somewhere in the catacombs with the bones of the ancient wizard who used them in his lifetime. Somehow the dogs of Xotalanc found them and learned their secret."

"Somebody ought to go to Xotalanc and see if any remain alive," said Conan. "I'll go if somebody will guide me."

Olmec glanced at the remnants of his people. There were only twenty left alive, and of these several lay groaning on the floor. Tascela was the only one of the Tecuhltli who had escaped without a wound. The princess was untouched, though she had fought as savagely as any.

"Who will go with Conan to Xotalanc?" asked Olmec.

Techotl limped forward. The wound in his thigh had started bleeding afresh, and he had another gash across his ribs.

"I will go!"

"No, you won't," vetoed Conan. "And you're not going either, Valeria. In a little while that leg will be getting stiff."

"I will go," volunteered a warrior, who was knotting a bandage about a slashed forearm.

"Very well, Yanath. Go with the Cimmerian. And you, too, Topal." Olmec indicated another man whose injuries were slight. "But first aid to lift the badly wounded on these couches where we may bandage their hurts."

This was done quickly. As they stooped to pick up a woman who had been stunned by a warclub, Olmec's beard brushed Topal's ear. Conan thought the prince muttered something to the warrior, but he could not be sure. A few moments later he was leading his companions down the hall.

Conan glanced back as he went out the door, at that shambles where the dead lay on the smoldering floor, blood-stained dark limbs knotted in attitudes of fierce muscular effort, dark faces frozen in masks of hate, glassy eyes glaring up at the green fire-jewels which bathed the ghastly scene in a dusky emerald witchlight. Among the dead the living moved aimlessly, like people moving in a trance. Conan heard Olmec call a woman and direct her to bandage Valeria's leg. The pirate followed the woman into an adjoining chamber, already beginning to limp slightly.

Warily the two Tecuhltli led Conan along the hall beyond the bronze door, and through chamber after chamber shimmering in the green fire. They saw no one, heard no sound. After they crossed the Great Hall which bisected the city from north to south, their caution was increased by the realization of their nearness to enemy territory. But chambers and halls

lay empty to their wary gaze, and they came at last along a broad dim hallway and halted before a bronze door similar to the Eagle Door of Tecuhltli. Gingerly they tried it, and it opened at silently under their fingers. Awed, they started into the green-lit chambers beyond. For fifty years no Tecuhltli had entered those halls save as a prisoner going to a hideous doom. To go to Xotalanc had been the ultimate horror that could befall a man of the western castle. The terror of it had stalked through their dreams since earliest childhood. To Yanath and Topol that bronze door was like the portal of hell.

They cringed back, unreasoning horror in their eyes, and Conan pushed past them and strode into Xotalanc.

Timidly they followed him. As each man set foot over the threshold he stared and glared wildly about him. But only their quick, hurried breathing disturbed the silence.

They had come into a square guardroom, like that behind the Eagle Door of Tecuhltli, and, similarly, a hall ran away from it to a broad chamber that was a counterpart of Olmec's throne room.

Conan glanced down the hall with its rugs and divans and hangings, and stood listening intently. He heard no noise, and the rooms had an empty feel. He did not believe there were any Xotalancas left alive in Xuchotl.

"Come on," he muttered, and started down the hall.

He had not gone far when he was aware that only Yanath was following him. He wheeled back to see Topal standing in an attitude of horror, one arm out as if to fend off some threatening peril, his distended eyes fixed with hypnotic intensity on something protruding from behind a divan.

"What the devil?" Then Conan saw what Topal was staring at, and he felt a faint twitching of the skin between his giant shoulders. A monstrous head protruded from behind the divan, a reptilian head, broad as the head of a crocodile, with down-curving fangs that projected over the lower jaw. But there was an unnatural limpness about the thing, and the hideous eyes were glazed.

Conan peered behind the couch. It was a great serpent which lay there limp in death, but such a serpent as he had never seen in his wanderings. The reek and chill of the deep black earth were about it, and its color was an indeterminable hue which changed with each new angle from which he surveyed it. A great wound in the neck showed what had caused its death.

"It is the Crawler!" whispered Yanath.

"It's the thing I slashed on the stair," grunted Conan. "After it trailed us to the Eagle Door, it dragged itself here to die. How could the Xotalancas control such a brute?"

The Tecuhltli shivered and shook their heads.

"They brought it up from the black tunnels below the catacombs. They discovered secrets unknown to Tecuhltli."

"Well, it's dead, and if they'd had any more of them, they'd have brought them along when they came to Tecuhltli. Come on."

They crowded close at his heels as he strode down the hall and thrust on the silver-worked door at the other end.

"If we don't find anybody on this floor," he said, "we'll descend into the lower floors. We'll explore Xotalanc from the roof to the catacombs. If Xotalanc is like Tecuhltli, all the rooms and halls in this tier will be lighted--what the devil!"

They had come into the broad throne chamber, so similar to that one in Tecuhltli. There were the same jade dais and ivory seat, the same divans, rugs and hangings on the walls. No black, red-scarred column stood behind the throne-dais, but evidences of the grim feud were not lacking.

Ranged along the wall behind the dais were rows of glass-covered shelves. And on those shelves hundreds of human heads, perfectly preserved, stared at the startled watchers with emotionless eyes, as they had stared for only the gods knew how many months and years.

Topal muttered a curse, but Yanath stood silent, the mad light growing in his wide eyes. Conan frowned, knowing that Tlazitlan sanity was hung on a hair-trigger.

Suddenly Yanath pointed to the ghastly relics with a twitching finger.

"There is my brother's head!" he murmured. "And there is my father's younger brother! And there beyond them is my sister's eldest son!"

Suddenly he began to weep, dry-eyed, with harsh, loud sobs that shook his frame. He did not take his eyes from the heads. His sobs grew shriller, changed to frightful, high-pitched laughter, and that in turn became an unbearable screaming. Yanath was stark mad.

Conan laid a hand on his shoulder, and as if the touch had released all the frenzy in his soul, Yanath screamed and whirled, striking at the Cimmerian with his sword. Conan parried the blow, and Topal tried to catch Yanath's arm. But the madman avoided him and with froth flying from his lips, he drove his sword deep into Topal's body. Topal sank down with a groan, and Yanath whirled for an instant like a crazy dervish; then he ran at the shelves and began hacking at the glass with his sword, screeching blasphemously.

Conan sprang at him from behind, trying to catch him unaware and disarm him, but the madman wheeled and lunged at him, screaming like a lost soul. Realizing that the warrior was hopelessly insane, the Cimmerian side-stepped, and as the maniac went past, he swung a cut that severed the shoulder-bone and breast, and dropped the man dead beside his dying victim.

Conan bent over Topal, seeing that the man was at his last gasp. It was useless to seek to stanch the blood gushing from the horrible wound.

"You're done for, Topal," grunted Conan. "Any word you want to send to your people?"

"Bend closer," gasped Topal, and Conan complied--and an instant later caught the man's wrist as Topal struck at his breast with a dagger.

"Crom!" swore Conan. "Are you mad, too?"

"Olmec ordered it!" gasped the dying man. "I know not why. As we lifted the wounded upon the couches he whispered to me, bidding me to slay you as we returned to Tecuhltli--" And with the name of his clan on his lips, Topal died.

Conan scowled down at him in puzzlement. This whole affair had an aspect of lunacy. Was Olmec mad, too? Were all the Tecuhltli madder than he had realized? With a shrug of his shoulders he strode down the hall and out of the bronze door, leaving the dead Tecuhltli lying before the staring dead eyes of their kinsmen's heads.

Conan needed no guide back through the labyrinth they had traversed. His primitive instinct of direction led him unerringly along the route they had come. He traversed it as warily as he had before, his sword in his hand, and his eyes fiercely searching each shadowed nook and corner; for it was his former allies he feared now, not the ghosts of the slain Xotalancas.

He had crossed the Great Hall and entered the chambers beyond when he heard something moving ahead of him--something which gasped and panted, and moved with a strange, floundering, scrambling noise. A moment later Conan saw a man crawling over the flaming floor toward him--a man whose progress left a broad bloody smear on the smoldering surface. It was Techotl and his eyes were already glazing; from a deep gash in his breast blood gushed steadily between the fingers of his clutching hand. With the other he clawed and hitched himself along.

"Conan," he cried chokingly, "Conan! Olmec has taken the yellow-haired woman!"

"So that's why he told Topal to kill me!" murmured Conan, dropping to his knee beside the man, who his experienced eye told him was dying. "Olmec isn't as mad as I thought."

Techotl's groping fingers plucked at Conan's arm. In the cold, loveless, and altogether hideous life of the Tecuhltli, his admiration and affection for the invaders from the outer world formed a warm, human oasis, constituted a tie that connected him with a more natural humanity that was totally lacking in his fellows, whose only emotions were hate, lust, and the urge of sadistic cruelty.

"I sought to oppose him," gurgled Techotl, blood bubbling frothily to his lips. "But he struck me down. He thought he had slain me, but I crawled away. Ah, Set, how far I have crawled in my own blood! Beware, Conan! Olmec may have set an ambush for your return! Slay Olmec! He is a beast. Take Valeria and flee! Fear not to traverse the forest. Olmec and Tascela lied about the dragons. They slew each other years ago, all save the strongest. For a dozen years there has been only one dragon. If you have slain him, there is naught in the forest to harm you. He was the god Olmec worshipped; and Olmec fed human sacrifices to him, the very old and the very young, bound and hurled from the wall. Hasten! Olmec has taken Valeria to the Chamber of the--"

His head slumped down and he was dead before it came to rest on the floor.

Conan sprang up, his eyes like live coals. So that was Olmec's game, having first used the strangers to destroy his foes! He should have known that something of the sort would be going on in that black-bearded degenerate's mind.

The Cimmerian started toward Tecuhltli with reckless speed. Rapidly he reckoned the numbers of his former allies. Only twenty-one, counting Olmec, had survived that fiendish battle in the throne room. Three had died since, which left seventeen enemies with which to reckon. In his rage Conan felt capable of accounting for the whole clan single-handed.

But the innate craft of the wilderness rose to guide his berserk rage. He remembered Techotl's warning of an ambush. It was quite probable that the prince would make such provisions, on the chance that Topal might have failed to carry out his order. Olmec would be expecting him to return by the same route he had followed in going to Xotalanc.

Conan glanced up at a skylight under which he was passing and caught the blurred glimmer of stars. They had not yet begun to pale for dawn. The events of the night had been crowded into a comparatively short space of time.

He turned aside from his direct course and descended a winding staircase to the floor below. He did not know where the door was to be found that let into the castle on that level, but he knew he could find it. How he was to force the locks he did not know; he believed that the doors of Tecuhltli would all be locked and bolted, if for no other reason than the habits of half a century. But there was nothing else but to attempt it.

Sword in hand, he hurried noiselessly on through a maze of green-lit or shadowy rooms and halls. He knew he must be near Tecuhltli, when a sound brought him up short. He recognized it for what it was--a human being trying to cry out through a stifling gag. It came from somewhere ahead of him, and to the left. In those deathly-still chambers a small sound carried a long way.

Conan turned aside and went seeking after the sound, which continued to be repeated. Presently he was glaring through a doorway upon a weird scene. In the room into which he was looking a low rack-like frame of iron lay on the floor, and a giant figure was bound prostrate upon it. His head rested on a bed of iron spikes, which were already crimson-pointed with blood where they had pierced his scalp. A peculiar harness-like contrivance was fastened about his head, though in such a manner that the leather band did not protect his scalp from the spikes. This harness was connected by a slender chain to the mechanism that upheld a huge iron ball which was suspended above the captive's hairy breast. As long as the man could force himself to remain motionless the iron ball hung in its place. But when the pain of the iron points caused him to lift his head, the ball lurched downward a few inches. Presently his aching neck muscles would no longer support his head in its unnatural position and it would fall back on the spikes again. It was obvious that eventually the ball would crush him to a pulp, slowly and inexorably. The victim was gagged, and above the gag his great black ox-eyes rolled wildly toward the man in the doorway, who stood in silent amazement. The man on the rack was Olmec, prince of Tecuhltli.

The Eyes of Tascela

"Why did you bring me into this chamber to bandage my leg?" demanded Valeria. "Couldn't you have done it just as well in the throne room?"

She sat on a couch with her wounded leg extended upon it, and the Tecuhltli woman had just bound it with silk bandages. Valeria's red-stained sword lay on the couch beside her.

She frowned as she spoke. The woman had done her task silently and efficiently, but Valeria liked neither the lingering, caressing touch of her slim fingers nor the expression in her eyes.

"They have taken the rest of the wounded into the other chambers," answered the woman in the soft speech of the Tecuhltli women, which somehow did not suggest either softness or gentleness in the speakers. A little while before, Valeria had seen this same woman stab a Xotalanca woman through the breast and stamp the eyeballs out of a wounded Xotalanca

man.

"They will be carrying the corpses of the dead down into the catacombs," she added, "lest the ghosts escape into the chambers and dwell there."

"Do you believe in ghosts?" asked Valeria.

"I know the ghost of Tolkemec dwells in the catacombs," she answered with a shiver. "Once I saw it, as I crouched in a crypt among the bones of a dead queen. It passed by in the form of an ancient man with flowing white beard and locks, and luminous eyes that blazed in the darkness. It was Tolkemec; I saw him living when I was a child and he was being tortured."

Her voice sank to a fearful whisper: "Olmec laughs, but I know Tolkemec's ghost dwells in the catacombs! They say it is rats which gnaw the flesh from the bones of the newly dead--but ghosts eat flesh. Who knows but that--"

She glanced up quickly as a shadow fell across the couch. Valeria looked up to see Olmec gazing down at her. The prince had cleansed his hands, torso, and beard of the blood that had splashed them; but he had not donned his robe, and his great dark-skinned hairless body and limbs renewed the impression of strength bestial in its nature. His deep black eyes burned with a more elemental light, and there was the suggestion of a twitching in the fingers that tugged at his thick blue-black beard.

He stared fixedly at the woman, and she rose and glided from the chamber. As she passed through the door she cast a look over her shoulder at Valeria, a glance full of cynical derision and obscene mockery.

"She has done a clumsy job," criticized the prince, coming to the divan and bending over the bandage. "Let me see--"

With a quickness amazing in one of his bulk he snatched her sword and threw it across the chamber. His next move was to catch her in his giant arms.

Quick and unexpected as the move was, she almost matched it; for even as he grabbed her, her dirk was in her hand and she stabbed murderously at his throat. More by luck than skill he caught her wrist, and then began a savage wrestling-match. She fought him with fists, feet, knees, teeth, and nails, with all the strength of her magnificent body and all the knowledge of hand-to-hand fighting she had acquired in her years of roving and fighting on sea and land. It availed her nothing against his brute strength. She lost her dirk in the first moment of contact, and thereafter found herself powerless to inflict any appreciable pain on her giant attacker.

The blaze in his weird black eyes did not alter, and their expression filled her with fury, fanned by the sardonic smile that seemed carved upon his bearded lips. Those eyes and that smile contained all the cruel cynicism that seethes below the surface of a sophisticated and degenerate race, and for the first time in her life Valeria experienced fear of a man. It was like struggling against some huge elemental force; his iron arms thwarted her efforts with an ease that sent panic racing through her limbs. He seemed impervious to any pain she could inflict. Only once, when she sank her white teeth savagely into his wrist so that the blood started, did he react. And that was to buffet her brutally upon the side of the head with his open hand, so that stars flashed before her eyes and her head rolled on her shoulders.

Her shirt had been torn open in the struggle, and with cynical cruelty he rasped his thick beard across her bare breasts, bringing the blood to suffuse the fair skin, and fetching a cry of pain and outraged fury from her. Her convulsive resistance was useless; she was crushed down on a couch, disarmed and panting, her eyes blazing up at him like the eyes of a trapped tigress.

A moment later he was hurrying from the chamber, carrying her in his arms. She made no resistance, but the smoldering of her eyes showed that she was unconquered in spirit, at least. She had not cried out. She knew that Conan was not within call, and it did not occur to her that any in Tecuhltli would oppose their prince. But she noticed that Olmec went stealthily, with his head on one side as if listening for sounds of pursuit, and he did not return to the throne chamber. He carried her through a door that stood opposite that through which he had entered, crossed another room and began stealing down a hall. As she became convinced that he feared some opposition to the abduction, she threw back her head and screamed at the top of her lusty voice.

She was rewarded by a slap that half-stunned her, and Olmec quickened his pace to a shambling run.

But her cry had been echoed and, twisting her head about, Valeria, through the tears and stars that partly blinded her, saw Techotl limping after them.

Olmec turned with a snarl, shifting the woman to an uncomfortable and certainly undignified position under one huge arm, where he held her writhing and kicking vainly, like a child.

"Olmec!" protested Techotl. "You cannot be such a dog as to do this thing! She is Conan's woman! She helped us slay the Xotalancas, and--"

Without a word Olmec balled his free hand into a huge fist and stretched the wounded warrior senseless at his feet. Stooping, and hindered not at all by the struggles and imprecations of his captive, he drew Techotl's sword from its sheath and stabbed the warrior in the breast. Then casting aside the weapon, he fled on along the corridor. He did not see a woman's dark face peer cautiously after him from behind a hanging. It vanished, and presently Techotl groaned and stirred, rose dazedly and staggered drunkenly away, calling Conan's name.

Olmec hurried on down the corridor, and descended a winding ivory staircase. He crossed several corridors and halted at last in a broad chamber whose doors were veiled with heavy tapestries, with one exception--a heavy bronze door similar to the Door of the Eagle on the upper floor.

He was moved to rumble, pointing to it: "That is one of the outer doors of Tecuhltli. For the first time in fifty years it is unguarded. We need not guard it now, for Xotalanc is no more."

"Thanks to Conan and me, you bloody rogue!" sneered Valeria, trembling with fury and the shame of physical coercion. "You treacherous dog! Conan will cut your throat for this!"

Olmec did not bother to voice his belief that Conan's own gullet had already been severed according to his whispered command. He was too utterly cynical to be at all interested in her thoughts or opinions. His flame-lit eyes devoured her, dwelling burningly on the generous expanses of clear white flesh exposed where her shirt and breeches had been torn in the struggle.

"Forget Conan," he said thickly. "Olmec is lord of Xuchotl. Xotalanc is no more. There will be no more fighting. We shall spend our lives in drinking and love-making. First let us drink!"

He seated himself on an ivory table and pulled her down on his knees, like a dark-skinned satyr with a white nymph in his arms. Ignoring her un-nymphlike profanity, he held her helpless with one great arm about her waist while the other reached across the table and secured a vessel of wine.

"Drink!" he commanded, forcing it to her lips, as she writhed her head away.

The liquor slopped over, stinging her lips, splashing down on her naked breasts.

"Your guest does not like your wine, Olmec," spoke a cool, sardonic voice.

Olmec stiffened; fear grew in his flaming eyes. Slowly he swung his great head about and stared at Tascela, who paused negligently in the curtained doorway, one hand on her smooth hip. Valeria twisted herself about in his iron grip, and when she met the burning eyes of Tascela, a chill tingled along her supple spine. New experiences were flooding Valeria's proud soul that night. Recently she had learned to fear a man; now she knew what it was to fear a woman.

Olmec sat motionless, a gray pallor growing under his swarthy skin. Tascela brought her other hand from behind her and displayed a small gold vessel.

"I feared she would not like your wine, Olmec," purred the princess, "so I brought some of mine, some I brought with me long ago from the shores of Lake Zuad--do you understand, Olmec?"

Beads of sweat stood out suddenly on Olmec's brow. His muscles relaxed, and Valeria broke away and put the table between them. But though reason told her to dart from the room, some fascination she could not understand held her rigid, watching the scene.

Tascela came toward the seated prince with a swaying, undulating walk that was mockery in itself. Her voice was soft, slurringly caressing, but her eyes gleamed. Her slim fingers stroked his beard lightly.

"You are selfish, Olmec," she crooned, smiling. "You would keep our handsome guest to yourself, though you knew I wished to entertain her. You are much at fault, Olmec!"

The mask dropped for an instant; he eyes flashed, her face was contorted and with an appalling show of strength her hand locked convulsively in his beard and tore out a great handful. This evidence of unnatural strength was no more terrifying than the momentary baring of the hellish fury that raged under her bland exterior.

Olmec lurched up with a roar, and stood swaying like a bear, his mighty hands clenching and unclenching.

"Slut!" His booming voice filled the room. "Witch! She-devil! Tecuhltli should have slain you fifty years ago! Begone! I have endured too much from you! This white-skinned wench is mine! Get hence before I slay you!"

The princess laughed and dashed the blood-stained strands into his face. Her laughter was less merciful than the ring of flint on steel.

"Once you spoke otherwise, Olmec," she taunted. "Once, in your youth, you spoke words of love. Aye, you were my lover once, years ago, and because you loved me, you slept in my arms beneath the enchanted lotus--and thereby put into my hands the chains that enslaved you. You know you cannot withstand me. You know I have but to gaze into your eyes, with the mystic power a priest of Stygia taught me, long ago, and you are powerless. You remember the night beneath the black lotus that waved above us, stirred by no worldly breeze; you scent again the unearthly perfumes that stole and rose like a cloud about you to enslave you. You cannot fight against me. You are my slave as you were that night--as you shall be so long as you live, Olmec of Xuchotl!"

Her voice had sunk to a murmur like the rippling of a stream running through starlit darkness. She leaned close to the prince and spread her long tapering fingers upon his giant breast. His eyes glared, his great hands fell limply to his sides.

With a smile of cruel malice, Tascela lifted the vessel and placed it to his lips.

"Drink!"

Mechanically the prince obeyed. And instantly the glaze passed from his eyes and they were flooded with fury, comprehension and an awful fear. His mouth gaped, but no sound issued. For an instant he reeled on buckling knees, and then fell in a sodden heap on the floor.

His fall jolted Valeria out of her paralysis. She turned and sprang toward the door, but with a movement that would have shamed a leaping panther, Tascela was before her. Valeria struck at her with her clenched fist, and all the power of her supple body behind the blow. It would have stretched a man senseless on the floor. But with a lithe twist of her torso, Tascela avoided the blow and caught the pirate's wrist. The next instant Valeria's left hand was imprisoned and, holding her wrists together with one hand, Tascela calmly bound them with a cord she drew from her girdle. Valeria thought she had tasted the ultimate in humiliation already that night, but her shame at being manhandled by Olmec was nothing to the sensations that now shook her supple frame. Valeria had always been inclined to despise the other members of her sex; and it was overwhelming to encounter another woman who could handle her like a child. She scarcely resisted at all when Tascela forced her into a chair and, drawing her bound wrists down between her knees, fastened them to the chair.

Casually stepping over Olmec, Tascela walked to the bronze door and shot the bolt and threw it open, revealing a hallway without.

"Opening upon this hall," she remarked, speaking to her feminine captive for the first time, "there is a chamber which in old times was used as a torture room. When we retired into Tecuhltli, we brought most of the apparatus with us, but there was one piece too heavy to move. It is still in working order. I think it will be quite convenient now."

An understanding flame of terror rose in Olmec's eyes. Tascela strode back to him, bent and gripped him by the hair.

"He is only paralyzed temporarily," she remarked conversationally. "He can hear, think, and feel--aye, he can feel very well indeed!"

With which sinister observation she started toward the door, dragging the giant bulk with an ease that made the pirate's eyes dilate. She passed into the hall and moved down it without hesitation, presently disappearing with her captive into a chamber that opened into it, and whence shortly thereafter issued the clank of iron.

Valeria swore softly and tugged vainly, with her legs braced against the chair. The cords that confined her were apparently unbreakable.

Tascela presently returned alone; behind her a muffled groaning issued from the chamber. She closed the door but did not bolt it. Tascela was beyond the grip of habit, as she was beyond the touch of other human instincts and emotions.

Valeria sat dumbly, watching the woman in whose slim hands, the pirate realized, her destiny now rested.

Tascela grasped her yellow locks and forced back her head, looking impersonably down into her face. But the glitter in her dark eyes was not impersonable.

"I have chosen you for a great honor," she said. "You shall restore the youth of Tascela. Oh, you stare at that! My appearance is that of youth, but through my veins creeps the sluggish chill of approaching age, as I have felt it a thousand times before. I am old, so old I do not remember my childhood. But I was a girl once, and a priest of Stygia loved me, and gave me the secret of immortality and youth everlasting. He died, then--some said by poison. But I dwelt in my palace by the shores of Lake Zuad and the passing years touched me not. So at last a king of Stygia desired me, and my people rebelled and brought me to this land. Olmec called me a princess. I am not of royal blood. I am greater than a princess. I am Tascela, whose youth your own glorious youth shall restore."

Valeria's tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. She sensed here a mystery darker than the degeneracy she had anticipated.

The taller woman unbound the Aquilonian's wrists and pulled her to her feet. It was not fear of the dominant strength that lurked in the princess' limbs that made Valeria a helpless, quivering captive in her hands. It was the burning, hypnotic, terrible eyes of Tascela.

He Comes from the Dark

"Well, I'm a Kushite!"

Conan glared down at the man on the iron rack.

"What the devil are you doing on that thing?"

Incoherent sounds issued from behind the gag and Conan bent and tore it away, evoking a bellow of fear from the captive; for his action caused the iron ball to lurch down until it nearly touched the broad breast.

"Be careful, for Set's sake!" begged Olmec.

"What for?" demanded Conan. "Do you think I care what happens to you? I only wish I had time to stay here and watch that chunk of iron grind your guts out. But I'm in a hurry. Where's Valeria?"

"Loose me!" urged Olmec. "I will tell you all!"

"Tell me first."

"Never!" The prince's heavy jaws set stubbornly.

"All right." Conan seated himself on a near-by bench. "I'll find her myself, after you've been reduced to a jelly. I believe I can speed up that process by twisting my sword-point around in your ear," he added, extending the weapon experimentally.

"Wait!" Words came in a rush from the captive's ashy lips. "Tascela took her from me. I've never been anything but a puppet in Tascela's hands."

"Tascela?" snorted Conan, and spat. "Why, the filthy--"

"No, no!" panted Olmec. "It's worse than you think. Tascela is old--centuries old. She renews her life and her youth by the sacrifice of beautiful young women. That's one thing that has reduced the clan to its present state. She will draw the essence of Valeria's life into her own body, and bloom with fresh vigor and beauty."

"Are the doors locked?" asked Conan, thumbing his sword edge.

"Aye! But I know a way to get into Tecuhltli. Only Tascela and I know, and she thinks me helpless and you slain. Free me and I swear I will help you rescue Valeria. Without my help you cannot win into Tecuhltli; for even if you tortured me into revealing the secret, you couldn't work it. Let me go, and we will steal on Tascela and kill her before she can work magic--before she can fix her eyes on us. A knife thrown from behind will do the work. I should have killed her thus long ago, but I feared that without her to aid us the Xotalancas would overcome us. She needed my help, too; that's the only reason she let me live this long. Now neither needs the other, and one must die. I swear that when we have slain the witch, you and Valeria shall go free without harm. My people will obey me when Tascela is dead."

Conan stooped and cut the ropes that held the prince, and Olmec slid cautiously from under the great ball and rose, shaking his head like a bull and muttering imprecations as he fingered his lacerated scalp. Standing shoulder to shoulder the two men presented a formidable picture of primitive power. Olmec was as tall as Conan, and heavier; but there was something repellent about the Tlazitlan, something abysmal and monstrous that contrasted unfavorably with the clean-cut, compact hardness of the Cimmerian. Conan had discarded the remnants of his tattered, blood-soaked shirt, and stood with his remarkable muscular development impressively revealed. His great shoulders were as broad as those of Olmec, and more cleanly outlined, and his huge breast arched with a more impressive sweep to a hard waist that lacked the paunchy thickness of Olmec's midsection. He might have been an image of primal strength cut out of bronze. Olmec was darker, but not from the burning of the sun. If Conan was a figure out of the dawn of time, Olmec was a shambling, somber shape from the darkness of time's pre-dawn.

"Lead on," demanded Conan. "And keep ahead of me. I don't trust you any farther than I can throw a bull by the tail."

Olmec turned and stalked on ahead of him, one hand twitching slightly as it plucked at his matted beard.

Olmec did not lead Conan back to the bronze door, which the prince naturally supposed Tascela had locked, but to a certain chamber on the border of Tecuhltli.

"This secret has been guarded for half a century," he said. "Not even our own clan knew of it, and the Xotalancas never learned. Tecuhltli himself built this secret entrance, afterwards slaying the slaves who did the work for he feared that he might find himself locked out of his own kingdom some day because of the spite of Tascela, whose passion for him soon changed to hate. But she discovered the secret, and barred the hidden door against him one day as he fled back from an unsuccessful raid, and the Xotalancas took him and flayed him. But once, spying upon her, I saw her enter Tecuhltli by this route, and so learned the secret."

He pressed upon a gold ornament in the wall, and a panel swung inward, disclosing an ivory stair leading upward.

"This stair is built within the wall," said Olmec. "It leads up to a tower upon the roof, and thence other stairs wind down to the various chambers. Hasten!"

"After you, comrade!" retorted Conan satirically, swaying his broadsword as he spoke, and Olmec shrugged his shoulders and stepped onto the staircase. Conan instantly followed him, and the door shut behind them. Far above a cluster of fire-jewels made the staircase a well of dusky dragon-light.

They mounted until Conan estimated that they were above the level of the fourth floor, and then came out into a cylindrical tower, in the domed roof of which was set the bunch of fire-jewels that lighted the stair. Through gold-barred windows, set with unbreakable crystal panes, the first windows he had seen in Xuchotl, Conan got a glimpse of high ridges, domes and more towers, looming darkly against the stars. He was looking across the roofs of Xuchotl.

Olmec did not look through the windows. He hurried down one of the several stairs that wound down from the tower, and when they had descended a few feet, this stair changed into a narrow corridor that wound tortuously on for some distance. It ceased at a steep flight of steps leading downward. There Olmec paused.

Up from below, muffled, but unmistakable, welled a woman's scream, edged with fright, fury, and shame. And Conan recognized Valeria's voice.

In the swift rage roused by that cry, and the amazement of wondering what peril could wring such a shriek from Valeria's reckless lips, Conan forgot Olmec. He pushed past the prince and started down the stair. Awakening instinct brought him about again, just as Olmec strruck with his great mallet-like fist. The blow, fierce and silent, was aimed at the base of Conan's brain. But the Cimmerian wheeled in time to receive the buffet on the side of his neck instead. The impact would have snapped the vertebrae of a lesser man. As it was, Conan swayed backward, but even as he reeled he dropped his sword, useless at such close quarters, and grasped Olmec's extended arm, dragging the prince with him as he fell. Headlong they went down the steps together, in a revolving whirl of limbs and heads and bodies. And as they went, Conan's iron fingers found and locked in Olmec's bull-throat.

The barbarian's neck and shoulder felt numb from the sledge-like impact of Olmec's huge fist, which had carried all the strength of the massive forearm, thick triceps and great shoulder. But this did not affect his ferocity to any appreciable extent. Like a bulldog he hung on grimly, rolled, until at last they struck an ivory panel-door at the bottom with such and impact that they splintered it its full length and crashed through its ruins. But Olmec was already dead, for those iron fingers had crushed out his life and broken his neck as they fell.

Conan rose, shaking the splinters from his great shoulders, blinking blood and dust out of his eyes.

He was in the great throne room. There were fifteen people in that room besides himself. The first person he saw was Valeria. A curious black altar stood before the throne-dais. Ranged about it, seven black candles in golden candlesticks sent up oozing spirals of thick green smoke, disturbingly scented. These spirals united in a cloud near the ceiling, forming a smoky arch above the altar. On that altar lay Valeria, stark naked, her white flesh gleaming in shocking contrast to the glistening ebon stone. She was not bound. She lay at full length, her arms stretched out above her head to their fullest extent. At the head of the altar knelt a young man, holding her wrists firmly. A young woman knelt at the other end of the altar, grasping her ankles. Between them she could neither rise nor move.

Eleven men and women of Tecuhltli knelt dumbly in a semicircle, watching the scene with hot, lustful eyes.

On the ivory throne-seat Tascela lolled. Bronze bowls of incense rolled their spirals about her; the wisps of smoke curled about her naked limbs like caressing fingers. She could not sit still; she squirmed and shifted about with sensuous abandon, as if finding pleasure in the contact of the smooth ivory with her sleek flesh.

The crash of the door as it broke beneath the impact of the hurtling bodies caused no change in the scene. The kneeling men and women merely glanced incuriously at the corpse of their prince and at the man who rose from the ruins of the door, then swung their eyes greedily back to the writhing white shape on the black altar. Tascela looked insolently at him, and sprawled back on her seat, laughing mockingly.

"Slut!" Conan saw red. His hands clenched into iron hammers as he started for her. With his first step something clanged loudly and steel bit savagely into his leg. He stumbled and almost fell, checked in his headlong stride. The jaws of an iron trap had closed on his leg, with teeth that sank deep and held. Only the ridged muscles of his calf saved the bone from being splintered. The accursed thing had sprung out of the smoldering floor without warning. He saw the slots now, in the floor where the jaws had lain, perfectly camouflaged.

"Fool!" laughed Tascela. "Did you think I would not guard against your possible return? Every door in this chamber is guarded by such traps. Stand there and watch now, while I fulfill the destiny of your handsome friend! Then I will decide your own."

Conan's hand instinctively sought his belt, only to encounter an empty scabbard. His sword was on the stair behind him. His poniard was lying back in the forest, where the dragon had torn it from his jaw. The steel teeth in his leg were like burning coals, but the pain was not as savage as the fury that seethed in his soul. He was trapped, like a wolf. If he had had his sword he would have hewn off his leg and crawled across the floor to slay Tascela. Valeria's eyes rolled toward him with mute appeal, and his own helplessness sent red waves of madness surging through his brain.

Dropping on the knee of his free leg, he strove to get his fingers between the jaws of the trap, to tear them apart by sheer strength. Blood started from beneath his fingernails, but the jaws fitted close about his leg in a circle whose segments jointed perfectly, contracted until there was no space between his mangled flesh and the fanged iron. The site of Valeria's naked body added flame to the fire of his rage.

Tascela ignored him. Rising languidly from her seat she swept the ranks of her subjects with a searching glance, and asked: "Where are Xamec, Zlanath and Tachic?"

"They did not return from the catacombs, princess," answered a man. "Like the rest of us, they bore bodies of the slain into the crypts, but they have not returned. Perhaps the ghost of Tolkemec took them."

"Be silent, fool!" she ordered harshly. "The ghost is a myth."

She came down from her dais, playing with a thin gold-hilted dagger. Her eyes burned like nothing on the hither side of hell. She paused beside the altar and spoke in the tense stillness.

"Your life shall make me young, white woman!" she said. "I shall lean upon your bosom and place my lips over yours, and slowly--ah, slowly!--sink this blade through your heart, so that your life, fleeing your stiffening body, shall enter mine, making me bloom again with youth and with life everlasting!"

Slowly, like a serpent arching toward its victim, she bent down through the writhing smoke, closer and closer over the now motionless woman who stared up into her glowing dark eyes--eyes that grew larger and deeper, blazing like black moons in the swirling smoke.

The kneeling people gripped their hands and held their breath, tense for the bloody climax, and the only sound was Conan's fierce panting as he strove to tear his leg from the trap.

All eyes were glued on the altar and the white figure there; the crash of a thunderbolt could hardly have broken the spell, yet it was only a low cry that shattered the fixity of the scene and bought all whirling about--a low cry, yet one to make the hair stand up stiffly on the scalp. They looked, and they saw.

Framed in the door to the left of the dais stood a nightmare figure. It was a man, with a tangle of white hair and a matted white beard that fell over his breast. Rags only partly covered his gaunt frame, revealing half-naked limbs strangely unnatural in appearance. The skin was not like that of a normal human. There was a suggestion of scaliness about it, as if the owner had dwelt long under conditions almost antithetical to those conditions under which human life ordinarily thrives. And there was nothing at all human about the eyes that blazed from the tangle of white hair. They were great gleaming disks that started unwinkingly, luminous, whitish, and without a hint of normal emotion or sanity. The mouth gaped, but no coherent words issued--only a high-pitched tittering.

"Tolkemec!" whispered Tascela, livid, while the others crouched in speechless horror. "No myth, then, no ghost! Set! You have dwelt for twelve years in darkness! Twelve years among the bones of the dead! What grisly food did you find? What mad travesty of life did you live, in the stark blackness of that eternal night? I see now why Xamec and Zlanath and Tachic did not return from the catacombs--and never will return. But why have you waited so long to strike? Were you seeking something, in the pits? Some secret weapon you knew was hidden there? And have you found it at last?"

That hideous tittering was Tolkemec's only reply, as he bounded into the room with a long leap that carried him over the secret trap before the door--by chance, or by some faint recollection of the ways of Xuchotl. He was not mad, as a man is mad. He had dwelt apart from humanity so long that he was no longer human. Only an unbroken thread of memory embodied in hate and the urge for vengeance had connected him with the humanity from which he had been cut off, and held him lurking near the people he hated. Only that thin string had kept him from racing and prancing off for ever into the black corridors and realms of the subterranean world he had discovered, long ago.

"You sought something hidden!" whispered Tascela, cringing back. "And you have found it! You remember the feud! After all these years of blackness, you remember!"

For in the lean hand of Tolkemec now waved a curious jade-hued wand, on the end of which glowed a knob of crimson shaped like a pomegranate. She sprang aside as he thrust it out like a spear, and a beam of crimson fire lanced from the pomegranate. It missed Tascela, but the woman holding Valeria's ankles was in the way. It smote between her shoulders. There was a sharp crackling sound and the ray of fire flashed from her bosom and struck the black altar, with a snapping of blue sparks. The woman toppled sidewise, shriveling and withering like a mummy even as she fell.

Valeria rolled from the altar on the other side, and started for the opposite wall on all fours. For hell had burst loose in the throne room of dead Olmec.

The man who had held Valeria's hands was the next to die. He turned to run, but before he had taken half a dozen steps, Tolkemec, with an agility appalling in such a frame, bounded around to a position that placed the man between him and the altar. Again the red fire-beam flashed and the Tecuhltli rolled lifeless to the floor, as the beam completed its course with a burst of blue sparks against the altar.

Then began the slaughter. Screaming insanely the people rushed about the chamber, caroming from one another, stumbling and falling. And among them Tolkemec capered and pranced, dealing death. They could not escape by the doors; for apparently the metal of the portals served like the metal veined stone altar to complete the circuit for whatever hellish power flashed like thunderbolts from the witch-wand the ancient waved in his hand. When he caught a man or a woman between him and a door or the altar, that one died instantly. He chose no special victim. He took them as they came, with his rags flapping about his wildly gyrating limbs, and the gusty echoes of his tittering sweeping the room above the screams. And bodies fell like falling leaves about the altar and at the doors. One warrior in desperation rushed at him, lifting a dagger, only to fall before he could strike. But the rest were like crazed cattle, with no thought for resistance, and no chance of escape.

The last Tecuhltli except Tascela had fallen when the princess reached the Cimmerian and the girl who had taken refuge beside him. Tascela bent and touched the floor, pressing a design upon it. Instantly the iron jaws released the bleeding limb and sank back into the floor.

"Slay him if you can!" she panted, and pressed a heavy knife into his hand. "I have no magic to withstand him!"

With a grunt he sprang before the woman, not heeding his lacerated leg in the heat of the fighting lust. Tolkemec was coming toward him, his weird eyes ablaze, but he hesitated at the gleam of the knife in Conan's hand. Then began a grim game, as Tolkemec sought to circle about Conan and get the barbarian between him and the altar or a metal door, while Conan sought to avoid this and drive home his knife. The women watched tensely, holding their breath.

There was no sound except the rustle and scrape of quick-shifting feet. Tolkemec pranced and capered no more. He realized that grimmer game confronted him than the people who had died screaming and fleeing. In the elemental blaze of the barbarian's eyes he read an intent deadly as his own. Back and forth they weaved, and when one moved the other moved as if invisible threads bound them together. But all the time Conan was getting closer and closer to his enemy. Already the coiled muscles of his thighs were beginning to flex for a spring, when Valeria cried out. For a fleeting instant a bronze door was in line with Conan's moving body. The red line leaped, searing Conan's flank as he twisted aside, and even as he shifted he hurled the knife. Old Tolkemec went down, truly slain at last, the hilt vibrating on his breast.

Tascela sprang--not toward Conan, but toward the wand where it shimmered like a live thing on the floor. But as she leaped, so did Valeria, with a dagger snatched from a dead man; and the blade, driven with all the power of the pirate's muscles, impaled the princess of Tecuhltli so that the point stood out between her breasts. Tascela screamed once and fell dead, and Valeria spurned the body with her heel as it fell.

"I had to do that much, for my own self-respect!" panted Valeria, facing Conan across the limp corpse.

"Well, this cleans up the feud," he grunted. "It's been a hell of a night! Where did these people keep their food? I'm hungry."

"You need a bandage on that leg." Valeria ripped a length of silk from a hanging and knotted it about her waist, then tore off some smaller strips which she bound efficiently about the barbarian's lacerated limb.

"I can walk on it," he assured her. "Let's begone. It's dawn, outside this infernal city. I've had enough of Xuchotl. It's well the breed exterminated itself. I don't want any of their accursed jewels. They might be haunted."

"There is enough clean loot in the world for you and me," she said, straightening to stand tall and splendid before him.

The old blaze came back in his eyes, and this time she did not resist as he caught her fiercely in his arms.

"It's a long way to the coast," she said presently, withdrawing her lips from his.

"What matter?" he laughed. "There's nothing we can't conquer. We'll have our feet on a ship's deck before the Stygians open their ports for the trading season. And then we'll show the world what plundering means!"

THE END

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JEWELS OF GWAHLUR
by Robert E. Howard
Chapter 1.

Paths of Intrigue

The cliffs rose sheer from the jungle, towering ramparts of stone that glinted jade-blue and dull crimson in the rising sun, and curved away and away to east and west above the waving emerald ocean of fronds and leaves. It looked insurmountable, that giant palisade with its sheer curtains of solid rock in which bits of quartz winked dazzlingly in the sunlight. But the man who was working his tedious way upward was already halfway to the top.

He came from a race of hillmen, accustomed to scaling forbidding crags, and he was a man of unusual strength and agility. His only garment was a pair of short red silk breeks, and his sandals were slung to his back, out of his way, as were his sword and dagger.

The man was powerfully built, supple as a panther. His skin was bronzed by the sun, his square-cut black mane confined by a silver band about his temples. His iron muscles, quick eyes and sure feet served him well here, for it was a climb to test these qualities to the utmost. A hundred and fifty feet below him waved the jungle. An equal distance above him the rim of the cliffs was etched against the morning sky.

He labored like one driven by the necessity of haste; yet he was forced to move at a snail's pace, clinging like a fly on a wall. His groping hands and feet found niches and knobs, precarious holds at best, and sometimes he virtually hung by his finger nails. Yet upward he went, clawing, squirming, fighting for every foot. At times he paused to rest his aching muscles, and, shaking the sweat out of his eyes, twisted his head to stare searchingly out over the jungle, combing the green expanse for any trace of human life or motion.

Now the summit was not far above him, and he observed, only a few feet above his head, a break in the sheer stone of the cliff. An instant later he had reached it -- a small cavern, just below the edge of the rim. As his head rose above the lip of its floor, he grunted. He clung there, his elbows hooked over the lip. The cave was so tiny that it was little more than a niche cut in the stone, but it held an occupant. A shriveled brown mummy, cross-legged, arms folded on the withered breast upon which the shrunken head was sunk, sat in the little cavern. The limbs were bound in place with rawhide thongs which had become mere rotted wisps. If the form had ever been clothed, the ravages of time had long ago reduced the garments to dust. But thrust between the crossed arms and the shrunken breast there was a roll of parchment, yellowed with age to the color of old ivory.

The climber stretched forth a long arm and wrenched away this cylinder. Without investigation, he thrust it into his girdle and hauled himself up until he was standing in the opening of the niche. A spring upward and he caught the rim of the cliffs and pulled himself up and over almost with the same motion.

There he halted, panting, and stared downward.

It was like looking into the interior of a vast bowl, rimmed by a circular stone wall. The floor of the bowl was covered with trees and denser vegetation, though nowhere did the growth duplicate the jungle denseness of the outer forest. The cliffs marched around it without a break and of uniform height. It was a freak of nature, not to be paralleled, perhaps, in the whole world: a vast natural amphitheater, a circular bit of forested plain, three or four miles in diameter, cut off from the rest of the world, and confined within the ring of those palisaded cliffs.

But the man on the cliffs did not devote his thoughts to marveling at the topographical phenomenon. With tense eagerness he searched the tree-tops below him, and exhaled a gusty sigh when he caught the glint of marble domes amidst the twinkling green. It was no myth, then; below him lay the fabulous and deserted palace of Alkmeenon.

Conan the Cimmerian, late of the Baracha Isles, of the Black Coast, and of many other climes where life ran wild, had come to the kingdom of Keshan following the lure of a fabled treasure that outshone the hoard of the Turanian kings.

Keshan was a barbaric kingdom lying in the eastern hinterlands of Kush where the broad grasslands merge with the forests that roll up from the south. The people were a mixed race, a dusky nobility ruling a population that was largely pure Negro. The rulers -- princes and high priests -- claimed descent from a white race which, in a mythical age, had ruled a kingdom whose capital city was Alkmeenon. Conflicting legends sought to explain the reason for that race's eventual downfall, and the abandonment of the city by the survivors. Equally nebulous were the tales of the Teeth of Gwahlur, the treasure of Alkmeenon. But these misty legends had been enough to bring Conan to Keshan, over vast distances of plain, riverlaced jungle, and mountains.

He had found Keshan, which in itself was considered mythical by many northern and western nations, and he had heard enough to confirm the rumors of the treasure that men called the Teeth of Gwahlur. But its hiding place he could not learn, and he was confronted with the necessity of explaining his presence in Keshan. Unattached strangers were not welcome there.

But he was not nonplussed. With cool assurance he made his offer to the stately, plumed, suspicious grandees of the barbarically magnificent court. He was a professional fighting man. In search of employment (he said) he had come to Keshan. For a price he would train the armies of Keshan and lead them against Punt, their hereditary enemy, whose recent successes in the field had aroused the fury of Keshan's irascible king.

The proposition was not so audacious as it might seem. Conan's fame had preceded him, even into distant Keshan; his exploits as a chief of the black corsairs, those wolves of the southern coasts, had made his name known, admired and feared throughout the black kingdoms. He did not refuse tests devised by the dusky lords. Skirmishes along the borders were incessant, affording the Cimmerian plenty of opportunities to demonstrate his ability at hand-to-hand fighting. His reckless ferocity impressed the lords of Keshan, already aware of his reputation as a leader of men, and the prospects seemed favorable. All Conan secretly desired was employment to give him legitimate excuse for remaining in Keshan long enough to locate the hiding place of the Teeth of Gwahlur. Then there came an interruption. Thutmekri came to Keshan at the head of an embassy from Zembabwei.

Thutmekri was a Stygian, an adventurer and a rogue whose wits had recommended him to the twin kings of the great hybrid trading kingdom which lay many days' march to the east. He and the Cimmerian knew each other of old, and without love. Thutmekri likewise had a proposition to make to the king of Keshan, and it also concerned the conquest of Punt -- which kingdom, incidentally, lying east of Keshan, had recently expelled the Zembabwan traders and burned their fortresses.

His offer outweighed even the prestige of Conan. He pledged himself to invade Punt from the east with a host of black spearmen, Shemitish archers, and mercenary swordsmen, and to aid the king of Keshan to annex the hostile kingdom. The benevolent kings of Zembabwei desired only a monopoly of the trade of Keshan and her tributaries -- and, as a pledge of good faith, some of the Teeth of Gwahlur. These would be put to no base usage, Thutmekri hastened to explain to the suspicious chieftains; they would be placed in the temple of Zembabwei beside the squat gold idols of Dagon and Derketo, sacred guests in the holy shrine of the kingdom, to seal the covenant between Keshan and Zembabwei. This statement brought a savage grin to Conan's hard lips.

The Cimmerian made no attempt to match wits and intrigue with Thutmekri and his Shemitish partner, Zargheba. He knew that if Thutmekri won his point, he would insist on the instant banishment of his rival. There was but one thing for Conan to do: find the jewels before the king of Keshan made up his mind, and flee with them. But by this time he was certain that they were not hidden in Keshia, the royal city, which was a swarm of thatched huts crowding about a mud wall that enclosed a palace of stone and mud and bamboo.

While he fumed with nervous impatience, the high priest Gorulga announced that before any decision could be reached, the will of the gods must be ascertained concerning the proposed alliance with Zembabwei and the pledge of objects long held holy and inviolate. The oracle of Alkmeenon must be consulted.

This was an awesome thing, and it caused tongues to wag excitedly in palace and beehive hut. Not for a century had the priests visited the silent city. The oracle, men said, was the Princess Yelaya, the last ruler of Alkmeenon, who had died in the full bloom of her youth and beauty, and whose body had miraculously remained unblemished throughout the ages. Of old, priests had made their way into the haunted city, and she had taught them wisdom. The last priest to seek the oracle had been a wicked man, who had sought to steal for himself the curiously cut jewels that men called the Teeth of Gwahlur. But some doom had come upon him in the deserted palace, from which his acolytes, fleeing, had told tales of horror that had for a hundred years frightened the priests from the city and the oracle.

But Gorulga, the present high priest, as one confident in his knowledge of his own integrity, announced that he would go with a handful of followers to revive the ancient custom. And in the excitement tongues buzzed indiscreetly, and Conan caught the clue for which he had sought for weeks -- the overheard whisper of a lesser priest that sent the Cimmerian stealing out of Keshia the night before the dawn when the priests were to start.

Riding as hard as he dared for a night and a day and a night, he came in the early dawn to the cliffs of Alkmeenon, which stood in the southwestern corner of the kingdom, amidst uninhabited jungle which was taboo to the common men. None but the priests dared approach the haunted vale within a distance of many mailes. And not even a priest had entered Alkmeenon for a hundred years.

No man had ever climbed these cliffs, legends said, and none but the priests knew the secret entrance into the valley. Conan did not waste time looking for it. Steeps that balked these black people, horsemen and dwellers of plain and level forest, were not impossible for a man born in the rugged hills of Cimmeria.

Now on the summit of the cliffs he looked down into the circular valley and wondered what plague, war, or superstition had driven the members of that ancient white race forth from their stronghold to mingle with and be absorbed by the black tribes that hemmed them in.

This valley had been their citadel. There the palace stood, and there only the royal family and their court dwelt. The real city stood outside the cliffs. Those waving masses of green jungle vegetation hid its ruins. But the domes that glistened in the leaves below him were the unbroken pinnacles of the royal palace of Alkmeenon which had defied the corroding ages.

Swinging a leg over the rim he went down swiftly. The inner side of the cliffs was more broken, not quite so sheer. In less than half the time it had taken him to ascend the outer side, he dropped to the swarded valley floor.

With one hand on his sword, he looked alertly about him. There was no reason to suppose men lied when they said that Alkmeenon was empty and deserted, haunted only by the ghosts of the dead past. But it was Conan's nature to be suspicious and wary. The silence was primodial; not even a leaf quivered on a branch. When he bent to peer under the trees, he saw nothing but the marching rows of trunks, receding and receding into the blue gloom of the deep woods.

Nevertheless he went warily, sword in hand, his restless eyes combing the shadows from side to side, his springy tread making no sound on the sward. All about him he saw signs of an ancient civilization; marble fountains, voiceless and crumbling, stood in circles of slender trees whose patterns were too symmetrical to have been a chance of nature. Forest-growth and underbrush had invaded the evenly planned groves, but their outlines were still visible. Broad pavements ran away under the trees, broken, and with grass growing through the wide cracks. He glimpsed walls with ornamental copings, lattices of carven stone that might once have served as the walls of pleasure pavilions.

Ahead of him, through the trees, the domes gleamed and the bulk of the structure supporting them became more apparent as he advanced. Presently, pushing through a screen of vine-tangled branches, he came into a comparatively open space where the trees straggled, unencumbered by undergrowth, and saw before him the wide, pillared portico of the palace.

As he mounted the broad marble steps, he noted that the building was in far better state of preservation than the lesser structures he had glimpsed. The thick walls and massive pillars seemed too powerful to crumble before the assault of time and the elements. The same enchanted quiet brooded over all. The cat-like pad of his sandaled feet seemed startingly loud in the stillness.

Somewhere in this palace lay the effigy or image which had in times past served as oracle for the priests of Keshan. And somewhere in the palace, unless that indiscreet priest had babbled a lie, was hidden the treasure of the forgotten kings of Alkmeenon.

Conan passed into a broad, lofty hall, lined with tall columns, between which arches gaped, their doors long rotted away. He traversed this in a twilight dimness, and at the other end passed through great double-valved bronze doors which stood partly open, as they might have stood for centuries. He emerged into a vast domed chamber which must have served as audience hall for the kings of Alkmeenon.

It was octagonal in shape, and the great dome up in which the lofty ceiling curved obviously was cunningly pierced, for the chamber was much better lighted than the hall which led to it. At the farther side of the great room there rose a dais with broad lapis-lazuli steps leading up to it, and on that dais there stood a massive chair with ornate arms and a high back which once doubtless supported a cloth-of-gold canopy. Conan grunted explosively and his eyes lit. The golden throne of Alkmeenon, named in immemorial legendry! He weighed it with a practised eye. It represented a fortune in itself, if he were but able to bear it away. Its richness fired his imagination concerning the treasure itself, and made him burn with eagerness. His fingers itched to plunge among the gems he had heard described by story-tellers in the market squares of Keshia, who repeated tales handed down from mouth to mouth through the centuries -- jewels not to be duplicated in the world, rubies, emeralds, diamonds, bloodstones, opals, sapphires, the loot of the ancient world.

He had expected to find the oracle-effigy seated on the throne, but since it was not, it was probably placed in some other part of the palace, if, indeed, such a thing really existed. But since he had turned his face toward Keshan, so many myths had proved to be realities that he did not doubt that the would find some kind of image or god.

Behind the throne there was a narrow arched doorway which doubtless had been masked by hangings in the days of Alkmeenon's life. He glanced through it and saw that it let into an alcove, empty, and with a narrow corridor leading off from it at right angles. Turning away from it, he spied another arch to the left of the dais, and it, unlike the others, was furnished with a door. Nor was it any common door. The portal was of the same rich metal as the throne, and carved with many curious arabesques.

At his touch it swung open so readily that its hinges might recently have been oiled. Inside he halted, staring.

He was in a square chamber of no great dimensions, whose marble walls rose to an ornate ceiling, inlaid with gold. Gold friezes ran about the base and the top of the walls, and there was no door other than the one through which he had entered. But he noted these details mechanically. His whole attention was centered on the shape which lay on an ivory dais before him.

He had expected an image, probably carved with the skill of a forgotten art. But no art could mimic the perfection of the figure that lay before him.

It was no effigy of stone or metal or ivory. It was the actual body of a woman, and by what dark art the ancients had preserved that form unblemished for so many ages Conan could not even guess. The very garments she wore were intact -- and Conan scowled at that, a vague uneasiness stirring at the back of his mind. The arts that preserved the body should not have affected the garments. Yet there they were -- gold breast-plates set with concentric circles of small gems, gilded sandals, and a short silken skirt upheld by a jeweled girdle. Neither cloth nor metal showed any signs of decay.

Yelaya was coldly beautiful, even in death. Her body was like alabaster, slender yet voluptuous; a great crimson jewel gleamed against the darkly piled foam of her hair.

Conan stood frowning down at her, and then tapped the dais with his sword. Possibilities of a hollow containing the treasure occurred to him, but the dais rang solid. He turned and paced the chamber in some indecision. Where should he search first, in the limited time at his disposal? The priest he had overheard babbling to a courtesan had said the treasure was

hidden in the palace. But that included a space of considerable vastness. He wondered if he should hide himself until the priests had come and gone, and then renew the search. But there was a strong chance that they might take the jewels with them when they returned to Keshia. For he was convinced that Thutmekri had corrupted Gorulga.

Conan could predict Thutmekri's plans, from his knowledge of the man. He knew that it had been Thutmekri who had proposed the conquest of Punt to the kings of Zembabwei, which conquest was but one move toward their real goal -- the capture of the Teeth of Gwahlur. Those wary kings would demand proof that the treasure really existed before they made any move. The jewels Thutmekri asked as a pledge would furnish that proof.

With positive evidence of the treasure's reality, the kings of Zimbabwei would move. Punt would be invaded simultaneously from the east and the west, but the Zembabwans would see to it that the Keshani did most of the fighting, and then, when both Punt and Keshan were exhausted from the struggle, the Zembabwans would crush both races, loot Keshan and take the treasure by force, if they had to destroy every building and torture every living human in the kingdom.

But there was always another possibility: if Thutmekri could get his hands on the hoard, it would be characteristic of the man to cheat his employers, steal the jewels for himself and decamp, leaving the Zembabwan emissaries holding the sack.

Conan believed that this consulting of the oracle was but a ruse to persuade the king of Keshan to accede to Thutmekri's wishes -- for he never for a moment doubted that Gorulga was as subtle and devious as all the rest mixed up in this grand swindle. Conan had not approached the high priest himself, because in the game of bribery he would have no chance against Thutmekri, and to attempt it would be to play directly into the Stygian's hands. Gorulga could denounce the Cimmerian to the people, establish a reputation for integrity, and rid Thutmekri of his rival at one stroke. He wondered how Thutmekri had corrupted the high priest, and just what could be offered as a bribe to a man who had the greatest treasure in the world under his fingers.

At any rate he was sure that the oracle would be made to say that the gods willed it that Keshan whould follow Thutmekri's wishes, and he was sure, too, that it would drop a few pointed remarks concerning himself. After that Keshia would be too hot for the Cimmerian, nor had Conan had any intention of returning when he rode way in the night.

The oracle chamber held no clue for him. He went forth into the great throne room and laid his hands on the throne. It was heavy, but he could tilt it up. The floor beneath, a thick marble dais, was solid. Again he sought the alcove. His mind clung to a secret crypt near the oracle. Painstakingly he began to tap along the walls, and presently his taps rang hollow at a spot opposite the mouth of the narrow corridor. Looking more closely he saw that the crack between the marble panel at that point and the next was wider than usual. He inserted a dagger point and pried.

Silently the panel swung open, revealing a niche in the wall, but nothing else. He swore feelingly. The aperture was empty, and it did not look as if it had ever served as a crypt for treasure. Leaning into the niche he saw a system of tiny holes in the wall, about on a level with a man's mouth. He peered through, and grunted understandingly. That was the wall that formed the partition between the alcove and the oracle chamber. Those holes had not been visible in the chamber. Conan grinned. This explained the mystery of the oracle, but it was a bit cruder than he had expected. Gorulga would plant either himself or some trusted minion in that niche, to talk through the holes, the credulous acolytes, black men all, would accept it as the veritable voice of Yelaya.

Remembering something, the Cimmerian drew forth the roll of parchment he had taken from the mummy and unrolled it carefully, as it seemed ready to fall to pieces with age. He scowled over the dim characters with which it was covered. In his roaming about the world the giant adventurer had picked up a wide smattering of knowledge, particularly including the speaking and reading of many alien tongues. Many a sheltered scholar would have been astonished at the Cimmerian's linguistic abilities, for he had experienced many adventures where knowledge of a strange language had meant the difference between life and death.

The characters were puzzling, at once familiar and unintelligible, and presently he discovered the reason. They were the characters of archaic Pelishtic, which possessed many points of difference from the modern script, with which he was familiar, and which, three centuries ago, had been modified by conquest by a nomad tribe. This older, purer script baffled him. He made out a recurrent phrase, however, which he recognized as a proper name: Bit-Yakin. He gathered that it was the name of the writer.

Scowling, his lips unconsciously moving as he struggled with the task, he blundered through the manuscript, finding much of it untranslatable and most of the rest of it obscure.

He gathered that the writer, the mysterious Bit-Yakin, had come from afar with his servants, and entered the valley of Alkmeenon. Much that followed was meaningless, interspersed as it was with unfamiliar phrases and characters. Such as he could translate seemed to indicate the passing of a very long period of time. The name of Yelaya was repeated frequently, and toward the last part of the manuscript it became apparent that Bit-Yakin knew that death was upon him. With a slight start Conan realized that the mummy in the cavern must be the remains of the writer of the manuscript, the mysterious Pelishti, Bit-Yakin. The man had died, as he had prophesied, and his servants, obviously, had placed him in that open crypt, high up on the cliffs, according to his instructions before his death.

It was strange that Bit-Yakin was not mentioned in any of the legends of Alkmeenon. Obviously he had come to the valley after it had been deserted by the original inhabitants -- the manuscript indicated as much -- but it seemed peculiar that the priests who came in the old days to consult the oracle had not seen the man or his servants. Conan felt sure that the mummy and this parchment was more than a hundred years old. Bit-Yakin had dwelt in the valley when the priests came of old to bow before dead Yelaya. Yet concerning him the legends were silent, telling only of a deserted city, haunted only by the dead.

Why had the man dwelt in this desolate spot, and to what unknown destination had his servants departed after disposing of their master's corpse?

Conan shrugged his shoulders and thrust the parchment back into his girdle -- he started violently, the skin on the backs of his hands tingling. Startingly, shockingly in the slumberous stillness, there had boomed the deep strident clangor of a great gong!

He wheeled, crouching like a great cat, sword in hand, glaring down the narrow corridor from which the sound had seemed to come. Had the priests of Keshia arrived? This was improbable, he knew; they would not have had time to reach the valley. But that gong was indisputable evidence of human presence.

Conan was basically a direct-actionist. Such subtlety as he possessed had been acquired through contact with the more devious races. When taken off guard by some unexpected occurrence, he reverted instinctively to type. So now, instead of hiding or slipping away in the opposite direction as the average man might have done, he ran straight down the corridor in the direction of the sound. His sandals made no more sound than the pads of a panther would have made; his eyes were slits, his lips unconsciously asnarl. Panic had momentarily touched his soul at the shock of that unexpected reverberation, and the red rage of the primitive that is wakened by threat of peril, always lurked close to the surface of the Cimmerian.

He emerged presently from the winding corridor into a small open court. Something glinting in the sun caught his eye. It was the gong, a great gold disk, hanging from a gold arm extending from the crumbling wall. A brass mallet lay near, but there was no sound or sight of humanity. The surrounding arches gaped emptily. Conan crouched inside the doorway for what seemed a long time. There was no sound or movement throughout the great palace. His patience exhausted at last, he glided around the curve of the court, peering into the arches, ready to leap either way like a flash of light, or to strike right or left as a cobra strikes.

He reached the gong, started into the arch nearest it. He saw only a dim chamber, littered with the debris of decay. Beneath the gong the polished marble flags showed no footprint, but there was a scent in the air -- a faintly fetid odor he could not classify; his nostrils dilated like those of a wild beast as he sought in vain to identify it.

He turned toward the arch -- with appalling suddenness the seemingly solid flags splintered and gave way under his feet. Even as he fell he spread wide his arms and caught the edges of the aperture that gaped beneath him. The edges crumbled off under his clutching fingers. Down into utter blackness he shot, into black icy water that gripped him and whirled him away with breathless speed.

Chapter 2.
A Goddess Awakens

The Cimmerian at first made no attempt to fight the current that was sweeping him through lightless night. He kept himself afloat, gripping between his teeth the sword, which he had not relinquished, even in his fall, and did not seek to guess to what doom he was being borne. But suddenly a beam of light lanced the darkness ahead of him. He saw the surging, seething black surface of the water, in turmoil as if disturbed by some monster of the deep, and he saw the sheer stone walls of the channel curved up to a vault overhead. On each side ran a narrow ledge, just below the arching roof, but they were far out of his reach. At one point this roof had been broken, probably fallen in, and the light was streaming through the aperture. Beyond that shaft of light was utter blackness, and panic assailed the Cimmerian as he saw he would be swept on past that spot of light, and into the unknown blackness again.

Then he saw something else: bronze ladders extending from the ledges to the water's surface at regular intervals, and there was one just ahead of him. Instantly he struck out for it, fighting the current that would have held him to the middle of the stream. It dragged at him as with tangible, animate, slimy hands, but he buffeted the rushing surge with the strength of desperation and drew closer and closer inshore, fighting furiously for every inch. Now he was even with the ladder and with a fierce, gasping plunge he gripped the bottom rung and hung on, breathless.

A few seconds later he struggled up out of the seething water, trusting his weight dubiously to the corroded rungs. They sagged and bent, but they held, and he clambered up onto the narrow ledge which ran along the wall scarcely a man's length below the curving roof. The tall Cimmerian was forced to bend his head as he stood up. A heavy bronze door showed in the stone at a point even with the head of the ladder, but it did not give to Conan's efforts. He transferred his sword from his teeth to its scabbard, spitting blood -- for the edge had cut his lips in that fierce fight with the river -- and turned his attention to the broken roof.

He could reach his arms up through the crevice and grip the edge, and careful testing told him it would bear his weight. An instant later he had drawn himself up through the hole, and found himself in a wide chamber, in a state of extreme disrepair. Most of the roof had fallen in, as well as a great section of the floor, which was laid over the vault of a subterranean river. Broken arches opened into other chambers and corridors, and Conan believed he was still in the great palace. He wondered uneasily how many chambers in that palace had underground water directly under them, and when the ancient flags or tiles might give way again and precipitate him back into the current from which he had just crawled.

And he wondered just how much of an accident that fall had been. Had those rotten flags simply chanced to give way beneath his weight, or was there a more sinister explanation? One thing at least was obvious: he was not the only living thing in that palace. That gong had not sounded of its own accord, whether the noise had been meant to lure him to his death, or not. The silence of the palace became suddenly sinister, fraught with crawling menace.

Could it be someone on the same mission as himself? A sudden thought occurred to him, at the memory of the mysterious Bit-Yakin. Was it not possible that this man had found the Teeth of Gwahlur in his long residence in Alkmeenon -- that his servants had taken them with them when they departed? The possibility that he might be following a will-o'-the-wisp infuriated the Cimmerian.

Choosing a corridor which he believed led back toward the part of the palace he had first entered, he hurried along it, stepping gingerly as he thought of that black river that seethed and foamed somewhere below his feet.

His speculations recurrently revolved about the oracle chamber and its cryptic occupant. Somewhere in that vicinity must be the clue to the mystery of the treasure, if indeed it still remained in its immemorial hiding place.

The great palace lay silent as ever, disturbed only by the swift passing of his sandaled feet. The chambers and halls he traversed were crumbling into ruin, but as he advanced the ravages of decay became less apparent. He wondered briefly for what purpose the ladders had been suspended from the ledges over the subterranean river, but dismissed the matter with a shrug. He was little interested in speculating over unremunerative problems of antiquity.

He was not sure just where the oracle chamber lay, from where he was, but presently he emerged into a corridor which led back into the great throne room under one of the arches. He had reached a decision; it was useless for him to wander aimlessly about the palace, seeking the hoard. He would conceal himself somewhere here, wait until the Keshani

priests came, and then, after they had gone through the farce of consulting the oracle, he would follow them to the hiding place of the gems, to which he was certain they would go. Perhaps they would take only a few of the jewels with them. He would content himself with the rest.

Drawn by a morbid fascination, he re-entered the oracle chamber and stared down again at the motionless figure of the princess who was worshipped as a goddess, entranced by her frigid beauty. What cryptic secret was locked in that marvelously molded form?

He started violently. The breath sucked through his teeth, the short hairs prickled at the back of his scalp. The body still lay as he had first seen it, silent, motionless, in breast-plates of jeweled gold, gilded sandals and silken skirt. But now there was a subtle difference. The lissom limbs were not rigid, a peach-bloom touched the cheeks, the lips were red--

With a panicky curse Conan ripped out his sword.

"Crom! She's alive!"

At his words the long dark lashes lifted; the eyes opened and gazed up at him inscrutably, dark, lustrous, mystical. He glared in frozen speechlessness.

She sat up with a supple ease, still holding his ensorcelled stare.

He licked his dry lips and found voice.

"You -- are -- are you Yelaya?" he stammered.

"I am Yelaya!" The voice was rich and musical, and he stared with new wonder. "Do not fear. I will not harm you if you do my bidding."

"How can a dead woman come to life after all these centuries?" he demanded, as if skeptical of what his senses told him. A curious gleam was beginning to smolder in his eyes.

She lifted her arms in a mystical gesture.

"I am a goddess. A thousand years ago there descended upon me the curse of the greater gods, the gods of darkness beyond the borders of light. The mortal in me died; the goddess in me could never die. Here I have lain for so many centuries, to awaken each night at sunset and hold my court as of yore, with specters drawn from the shadows of the past. Man, if you would not view that which will blast your soul for ever, get hence quickly! I command you! Go!" The voice became imperious, and her slender arm lifted and pointed.

Conan, his eyes burning slits, slowly sheathed his sword, but he did not obey her order. He stepped closer, as if impelled by a powerful fascination -- without the slightest warning he grabbed her up in a bear-like grasp. She screamed a very ungoddess-like scream, and there was a sound of ripping silk, as with one ruthless wrench he tore off her skirt.

"Goddess! Ha!" His bark was full of angry contempt. He ignored the frantic writhings of his captive. "I thought it was strange that a princess of Alkmeenon would speak with a Corinthian accent! As soon as I'd gathered my wits I knew I'd seen you somewhere. You're Muriela, Zargheba's Corinthian dancing girl. This crescent-shaped birthmark on your hip proves it. I saw it once when Zargheba was whipping you. Goddess! Bah!" He smacked the betraying hip contemptuously and resoundingly with his open hand, and the girl yelped piteously.

All her imperiousness had gone out of her. She was no longer a mystical figure of antiquity, but a terrified and humiliated dancing girl, such as can be bought at almost any Shemitish market place. She lifted up her voice and wept unashamedly. Her captor glared down at her with angry triumph.

"Goddess! Ha! So you were one of the veiled women Zargheba brought to Keshia with him. Did you think you could fool me, you little idiot? A year ago I saw you in Akbitana with that swine, Zargheba, and I don't forget faces -- or women's figures. I think I'll--"

Squirming about in his grasp she threw her slender arms about his massive neck in an abandon of terror; tears coursed down her cheeks, and her sobs quivered with a note of hysteria.

"Oh, please don't hurt me! Don't! I had to do it! Zargheba brought me here to act as the oracle!"

"Why, you sacrilegious little hussy!" rumbled Conan. "Do you not fear the gods? Crom! Is there no honesty anywhere?"

"Oh, please!" she begged, quivering with abject fright. "I couldn't disobey Zargheba. Oh, what shall I do? I shall be cursed by these heathen gods!"

"What do you think the priests will do to you if they find out you're an imposter?" he demanded.

At the thought her legs refused to support her, and she collapsed in a shuddering heap, clasping Conan's knees and mingling incoherent pleas for mercy and protection with piteous protestations of her innocence of any malign intention. It was a vivid change from her pose as the ancient princess, but not surprising. The fear that had nerved her then was now her undoing.

"Where is Zargheba?" he demanded. "Stop yammering, damn it, and answer me."

"Outside the palace," she whimpered, "watching for the priests."

"How many men with him?"

"None. We came alone."

"Ha!" It was much like the satisfied grunt of a hunting lion. "You must have left Keshia a few hours after I did. Did you climb the cliffs?"

She shook her head, too choked with tears to speak coherently. With an impatient imprecation he seized her slim shoulders and shook her until she gasped for breath.

"Will you quit that blubbering and answer me? How did you get into the valley?"

"Zargheba knew the secret way," she gasped. "The priest Gwarunga told him, and Thutmekri. On the south side of the valley there is a broad pool lying at the foot of the cliffs. There is a cave-mouth under the surface of the water that is not visible to the casual glance. We ducked under the water and entered it. The cave slopes up out of the water swiftly and leads through the cliffs. The opening on the side of the valley is masked by heavy thickets."

"I climbed the cliffs on the east side," he muttered. "Well, what then?"

"We came to the palace and Zargheba hid me among the trees while he went to look for the chamber of the oracle. I do not think he fully trusted Gwarunga. While he was gone I thought I heard a gong sound, but I was not sure. Presently Zargheba came and took me into the palace and brought me to this chamber, where the goddess Yelaya lay upon the dais. He stripped the body and clothed me in the garments and ornaments. Then he went forth to hide the body and watch for the priests. I have been afraid. When you entered I wanted to leap up and beg you to take me away from this place, but I feared Zargheba. When you discovered I was alive, I thought I could frighten you away."

"What were you to say as the oracle?" he asked.

"I was to bid the priests to take the Teeth of Gwahlur and give some of them to Thutmekri as a pledge, as he desired, and place the rest in the palace at Keshia. I was to tell them that an awful doom threatened Keshan if they did not agree to Thutmekri's proposals. And, oh, yes, I was to tell them that you were to be skinned alive immediately."

"Thutmekri wanted the treasure where he -- or the Zembabwans -- could lay hand on it easily," muttered Conan, disregarding the remark concerning himself. "I'll carve his liver yet -- Gorulga is a party to this swindle, of course?"

"No. He believes in his gods, and is incorruptible. He knows nothing about this. He will obey the oracle. It was all Thutmekri's plan. Knowing the Keshani would consult the oracle, he had Zargheba bring me with the embassy from Zembabwei, closely veiled and secluded."

"Well, I'm damned!" muttered Conan. "A priest who honestly believes in his oracle, and can not be bribed. Crom! I wonder if it was Zargheba who banged that gong. Did he know I was here? Could he have known about that rotten flagging? Where is he now, girl?"

"Hiding in a thicket of lotus trees, near the ancient avenue that leads from the south wall of the cliffs to the palace," she answered. Then she renewed her importunities. "Oh, Conan, have pity on me! I am afraid of this evil, ancient place. I know I have heard stealthy footfalls padding about me -- oh, Conan, take me away with you! Zargheba will kill me when I have served his purpose here -- I know it! The priests, too, will kill me if they discover my deceit.

"He is a devil -- he bought me from a slave-trader who stole me out of a caravan bound through southern Koth, and has made me the tool of his intrigues ever since. Take me away from him! You can not be as cruel as he. Don't leave me to be slain here! Please! Please!"

She was on her knees, clutching at Conan hysterically, her beautiful tear-stained face upturned to him, her dark silken hair flowing in disorder over her white shoulders. Conan picked her up and set her on his knee.

"Listen to me. I'll protect you from Zargheba. The priests shall not know of your perfidy. But you've got to do as I tell you."

She faltered promises of explicit obedience, clasping his corded neck as if seeking security from the contact.

"Good. When the priests come, you'll act the part of Yelaya, as Zargheba planned -- it'll be dark, and in the torchlight they'll never know the difference. But you'll say this to them: 'It is the will of the gods that the Stygian and his Shemitish dogs be driven from Keshan. They are thieves and tratiors who plot to rob the gods. Let the Teeth of Gwahlur be placed in the care of the general Conan. Let him lead the armies of Keshan. He is beloved of the gods.'"

She shivered, with an expression of desperation, but acquiesced.

"But Zargheba?" she cried. "He'll kill me!"

"Don't worry about Zargheba," he grunted. "I'll take care of that dog. You do as I say. Here, put up your hair again. It's fallen all over your shoulders. And the gem's fallen out of it."

He replaced the great glowing gem himself, nodding approval.

"It's worth a roomful of slaves, itself alone. Here, put your skirt back on. It's torn down the side, but the priests will never notice it. Wipe your face. A goddess doesn't cry like a whipped schoolgirl. By Crom, you do look like Yelaya, face, hair, figure and all! If you act the goddess with the priests as well as you did with me, you'll fool them easily."

"I'll try," she shivered.

"Good; I'm going to find Zargheba."

At that she became panicky again.

"No! Don't leave me alone! This place is haunted!"

"There's nothing here to harm you," he assured her impatiently. "Nothing but Zargheba, and I'm going to look after him. I'll be back shortly. I'll be watching from close by in case anything goes wrong during the ceremony; but if you play your part properly, nothing will go wrong."

And turning, he hastened out of the oracle chamber; behind him Muriela squeaked wretchedly at his going.

Twilight had fallen. The great rooms and halls were shadowy and indistinct; copper friezes glinted dully through the dusk. Conan strode like a silent phantom through the great halls, with a sensation of being stared at from the shadowed recesses by invisible ghosts of the past. No wonder the girl was nervous amid such surroundings.

He glided down the marble steps like a slinking panther, sword in hand. Silence reigned over the valley, and above the rim of the cliffs, stars were blinking out. If the priests of Keshia had entered the valley there was not a sound, not a movement in the greenery to betray them. He made out the ancient broken-paved avenue, wandering away to the south, lost amid clustering masses of fronds and thick-leaved bushes. He followed it warily, hugging the edge of the paving where the shrubs massed their shadows thickly, until he saw ahead of him, dimly in the dusk, the clump of lotus-trees, the strange growth peculiar to the black lands of Kush. There, according to the girl, Zargheba should be lurking. Conan became stealth personified. A velvet-footed shadow, he melted into the thickets.

He approached the lotus grove by a circuitous movement, and scarcely the rustle of a leaf proclaimed his passing. At the edge of the trees he halted suddenly, crouched like a suspicious panther among the deep shrubs. Ahead of him, among the dense leaves, showed a pallid oval, dim in the uncertain light. It might have been one of the great white blossoms

which shone thickly among the branches. But Conan knew that it was a man's face. And it was turned toward him. He shrank quickly deeper into the shadows. Had Zargheba seen him? The man was looking directly toward him. Seconds passed. The dim face had not moved. Conan could make out the dark tuft below that was the short black beard.

And suddenly Conan was aware of something unnatural. Zargheba, he knew, was not a tall man. Standing erect, he head would scarcely top the Cimmerians shoulders; yet that face was on a level with Conan's own. Was the man standing on something? Conan bent and peered toward the ground below the spot where the face showed, but his vision was blocked by undergrowth and the thick boles of the trees. But he saw something else, and he stiffened. Through a slot in the underbrush he glimpsed the stem of the tree under which, apparently, Zargheba was standing. The face was directly in line with that tree. He should have seen below that face, not the tree-trunk, but Zargheba's body -- but there was no body there.

Suddenly tenser than a tiger who stalks his prey, Conan glided deeper into the thicket, and a moment later drew aside a leafy branch and glared at the face that had not moved. Nor would it ever move again, of its own volition. He looked on Zargheba's severed head, suspended from the branch of the tree by its own long black hair.

Chapter 3.

The Return of the Oracle

Conan wheeled supplely, sweeping the shadows with a fiercely questing stare. There was no sign of the murdered man's body; only yonder the tall lush grass was trampled and broken down and the sward was dabbled darkly and wetly. Conan stood scarcely breathing as he strained his ears into the silence. The trees and bushes with their great pallid blossoms stood dark, still, and sinister, etched against the deepening dusk.

Primitive fears whispered at the back of Conan's mind. Was this the work of the priests of Keshan? If so, where were they? Was it Zargheba, after all, who had struck the gong? Again there rose the memory of Bit-Yakin and his mysterious servants. Bit-Yakin was dead, shriveled to a hulk of wrinkled leather and bound in his hollowed crypt to greet the rising sun for ever. But the servants of Bit-Yakin were unaccounted for. There was no proof they had ever left the valley.

Conan thought of the girl, Muriela, alone and unguarded in that great shadowy palace. He wheeled and ran back down the shadowed avenue, and he ran as a suspicious panther runs, poised even in full stride to whirl right or left and strike death blows.

The palace loomed through the trees, and he saw something else -- the glow of fire reflecting redly from the polished marble. He melted into the bushes that lined the broken street, glided through the dense growth and reached the edge of the open space before the portico. Voices reached him; torches bobbed and their flare shone on glossy ebon shoulders. The priests of Keshan had come.

They had not advanced up the wide, overgrown avenue as Zargheba had expected them to do. Obviously there was more than one secret way into the valley of Alkmeenon.

They were filing up the broad marble steps, holding their torches high. He saw Gorulga at the head of the parade, a profile chiseled out of copper, etched in the torch glare. The rest were acolytes, giant black men from whose skins the torches struck highlights. At the end of the procession there stalked a huge Negro with an unusually wicked cast of countenance, at the sight of whom Conan scowled. That was Gwarunga, whom Muriela had named as the man who had revealed the secret of the pool-entrance to Zargheba. Conan wondered how deeply the man was in the intrigues of the Stygian.

He hurried toward the portico, circling the open space to keep in the fringing shadows. They left no one to guard the entrance. The torches streamed steadily down the long dark hall. Before they reached the double-valved door at the other end, Conan had mounted the outer steps and was in the hall behind them. Slinking swiftly along the column-lined wall, he reached the great door as they crossed the huge throne room, their torches driving back the shadows. They did not look back. In single file, their ostrich plumes nodding, their leopard skin tunics contrasting curiously with the marble and arabesqued metal of the ancient palace, they moved across the wide room and halted momentarily at the golden door to the left of the throne-dais.

Gorluga's voice boomed eerily and hollowly in the great empty space, framed in sonorous phrases unintelligible to the lurking listener; then the high priest thrust open the golden door and entered, bowing repeatedly from the waist and behind him the torches sank and rose, showering flakes of flame, as the worshippers imitated their master. The gold door closed behind them, shutting out sound and sight, and Conan darted across the throne-chamber and into the alcove behind the throne. He made less sound than a wind blowing across the chamber.

Tiny beams of light streamed through the apertures in the wall, as he pried open the secret panel. Gliding into the niche, he peered through. Muriela sat upright on the dais, her arms folded, her head leaning back against the wall, within a few inches of his eyes. The delicate perfume of her foamy hair was in his nostrils. He could not see her face, of course, but her attitude was as if she gazed tranquilly into some far gulf of space, over and beyond the shaven heads of the black giants who knelt before her. Conan grinned with appreciation. "The little slut's an actress," he told himself. He knew she was shriveling with terror, but she showed no sign. In the uncertain flare of the torches she looked exactly like the goddess he had seen lying on that same dais, if one could imagine that goddess imbued with vibrant life.

Gorulga was booming forth some kind of a chant in an accent unfamiliar to Conan, and which was probably some invocation in the ancient tongue of Alkmeenon, handed down from generation to generation of high priests. It seemed interminable. Conan grew restless. The longer the thing lasted, the more terrific would be the strain on Muriela. If she snapped -- he hitched his sword and dagger forward. He could not see the little trollop tortured and slain by black men.

But the chant -- deep, low-pitched, and indescribably ominous -- came to a conclusion at last, and a shouted acclaim from the acolytes marked its period. Lifting his head and raising his arms toward the silent form on the dais, Gorulga cried in the deep, rich resonance that was the natural attribute of the Keshani priest: "O great goddess, dweller with the great one of darkness, let thy heart be melted, thy lips opened for the ears of thy slave whose head is in the dust beneath thy feet! Speak, great goddess of the holy valley! Thou knowest the paths before us; the darkness that vexes us is as the light of the midday sun to thee. Shed the radiance of thy wisdom on the paths of thy servants! Tell us, O mouthpiece of the gods: what is their will concerning Thutmekri the Stygian?"

The high-piled burnished mass of hair that caught the torchlight in dull bronze gleams quivered slightly. A gusty sigh rose from the blacks, half in awe, half in fear. Muriela's voice came plainly to Conan's ears in the breathless silence, and it seemed cold, detached, impresonal, though he winced at the Corinthian accent.

"It is the will of the gods that the Stygian and his Shemitish dogs be driven from Keshan!" She was repeating his exact words. "They are thieves and traitors who plot to rob the gods. Let the Teeth of Gwahlur be placed in the care of the general Conan. Let him lead the armies of Keshan. He is beloved of the gods!"

There was a quiver in her voice as she ended, and Conan began to sweat, believing she was on the point of an hysterical collapse. But the blacks did not notice, any more than they identified the Corinthian accent, of which they knew nothing. They smote their palms softly together and a murmur of wonder and awe rose from them. Gorulga's eyes glittered fanatically in the torchlight.

"Yelaya has spoken!" he cried in an exalted voice. "It is the will of the gods! Long ago, in the days of our ancestors, they were made taboo and hidden at the command of the gods, who wrenched them from the awful jaws of Gwahlur the king of darkness, in the birth of the world. At the command of the gods the Teeth of Gwahlur were hidden; at their command they shall be brought forth again. O star-born goddess, give us your leave to go to the secret hiding-place of the Teeth to secure them for him whom the gods love!"

"You have my leave to go!" answered the false goddess, with an imperious gesture of dismissal that set Conan grinning again, and the priests backed out, ostrich plumes and torches rising and falling with the rhythm of their genuflexions.

The gold door closed and with a moan, the goddess fell back limply on the dais. "Conan!" she whimpered faintly. "Conan!"

"Shhh!" he hissed through the apertures, and turning, glided from the niche and closed the panel. A glimpse past the jamb of the carven door showed him the torches receding across the great throne room, but he was at the same time aware of a radiance that did not emanate from the torches. He was startled, but the solution presented itself instantly. An early moon had risen and its light slanted through the pierced dome which by some curious workmanship intensified the light. The shining dome of Alkmeenon was no fable, then. Perhaps its interior was of the curious whitely flaming crystal found only in the hills of the black countries. The light flooded the throne room and seeped into the chambers immediately adjoining.

But as Conan made toward the door that led into the throne room, he was brought around suddenly by a noise that seemed to emanate from the passage that led off from the alcove. He crouched at the mouth, staring into it, remembering the clangor of the gong that had echoed from it to lure him into a snare. The light from the dome filtered only a little way into that narrow corridor, and showed him only empty space. Yet he could have sworn that he had heard the furtive pad of a foot somewhere down it.

While he hesitated, he was electrified by a woman's strangled cry from behind him. Bounding through the door behind the throne, he saw an unexpected spectacle, in the crystal light.

The torches of the priests had vanished from the great hall outside -- but one priest was still in the palace: Gwarunga. His wicked features were convulsed with fury, and he grasped the terrified Muriela by the throat, choking her efforts to scream and plead, shaking her brutally.

"Traitress!" Between his thick red lips his voice hissed like a cobra. "What game are you playing? Did not Zargheba tell you what to say? Aye, Thutmekri told me! Are you betraying your master, or is he betraying his friends through you? Slut! I'll twist off your false head -- but first I'll--"

A widening of his captive's lovely eyes as she stared over his shoulder warned the huge black. He released her and wheeled, just as Conan's sword lashed down. The impact of the stroke knocked him headlong backward to the marble floor, where he lay twitching, blood oozing from a ragged gash in his scalp.

Conan started toward him to finish the job -- for he knew that the black's sudden movement had caused the blade to strike flat -- but Muriela threw her arms convulsively about him.

"I've done as you ordered!" she gasped hysterically. "Take me away! Oh, please take me away!"

"We can't go yet," he grunted. "I want to follow the priests and see where they get the jewels. There may be more loot hidden there. But you can go with me. Where's that gem you wore in your hair?"

"It must have fallen out on the dais," she stammered, feeling for it. "I was so frightened -- when the priests left I ran out to find you, and this big brute had stayed behind, and he grabbed me--"

"Well, go get it while I dispose of this carcass," he commanded. "Go on! That gem is worth a fortune itself."

She hesitated, as if loth to return to that cryptic chamber; then, as he grasped Gwarunga's girdle and dragged him into the alcove, she turned and entered the oracle room.

Conan dumped the senseless black on the floor, and lifted his sword. The Cimmerian had lived too long in the wild places of the world to have any illusions about mercy. The only safe enemy was a headless enemy. But before he could strike, a startling scream checked the lifted blade. It came from the oracle chamber.

"Conan! Conan! She's come back!" The shriek ended in a gurgle and a scraping shuffle.

With an oath Conan dashed out of the alcove, across the throne dais and into the oracle chamber, almost before the sound had ceased. There he halted, glaring bewilderedly. To all appearances Muriela lay placidly on the dais, eyes closed as if in slumber.

"What in thunder are you doing?" he demanded acidly. "Is this any time to be playing jokes--"

His voice trailed away. His gaze ran along the ivory thigh molded in the close-fitting silk skirt. That skirt should gape from girdle to hem. He knew, because it had been his own hand that tore it, as he ruthlessly stripped the garment from the dancer's writhing body. But the skirt showed no rent. A single stride brought him to the dais and he laid his hand on the ivory body -- snatched it away as if it had encountered hot iron instead of the cold immobility of death.

"Crom!" he muttered, his eyes suddenly slits of balefire. "It's not Muriela! It's Yelaya!"

He understood now that frantic scream that had burst from Muriela's lips when she entered the chamber. The goddess had returned. The body had been stripped by Zargheba to furnish the accouterments for the pretender. Yet now it was clad in silk and jewels as Conan had first seen it. A peculiar prickling made itself manifest among the sort hairs at the base of

Conan's scalp.

"Muriela!" he shouted suddenly. "Muriela! Where the devil are you?"

The walls threw back his voice mockingly. There was no entrance that he could see except the golden door, and none could have entered or departed through that without his knowledge. This much was indisputable: Yelaya had been replaced on the dais within the few minutes that had elapsed since Muriela had first left the chamber to be seized by Gwarunga; his ears were still tingling with the echoes of Muriela's scream, yet the Corinthian girl had vanished as if into thin air. There was but one explanation, if he rejected the darker speculation that suggested the supernatural -- somewhere in the chamber there was a secret door. And even as the thought crossed his mind, he saw it.

In what had seemed a curtain of solid marble, a thin perpendicular crack showed and in the crack hung a wisp of silk. In an instant he was bending over it. That shred was from Muriela's torn skirt. The implication was unmistakable. It had been caught in the closing door and torn off as she was borne through the opening by whatever grim beings were her captors. The bit of clothing had prevented the door from fitting perfectly into its frame.

Thrusting his dagger-point into the crack, Conan exerted leverage with a corded forearm. The blade bent, but it was of unbreakable Akbitanan steel. The marble door opened. Conan's sword was lifted as he peered into the aperture beyond, but he saw no shape of menace. Light filtering into the oracle chamber revealed a short flight of steps cut out of marble. Pulling the door back to its fullest extent, he drove his dagger into a crack in the floor, proping it open. Then he went down the steps without hesitation. He saw nothing, heard nothing. A dozen steps down, the stair ended in a narrow corridor which ran straight away into gloom.

He halted suddenly, posed like a statue at the foot of the stair, staring at the paintings which frescoed the walls, half visible in the dim light which filtered down from above. The art was unmistakably Pelishti; he had seen frescoes of identical characteristics on the walls of Asgalun. But the scenes depicted had no connection with anything Pelishti, except for one human figure, frequently recurrent: a lean, white-bearded old man whose racial characteristics were unmistakable. They seemed to represent various sections of the palace above. Several scenes showed a chamber he recognized as the oracle chamber with the figure of Yelaya stretched upon the ivory dais and huge black men kneeling before it. And there behind the wall, in the niche, lurked the ancient Pelishti. And there were other figures, too -- figures that moved through the deserted palace, did the bidding of the Pelishti, and dragged unnamable things out of the subterranean river. In the few seconds Conan stood frozen, hitherto unintelligible phrases in the parchment manuscript blazed in his brain with chilling clarity. The loose bits of the pattern clicked into place. The mystery of Bit-Yakin was a mystery no longer, nor the riddle of Bit-Yakin's servants.

Conan turned and peered into the darkness, an icy finger crawling along his spine. Then he went along the corridor, cat-footed, and without hesitation, moving deeper and deeper into the darkness as he drew farther away from the stair. The air hung heavy with the odor he had scented in the court of the gong.

Now in utter blackness he heard a sound ahead of him -- the shuffle of bare feet, or the swish of loose garments against stone, he could not tell which. But an instant later his outstretched hand encountered a barrier which he identified as a massive door of carved metal. He pushed against it fruitlessly, and his sword-point sought vainly for a crack. It fitted into the sill and jambs as if molded there. He exerted all his strength, his feet straining against the floor, the veins knotting in his temples. It was useless; a charge of elephants would scarcely have shaken that titanic portal.

As he leaned there he caught a sound on the other side that his ears instantly identified -- it was the creak of rusty iron, like a lever scraping in its slot. Instinctively action followed recognition so spontaneously that sound, impulse and action were practically simultaneous. And as his prodigious bound carried him backward, there was the rush of a great bulk from above, and a thunderous crash filled the tunnel with deafening vibrations. Bits of flying splinters struck him -- a huge block of stone, he knew from the sound, dropped on the spot he had just quitted. An instant's slower thought or action and it would have crushed him like an ant.

Conan fell back. Somewhere on the other side of that metal door Muriela was a captive, if she still lived. But he could not pass that door, and if he remained in the tunnel another block might fall, and he might not be so lucky. It would do the girl no good for him to be crushed into a purple pulp. He could not continue his search in that direction. He must get above ground and look for some other avenue of approach.

He turned and hurried toward the stair, sighing as he emerged into comparative radiance. And as he set foot on the first step, the light was blotted out, and above him the marble door rushed shut with a resounding reverberation.

Something like panic seized the Cimmerian then, trapped in that black tunnel, and he wheeled on the stair, lifting his sword and glaring murderously into the darkness behind him, expecting a rush of ghoulish assailants. But there was no sound or movement down the tunnel. Did the men beyond the door -- if they were men -- believe that he had been disposed of by the fall of the stone from the roof, which had undoubtedly been released by some sort of machinery?

Then why had the door been shut above him? Abandoning speculation, Conan groped his way up the steps, his skin crawling in anticipation of a knife in his back at every stride, yearning to drown his semi-panic in a barbarous burst of bloodletting.

He thrust against the door at the top, and cursed soulfully to find that it did not give to his efforts. Then as he lifted his sword with his right hand to hew at the marble, his groping left encountered a metal bolt that evidently slipped into place at the closing of the door. In an instant he had drawn this bolt, and then the door gave to his shove. He bounded into the chamber like a slit-eyed, snarling incarnation of fury, ferociously desirous to come to grips with whatever enemy was hounding him.

The dagger was gone from the floor. The chamber was empty, and so was the dais. Yelaya had again vanished.

"By Crom!" muttered the Cimmerian. "Is she alive, after all?"

He strode out into the throne room, baffled, and then, struck by a sudden thought, stepped behind the throne and peered into the alcove. There was blood on the smooth marble where he had cast down the senseless body of Gwarunga -- that was all. The black man had vanished as completely as Yelaya.

Chapter 4.

The Teeth of Gwahlur

Baffled wrath confused the brain of Conan the Cimmerian. He knew no more how to go about searching for Muriela than he had known how to go about searching for the Teeth of Gwahlur. Only one thought occurred to him -- to follow the priests. Perhaps at the hiding-place of the treasure some clue would be revealed to him. It was a slim chance, but better than wandering about aimlessly.

As he hurried through the great shadowy hall that led to the portico he half expected the lurking shadows to come to life behind him with rending fangs and talons. But only the beat of his own rapid heart accompanied him into the moonlight that dappled the shimmering marble.

At the foot of the wide steps he cast about in the bright moonlight for some sight to show him the direction he must go. And he found it -- petals scattered on the sward told where an arm or garment had brushed against a blossom-laden branch. Grass had been pressed down under heavy feet. Conan, who had tracked wolves in his native hills, found no insurmountable difficulty in following the trail of the Keshani priests.

It led away from the palace, through masses of exotic-scented shrubbery where great pale blossoms spread their shimmering petals, through verdant, tangled bushes that showered blooms at the touch, until he came at last to a great mass of rock that jutted like a titan's castle out from the cliffs at a point closest to the palace, which, however, was almost hidden from view by vine-interlaced trees. Evidently that babbling priest in Keshia had been mistaken when he said the Teeth were hidden in the palace. This trail had led him away from the place where Muriela had disappeared, but a belief was growing in Conan that each part of the valley was connected with that palace by subterranean passages.

Crouching in the deep, velvet-black shadows of the bushes, he scrutinized the great jut of rock which stood out in bold relief in the moonlight. It was covered with strange, grotesque carvings, depicting men and animals, and half-bestial creatures that might have been gods or devils. The style of art differed so strikingly from that of the rest of the valley, that Conan wondered if it did not represent a different era and race, and was itself a relic of an age lost and forgotten at whatever immeasurably distant date the people of Alkmeenon had found and entered the haunted valley.

A great door stood open in the sheer curtain of the cliff, and a gigantic dragon's head was carved about it so that the open door was like the dragon's gaping mouth. The door itself was of carven bronze and looked to weigh several tons. There was no lock that he could see, but a series of bolts showing along the edge of the massive portal, as it stood open, told him that there was some system of locking and unlocking -- a system doubtless known only to the priests of Keshan.

The trail showed that Gorulga and his henchemen had gone through that door. But Conan hesitated. To wait until they emerged would probably mean to see the door locked in his face, and he might not be able to solve the mystery of its unlocking. On the other hand, if he followed them in, they might emerge and lock him in the cavern.

Throwing caution to the winds, he glided through the great portal. Somewhere in the cavern were the priests, the Teeth of Gwahlur, and perhaps a clue to the fate of Muriela. Personal risks had never yet deterred him from any purpose.

Moonlight illumined, for a few yards, the wide tunnel in which he found himself. Somewhere ahead of him he saw a faint glow and heard the echo of a weird chanting. The priests were not so far ahead of him as he had thought. The tunnel debouched into a wide room before the moonlight played out, an empty cavern of no great dimensions, but with a lofty, vaulted roof, glowing with a phosphorescent encrustation, which, as Conan knew, was a common phenomenon in that part of the world. It made a ghostly half-light, in which he was able to see a bestial image squatting on a shrine, and the black mouths of six or seven tunnels leading off from the chamber. Down the widest of these -- the one directly behind the squat image which looked toward the outer opening -- he caught the gleam of torches wavering, whereas the phosphorescent glow was fixed, and heard the chanting increase in volume.

Down it he went recklessly, and was presently peering into a larger cavern than the one he had just left. There was no phosphorus here, but the light of the torches fell on a larger altar and a more obscene and repulsive god squatting toad-like upon it. Before this repugnant deity Gorulga and his ten acolytes knelt and beat their heads upon the ground, while chanting monotonously. Conan realized why their progress had been so slow. Evidently approaching the secret crypt of the Teeth was a complicated and elaborate ritual.

He was fidgeting in nervous impatience before the chanting and bowing were over, but presently they rose and passed into the tunnel which opened behind the idol. Their torches bobbed away into the nighted vault, and he followed swiftly. Not much danger of being discovered. He glided along the shadows like a creature of the night, and the black priests were completely engrossed in their ceremonial mummery. Apparently they had not even noticed the absence of Gwarunga.

Emerging into a cavern of huge proportions, about whose upward curving walls gallery-like ledges marched in tiers, they began their worship anew before an altar which was larger, and a god which was more disgusting, than any encountered thus far.

Conan crouched in the black mouth of the tunnel, staring at the walls reflecting the lurid glow of the torches. He saw a carven stone stair winding up from tier to tier of the galleries; the roof was lost in darkness.

He started violently and the chanting broke off as the kneeling blacks flung up their heads. An inhuman voice boomed out high above them. They froze on their knees, their faces turned upward with a ghastly blue hue in the sudden glare of a weird light that burst blindingly up near the lofty roof and then burned with a throbbing glow. That glare lighted a gallery and a cry went up from the high priest, echoed shudderingly by his acolytes. In the flash there had been briefly disclosed to them a slim white figure standing upright in a sheen of silk and a glint of jewel-crusted gold. Then the blaze smoldered to a throbbing, pulsing luminosity in which nothing was distinct, and that slim shape was but a shimmering blur of ivory.

"Yelaya!" screamed Gorulga, his brown features ashen. "Why have you followed us? What is your pleasure?"

That weird unhuman voice rolled down from the roof, reechoing under that arching vault that magnified and altered it beyond recognition.

"Woe to the unbelievers! Woe to the false children of Keshia! Doom to them which deny their deity!"

A cry of horror went up from the priests. Gorulga looked like a shocked vulture in the glare of the torches.

"I do not understand!" he stammered. "We are faithful. In the chamber of the oracle you told us--"

"Do not heed what you heard in the chamber of the oracle!" rolled that terrible voice, multiplied until it was as though a myriad voices thundered and muttered the same warning. "Beware of false prophets and false gods! A demon in my guise spoke to you in the palace, giving false prophecy. Now harken and obey, for only I am the true goddess, and I give you one chance to save yourselves from doom!

"Take the Teeth of Gwahlur from the crypt where they were placed so long ago. Alkmeenon is no longer holy, because it has been desecrated by blasphemers. Give the Teeth of Gwahlur into the hands of Thutmekri, the Stygian, to place in the sanctuary of Dagon and Derketo. Only this can save Keshan from the doom the demons of the night have plotted. Take the Teeth of Gwahlur and go; return instantly to Keshia; there give the jewels to Thutmekri, and seize the foreign devil Conan and flay him alive in the great square."

There was no hesitation in obeying. Chattering with fear the priests scrambled up and ran for the door that opened behind the bestial god. Gorulga led the flight. They jammed briefly in the doorway, yelping as wildly waving torches touched squirming black bodies; they plunged through, and the patter of their speeding feet dwindled down the tunnel.

Conan did not follow. He was consumed with a furious desire to learn the truth of this fantastic affair. Was that indeed Yelaya, as the cold sweat on the backs of his hands told him, or was it that little hussy Muriela, turned traitress after all? If it was--

Before the last torch had vanished down the black tunnel he was bounding vengefully up the stone stair. The blue glow was dying down, but he could still make out that the ivory figure stood motionless on the gallery. His blood ran cold as he approached it, but he did not hesitate. He came on with his sword lifted, and towered like a threat of death over the inscrutable shape.

"Yelaya!" he snarled. "Dead as she's been for a thousand years! Ha!"

From the dark mouth of a tunnel behind him a dark form lunged. But the sudden, deadly rush of unshod feet had reached the Cimmerian's quick ears. He whirled like a cat and dodged the blow aimed murderously at his back. As the gleaming steel in the dark hand hissed past him, he struck back with the fury of a roused python, and the long straight blade impaled his assailant and stood out a foot and a half between his shoulders.

"So!" Conan tore his sword free as the victim sagged to the floor, gasping and gurgling. The man writhed briefly and stiffened. In the dying light Conan saw a black body and ebon countenance, hideous in the blue glare. He had killed Gwarunga.

Conan turned from the corpse to the goddess. Thongs about her knees and breast held her upright against tha stone pillar, and her thick hair, fastented to the column, held her head up. At a few yards' distance these bonds were not visible in the uncertain light.

"He must have come to after I descended into the tunnel," muttered Conan. "He must have suspected I was down there. So he pulled out the dagger" -- Conan stooped and wrenched the identical weapon from the stiffening fingers, glanced at it and replaced it in his own girdle -- "and shut the door. Then he took Yelaya to befool his brother idiots. That was he shouting a while ago. You couldn't recognize his voice, under this echoing roof. And that bursting blue flame -- I thought it looked familiar. It's a trick of the Stygian priests. Thutmekri must have given some of it to Gwarunga."

The man could easily have reached this cavern ahead of his companions. Evidently familiar with the plan of the caverns by hearsay or by maps handed down in the priestcraft, he had entered the cave after the others, carrying the goddess, followed a circuitous route through the tunnels and chambers, and ensconced himself and his burden on the balcony while Gorulga and the other acolytes were engaged in their endless rituals.

The blue glare had faded, but now Conan was aware of another glow, emanating from the mouth of one of the corridors that opened on the ledge. Somewhere down that corridor there was another field of phosphorus, for he recognized the faint steady radiance. The corridor led in the direction the priests had taken, and he decided to follow it, rather than descend into the darkness of the great cavern below. Doubtless it connected with another gallery in some other chamber, which might be the destination of the priests. He hurried down it, the illumination growing stronger as he advanced, until he could make out the floor and the walls of the tunnel. Ahead of him and below he could hear the priests chanting again.

Abruptly a doorway in the left-hand wall was limned in the phosphorous glow, and to his ears came the sound of soft, hysterical sobbing. He wheeled, and glared through the door.

He was looking again into a chamber hewn out of solid rock, not a natural cavern like the others. The domed roof shone with the phosphorous light, and the walls were almost covered with arabesques of beaten gold.

Near the farther wall on a granite throne, staring for ever toward the arched doorway, sat the monstrous and obscene Pteor, the god of the Pelishti, wrought in brass, with his exaggerated attributes reflecting the grossness of his cult. And in his lap sprawled a limp white figure.

"Well, I'll be damned!" muttered Conan. He glanced suspiciously about the chamber, seeing no other entrance or evidence of occupation, and then advanced noiselessly and looked down at the girl whose slim shoulders shook with sobs of abject misery, her face sunk in her arms. From thick bands of gold on the idol's arms slim gold chains ran to smaller bands on her wrists. He laid a hand on her naked shoulder and she started convulsively, shrieked, and twisted her tear-stained face toward him.

"Conan!" She made a spasmodic effort to go into the usual clinch, but the chains hindered her. He cut through the soft gold as close to her wrists as he could, grunting: "You'll have to wear these bracelets until I can find a chisel or a file. Let go of me, damn it! You actresses are too damned emotional. What happened to you, anyway?"

"When I went back into the oracle chamber," she whimpered, "I saw the goddess lying on the dais as I'd first seen her. I called out to you and started to run to the door -- then something grabbed me from behind. It clapped a hand over my mouth and carried me through a panel in the wall, and down some steps and along a dark hall. I didn't see what it was that had hold of me until we passed through a big metal door and came into a tunnel whose roof was alight, like this chamber.

"Oh, I nearly fainted when I saw! They are not humans! They are gray, hairy devils that walk like men and speak a gibberish no human could understand. They stood there and seemed to be waiting, and once I thought I heard somebody trying the door. Then one of the things pulled a metal lever in the wall, and something crashed on the other side of the door.

"Then they carried me on and on through winding tunnels and up stone stairways into this chamber, where they chained me on the knees of this abominable idol, and then they went away. Oh, Conan, what are they?"

"Servants of Bit-Yakin," he grunted. "I found a manuscript that told me a number of things, and then stumbled upon some frescoes that told me the rest. Bit-Yakin was a Pelishti who wandered into the valley with his servants after the people of Alkmeenon had deserted it. He found the body of Princess Yelaya, and discovered that the priests returned from time to time to make offerings to her, for even then she was worshipped as a goddess.

"He made an oracle of her, and he was the voice of the oracle, speaking from a niche he cut in the wall behind the ivory dais. The priests never suspected, never saw him or his servants, for they always hid themselves when the men came. Bit-Yakin lived and died here without ever being discovered by the priests. Crom knows how long he dwelt here, but it must have been for centuries. The wise men of the Pelishti know how to increase the span of their lives for hundreds of years. I've seen some of them myself. Why he lived here alone, and why he played the part of oracle no ordinary human can guess, but I believe the oracle part was to keep the city inviolate and sacred, so he could remain undisturbed. He ate the food the priests brought as an offering to Yelaya, and his servants ate other things -- I've always known there was a subterranean river flowing away from the lake where the people of the Puntish highlands throw their dead. That river runs under this palace. They have ladders hung over the water where they can hang and fish for the corpses that come floating through. Bit-Yakin recorded everything on parchment and painted walls.

"But he died at last, and his servants mummified him according to instructions he gave them before his death, and stuck him in a cave in the cliffs. The rest is easy to guess. His servants, who were even more nearly immortal than he, kept on dwelling here, but the next time a high priest came to consult the oracle, not having a master to restrain them, they tore him to pieces. So since then -- until Gorulga -- nobody came to talk to the oracle.

"It's obvious they've been renewing the garments and ornaments of the goddess, as they'd seen Bit-Yakin do. Doubtless there's a sealed chamber somewhere were the silks are kept from decay. They clothed the goddess and brought her back to the oracle room after Zargheba had stolen her. And, oh, by the way, they took off Zargheba's head and hung it up in a thicket."

She shivered, yet at the same time breathed a sigh of relief.

"He'll never whip me again."

"Not this side of Hell," agreed Conan. "But come on, Gwarunga ruined my chances with his stolen goddess. I'm going to follow the priests and take my chance of stealing the loot from them after they get it. And you stay close to me. I can't spend all my time looking for you."

"But the servants of Bit-Yakin!" she whispered fearfully.

"We'll have to take our chance," he grunted. "I don't know what's in their minds, but so far they haven't shown any disposition to come out and fight in the open. Come on."

Taking her wrist he led her out of the chamber and down the corridor. As they advanced they heard the chanting of the priests, and mingling with the sound the low sullen rushing of waters. The light grew stronger above them as they emerged on a high-pitched gallery of a great cavern and looked down on a scene weird and fantastic.

Above them gleamed the phosphorescent roof; a hundred feet below them stretched the smooth floor of the cavern. On the far side this floor was cut by a deep, narrow stream brimming its rocky channel. Rushing out of impenetrable gloom, it swirled across the cavern and was lost again in darkness. The visible surface reflected the radiance above; the dark seething waters glinted as if flecked with living jewels, frosty blue, lurid red, shimmering green, and ever-changing iridescence.

Conan and his companion stood upon one of the gallery-like ledges that banded the curve of the lofty wall, and from this ledge a natural bridge of stone soared in a breath-taking arch over the vast gulf of the cavern to join a much smaller ledge on the opposite side, across the river. Ten feet below it another, broader arch spanned the cave. At either end a carved stair joined the extremities of these flying arches.

Conan's gaze, following the curve of the arch that swept away from the ledge on which they stood, caught a glint of light that was not the lurid phosphorus of the cavern. On that small ledge opposite them there was an opening in the cave wall through which stars were glinting.

But his full attention was drawn to the scene beneath them. The priests had reached their destination. There in a sweeping angle of the cavern wall stood a stone altar, but there was no idol upon it. Whether there was one behind it, Conan cound not ascertain, because some trick of the light, or the sweep of the wall, left the space behind the altar in total darkness.

The priests had stuck their torches into holes in the stone floor, forming a semicircle of fire in front of the altar at a distance of several yards. Then the priests themselves formed a semicircle inside the crescent of torches, and Gorulga, after lifting his arms aloft in invocation, bent to the altar and laid hands on it. It lifted and tilted backward on its hinder edge, like the lid of a chest, revealing a small crypt.

Extending a long arm into the recess, Gorulga brought up a small brass chest. Lowering the altar back into place, he set the chest on it, and threw back the lid. To the eager watchers on the high gallery it seemed as if the action had released a blaze of living fire which throbbed and quivered about the opened chest. Conan's heart leaped and his hand caught at his hilt. The Teeth of Gwahlur at last! The treasure that would make its possessor the richest man in the world! His breath came fast between his clenched teeth.

Then he was suddenly aware that a new element had entered into the light of the torches and of the phosphorescent roof, rendering both void. Darkness stole around the altar, except for that glowing spot of evil radiance cast by the Teeth of Gwahlur, and that grew and grew. The blacks froze into basaltic statues, their shadows streaming grotesquely and gigantically out behind them.

The altar was laved in the glow now, and the astounded features of Gorulga stood out in sharp relief. Then the mysterious space behind the altar swam into the widening illumination. And slowly with the crawling light, figures became visible, like shapes growing out of the night and silence.

At first they seemed like gray stone statues, those motionless shapes, hairy, man-like, yet hideously human; but their eyes were alive, cold sparks of gray icy fire. And as the weird glow lit their bestial countenances, Gorulga screamed and fell backward, throwing up his long arms in a gesture of frenzied horror.

But a longer arm shot across the altar and a misshapen hand locked on his throat. Screaming and fighting, the high priest was dragged back across the altar; a hammer-like fist smashed down, and Gorulga's cries were stilled. Limp and broken he sagged cross the altar; his brains oozing from his crushed skull. And then the servants of Bit-Yakin surged like a bursting flood from Hell on the black priests who stood like horror-blasted images.

Then there was slaughter, grim and appalling.

Conan saw black bodies tossed like chaff in the inhuman hands of the slayers, against whose horrible strength and agility the daggers and swords of the priests were ineffective. He saw men lifted bodily and their heads cracked open against the stone altar. He saw a flaming torch, grasped in a monstrous hand, thrust inexorably down the gullet of an agonized wretch who writhed in vain against the arms that pinioned him. He saw a man torn in two pieces, as one might tear a chicken, and the bloody fragments hurled clear across the cavern. The massacre was as short and devastating as the rush of a hurricane. In a burst of red abysmal ferocity it was over, except for one wretch who fled screaming back the way the priests had come, pursued by a swarm of blood-dabbled shapes of horror which reached out their red-smeared hands for him. Fugitive and pursuers vanished down the black tunnel, and the screams of the human came back dwindling and confused by the distance.

Muriela was on her knees clutching Conan's legs; her face pressed against his knee and her eyes tightly shut. She was a quaking, quivering mold of abject terror. But Conan was galvanized. A quick glance across at the aperture where the stars shone, a glance down at the chest that still blazed open on the blood-smeared altar, and he saw and seized the desperate gamble.

"I'm going after that chest!" he grated. "Stay here!"

"Oh, Mitra, no!" In an agony of fright she fell to the floor and caught at his sandals. "Don't! Don't! Don't leave me!"

"Lie still and keep your mouth shut!" he snapped, disengaging himself from her frantic clasp.

He disregarded the tortuous stair. He dropped from ledge to ledge with reckless haste. There was no sign of the monsters as his feet hit the floor. A few of the torches still flared in their sockets, the phosphorescent glow throbbed and quivered, and the river flowed with an almost articulate muttering, scintillant with undreamed radiances. The glow that had heralded the appearance of the servants had vanished with them. Only the light of the jewels in the brass chest shimmered and quivered.

He snatched the chest, noting its contents in one lustful glance -- strange, curiously shapen stones that burned with an icy, non-terrestrial fire. He slammed the lid, thrust the chest under his arm, and ran back up the steps. He had no desire to encounter the hellish servants of Bit-Yakin. His glimpse of them in action had dispelled any ilusion concerning their fighting ability. Why they had waited so long before striking at the invaders he was unable to say. What human could guess the motives or thoughts of these monstrosities? That they were possessed of craft and intelligence equal to humanity had been demonstrated. And there on the cavern floor lay crimson proof of their bestial ferocity.

The Corinthian girl still cowered on the gallery where he had left her. He caught her wrist and yanked her to her feet, grunting: "I guess it's time to go!"

Too bemused with terror to be fully aware of what was going on, the girl suffered herself to be led across the dizzy span. It was not until they were poised over the rushing water that she looked down, voiced a startled yelp and would have fallen but for Conan's massive arm about her. Growling an objurgation in her ear, he snatched her up under his free arm and swept her, in a flutter of limply waving arms and legs, across the arch and into the aperture that opened at the other end. Without bothering to set her on her feet, he hurried through the short tunnel into which this aperture opened. An instant later they emerged upon a narrow ledge on the outer side of the cliffs that circled the valley. Less than a hundred feet below them the jungle waved in the starlight.

Looking down, Conan vented a gusty sigh of relief. He believed he could negotiate the descent, even though burdened with the jewels and the girl; although he doubted if even he, unburdened, could have ascended at that spot. He set the chest, still smeared with Gorulga's blood and clotted with his brains, on the ledge, and was about to remove his girdle in order to tie the box to his back, when he was galvanized by a sound behind him, a sound sinister and unmistakable.

"Stay here!" he snapped at the bewildered Corinthian girl. "Don't move!" And drawing his sword, he glided into the tunnel, glaring back into the cavern.

Half-way across the upper span he saw a gray deformed shape. One of the servants of Bit-Yakin was on his trail. There was no doubt that the brute had seen them and was following them. Conan did not hesitate. It might be easier to defend the mouth of the tunnel -- but this fight must be finished quickly, before the other servants could return.

He ran out on the span, straight toward the oncoming monster. It was no ape, neither was it a man. It was some shambling horror spawned in the mysterious, nameless jungles of the south, where strange life teemed in the reeking rot without the dominance of man, and drums thundered in temples that had never known the tread of a human foot. How the ancient Pelishti had gained lordship over them -- and with it eternal exile from humanity -- was a foul riddle about which Conan did not care to speculate, even if he had had opportunity.

Man and monster, they met at the highest arch of the span, where, a hundred feet below, rushed the furious black water. As the monstrous shape with its leprous gray body and the features of a carven, unhuman idol loomed over him, Conan struck as a wounded tiger strikes, with every ounce of thew and fury behind the blow. That stroke would have sheared a human body asunder; but the bones of the servant of Bit-Yakin were like tempered steel. Yet even tempered steel could not wholly have withstood that furious stroke. Ribs and shoulder-bone parted and blood spouted from the great gash.

There was no time for a second stroke. Before the Cimmerian could lift his blade again or spring clear, the sweep of a giant arm knocked him from the span as a fly is flicked from a wall. As he plunged downward the rush of the river was like a knell in his ears, but his twisting body fell half-way across the lower arch. He wavered there precariously for one blood-chilling instant, then his clutching fingers hooked over the farther edge, and he scrambled to safety, his sword still in his other hand.

As he sprang up, he saw the monster, spurting blood hideously, rush toward the cliff-end of the bridge, obviously intending to descend the stair that connected the arches and renew the feud. At the very ledge the brute paused in mid-flight -- and Conan saw it too -- Muriela, with the jewel chest under her arm, stood staring wilding in the mouth of the tunnel.

With a triumphant bellow the monster scooped her up under one arm, snatched the jewel chest with the other hand as she dropped it, and turning, lumbered back across the bridge. Conan cursed with passion and ran for the other side also. He doubted if he could climb the stair to the higher arch in time to catch the brute before it could plunge into the labyrinths of tunnels on the other side.

But the monster was slowing, like clockwork running down. Blood gushed from that terrible gash in his breast, and he lurched drunkenly from side to side. Suddenly he stumbled, reeled and toppled sidewise -- pitched headlong from the arch and hurtled downward. Girl and jewel chest fell from his nerveless hands and Muriela's scream rang terribly above the snarl of the water below.

Conan was almost under the spot from which the creature had fallen. The monster struck the lower arch glancingly and shot off, but the writhing figure of the girl struck and clung, and the chest hit the edge of the span near her. One falling object struck on one side of Conan and one on the other. Either was within arm's length; for the fraction of a split second the chest teetered ont he edge of the bridge, and Muriela clung by one arm, her face turned desperately toward Conan, her eyes dilated with the fear of death and her lips parted in a haunting cry of despair.

Conan did not hesitate, nor did he even glance toward the chest that held the wealth of an epoch. With a quickness that would have shamed the spring of a hungry jaguar, he swooped, grasped the girl's arm just as her fingers slipped from the smooth stone, and snatched her up on the span with one explosive heave. The chest toppled on over and struck the water ninety feet below, where the body of the servant of Bit-Yakin had already vanished. A splash, a jetting flash of foam marked where the Teeth of Gwahlur disappeared for ever from the sight of man.

Conan scarcely wasted a downward glance. He darted across the span and ran up the cliff stair like a cat, carrying the limp girl as if she had been an infant. A hideous ululation caused him to glance over his shoulder as he reached the higher arch, to see the other servants streaming back into the cavern below, blood dripping from their bared fangs. They raced up the stair that wound up from tier to tier, roaring vengefully; but he slung the girl unceremoniously over his shoulder, dashed through the tunnel and went down the cliffs like an ape himself, dropping and springing from hold to hold with breakneck recklessness. When the fierce countenances looked over the ledge of the aperture, it was to see the Cimmerian and the girl disappearing into the forest that surrounded the cliffs.

"Well," said Conan, setting the girl on her feet within the sheltering screen of branches, "we can take our time now. I don't think those brutes will follow us outside the valley. Anyway, I've got a horse tied at a water-hole close by, if the lions haven't eaten him. Crom's devils! What are you crying about now?"

She covered her tear-stained face with her hands, and her slim shoulders shook with sobs.

"I lost the jewels for you," she wailed miserably. "It was my fault. If I'd obeyed you and stayed out on the ledge, that brute would never have seen me. You should have caught the gems and let me drown!"

"Yes, I suppose I should," he agreed. "But forget it. Never worry about what's past. And stop crying, will you? That's better. Come on."

"You mean you're going to keep me? Take me with you?" she asked hopefully.

"What else do you suppose I'd do with you?" He ran an approving glance over her figure and grinned at the torn skirt which revealed a generous expanse of tempting ivory-tinted curves. "I can use an actress like you. There's no use going back to Keshia. There's nothing in Keshan now that I want. We'll go to Punt. The people of Punt worship an ivory woman, and they wash gold out of the rivers in wicker baskets. I'll tell them that Keshan is intriguing with Thutmekri to enslave them -- which is true -- and that the gods have sent me to protect them -- for about a houseful of gold. If I can manage to smuggle you into their temple to exchange places with their ivory goddess, we'll skin them out of their jaw teeth before we get through with them!"

Contents

BEYOND THE BLACK RIVER

By Robert E. Howard

Chapter 1. Conan Loses His Ax

The stillness of the forest trail was so primeval that the tread of a soft-booted foot was a startling disturbance. At least it seemed so to the ears of the wayfarer, though he was moving along the path with the caution that must be practised by any man who ventures beyond Thunder River. He was a young man of medium height, with an open countenance and a mop of tousled tawny hair unconfined by cap or helmet. His garb was common enough for that country--a coarse tunic, belted at the waist, short leather breeches beneath, and soft buckskin boots that came short of the knee. A knife-hilt jutted from one boot-top. The broad leather belt supported a short, heavy sword and a buckskin pouch. There was no perturbation in the wide eyes that scanned the green walls which fringed the trail. Though not tall, he was well built, and the arms that the short wide sleeves of the tunic left bare were thick with corded muscle.

He tramped imperturbably along, although the last settler's cabin lay miles behind him, and each step was carrying him nearer the grim peril that hung like a brooding shadow over the ancient forest.

He was not making as much noise as it seemed to him, though he well knew that the faint tread of his booted feet would be like a tocsin of alarm to the fierce ears that might be lurking in the treacherous green fastness. His careless attitude was not genuine; his eyes and ears were keenly alert, especially his ears, for no gaze could penetrate the leafy tangle for more than a few feet in either direction.

But it was instinct more than any warning by the external senses which brought him up suddenly, his hand on his hilt. He stood stock-still in the middle of the trail, unconsciously holding his breath, wondering what he had heard, and wondering if indeed he had heard anything. The silence seemed absolute. Not a squirrel chattered or bird chirped. Then his gaze fixed itself on a mass of bushes beside the trail a few yards ahead of him. There was no breeze, yet he had seen a branch quiver. The short hairs on his scalp prickled, and he stood for an instant undecided, certain that a move in either direction would bring death streaking at him from the bushes.

A heavy chopping crunch sounded behind the leaves. The bushes were shaken violently, and simultaneously with the sound, an arrow arched erratically from among them and vanished among the trees along the trail. The wayfarer glimpsed its flight as he sprang frantically to cover.

Crouching behind a thick stem, his sword quivering in his fingers, he saw the bushes part, and a tall figure stepped leisurely into the trail. The traveller stared in surprise. The stranger was clad like himself in regard to boots and breeks, though the latter were of silk instead of leather. But he wore a sleeveless hauberk of dark mesh-mail in place of a tunic, and a helmet perched on his black mane. That helmet held the other's gaze; it was without a crest, but adorned by short bull's horns. No civilized hand ever forged that head-piece. Nor was the face below it that of a civilized man: dark, scarred, with smoldering blue eyes, it was a face as untamed as the primordial forest which formed its background. The man held a broad-sword in his right hand, and the edge was smeared with crimson.

"Come on out," he called, in an accent unfamiliar to the wayfarer. "All's safe now. There was only one of the dogs. Come on out."

The other emerged dubiously and stared at the stranger. He felt curiously helpless and futile as he gazed on the proportions of the forest man--the massive iron-clad breast, and the arm that bore the reddened sword, burned dark by the sun and ridged and corded with muscles. He moved with the dangerous ease of a panther; he was too fiercely supple to be a product of civilization, even of that fringe of civilization which composed the outer frontiers.

Turning, he stepped back to the hushes and pulled them apart. Still not certain just what had happened, the wayfarer from the east advanced and stared down into the bushes. A man lay there, a short, dark, thickly-muscled man, naked except for a loin-cloth, a necklace of human teeth and a brass armlet. A short sword was thrust into the girdle of the loin-cloth, and one hand still gripped a heavy black bow. The man had long black hair; that was about all the wayfarer could tell about his head, for his features were a mask of blood and brains. His skull had been split to the teeth.

"A Pict, by the gods!" exclaimed the wayfarer.

The burning blue eyes turned upon him.

"Are you surprised?"

"Why, they told me at Velitrium, and again at the settlers' cabins along the road, that these devils sometimes sneaked across the border, but I didn't expect to meet one this far in the interior."

"You're only four miles east of Black River," the stranger informed him. "They've been shot within a mile of Velitrium. No settler between Thunder River and Fort Tuscelan is really safe. I picked up this dog's trail three miles south of the fort this morning, and I've been following him ever since. I came up behind him just as he was drawing an arrow on you. Another instant and there'd have been a stranger in Hell. But I spoiled his aim for him."

The wayfarer was staring wide eyed at the larger man, dumbfounded by the realization that the man had actually tracked down one of the forest devils and slain him unsuspected. That implied woodsmanship of a quality undreamed, even for Conajohara.

"You are one of the fort's garrison?" he asked.

"I'm no soldier. I draw the pay and rations of an officer of the line, but I do my work in the woods. Valannus knows I'm of more use ranging along the river than cooped up in the fort."

Casually the slayer shoved the body deeper into the thickets with his foot, pulled the bushes together and turned away down the trail. The other followed him.

"My name is Balthus," he offered. "I was at Velitrium last night. I haven't decided whether I'll take up a hide of land, or enter fort service."

"The best land near Thunder River is already taken," grunted the slayer. "Plenty of good land between Scalp Creek--you crossed it a few miles back--and the fort, but that's getting too devilish close to the river. The Picts steal over to burn and murder--as that one did. They don't always come singly. Some day they'll try to sweep the settlers out of Conajohara. And they may succeed--probably will succeed. This colonization business is mad, anyway. There's plenty of good land east of the Bossonian marches. If the Aquilonians would cut up some of the big estates of their barons, and plant wheat where now only deer are hunted, they wouldn't have to cross the border and take the land of the Picts away from them."

"That's queer talk from a man in the service of the governor of Conajohara," objected Balthus.

"It's nothing to me," the other retorted. "I'm a mercenary. I sell my sword to the highest bidder. I never planted wheat and never will, so long as there are other harvests to be reaped with the sword. But you Hyborians have expanded as far as you'll be allowed to expand. You've crossed the marches, burned a few villages, exterminated a few clans and pushed back the frontier to Black River; but I doubt if you'll even be able to hold what you've conquered, and you'll never push the frontier any further westward. Your idiotic king doesn't understand conditions here. He won't send you enough reinforcements, and there are not enough settlers to withstand the shock of a concerted attack from across the river."

"But the Picts are divided into small clans," persisted Balthus. "They'll never unite. We can whip any single clan."

"Or any three or four clans," admitted the slayer. "But some day a man will rise and unite thirty or forty clans, just as was done among the Cimmerians, when the Gundermen tried to push the border northward, years ago. They tried to colonize the southern marches of Cimmeria: destroyed a few small clans, built a fort-town, Venarium--you've heard the tale."

"So I have indeed," replied Balthus, wincing. The memory of that red disaster was a black blot in the chronicles of a proud and warlike people. "My uncle was at Venarium when the Cimmerians swarmed over the walls. He was one of the few who escaped that slaughter. I've heard him tell the tale, many a time. The barbarians swept out of the hills in a ravening horde, without warning, and stormed Venarium with such fury none could stand before them. Men, women, and children were butchered. Venarium was reduced to a mass of charred ruins, as it is to this day. The Aquilonians were driven back across the marches, and have never since tried to colonize the Cimmerian country. But you speak of Venarium familiarly. Perhaps you were there?"

"I was," grunted the other. "I was one of the horde that swarmed over the walls. I hadn't yet seen fifteen snows, but already my name was repeated about the council fires."

Balthus involuntarily recoiled, staring. It seemed incredible that the man walking tranquilly at his side should have been one of those screeching, blood-mad devils that poured over the walls of Venarium on that long-gone day to make her streets run crimson.

"Then you, too, are a barbarian!" he exclaimed involuntarily.

The other nodded, without taking offense.

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian."

"I've heard of you." Fresh interest quickened Balthus' gaze. No wonder the Pict had fallen victim to his own sort of subtlety! The Cimmerians were barbarians as ferocious as the Picts, and much more intelligent. Evidently Conan had spent much time among civilized men, though that contact had obviously not softened him, nor weakened any of his primitive instincts. Balthus' apprehension turned to admiration as he marked the easy catlike stride, the effortless silence with which the Cimmerian moved along the trail. The oiled links of his armor did not clink, and Balthus knew Conan could glide through the deepest thicket or most tangled copse as noiselessly as any naked Pict that ever lived.

"You're not a Gunderman?" It was more assertion than question.

Balthus shook his head. "I'm from the Tauran."

"I've seen good woodsmen from the Tauran. But the Bossonians have sheltered you Aquilonians from the outer wilderness for too many centuries. You need hardening."

That was true; the Bossonian marches, with their fortifed villages filled with determined bowmen, had long served Aquilonia as a buffer against the outlying barbarians. Now among the settlers beyond Thunder River here was growing up a breed of forest men capable of meeting the barbarians at their own game, but their numbers were still scanty. Most of the frontiersmen were like Balthus--more of the settler than the woodsman type.

The sun had not set, but it was no longer in sight, hidden as it was behind the dense forest wall. The shadows were lengthening, deepening back in the woods as the companions strode on down the trail.

"It will be dark before we reach the fort," commented Conan casually; then: "Listen!"

He stopped short, half crouching, sword ready, transformed into a savage figure of suspicion and menace, poised to spring and rend. Balthus had heard it too--a wild scream that broke at its highest note. It was the cry of a man in dire fear or agony.

Conan was off in an instant, racing down the trail, each stride widening the distance between him and his straining companion. Balthus puffed a curse. Among the settlements of the Tauran he was accounted a good runner, but Conan was leaving him behind with maddening ease. Then Balthus forgot his exasperation as his ears were outraged by the most frightful cry he had ever heard. It was not human, this one; it was a demoniacal caterwauling of hideous triumph that seemed to exult over fallen humanity and find echo in black gulfs beyond human ken.

Balthus faltered in his stride, and clammy sweat beaded his flesh. But Conan did not hesitate; he darted around a bend in the trail and disappeared, and Balthus, panicky at finding himself alone with that awful scream still shuddering through the forest in grisly echoes, put on an extra burst of speed and plunged after him.

The Aquilonian slid to a stumbling halt, almost colliding with the Cimmerian who stood in the trail over a crumpled body. But Conan was not looking at the corpse which lay there in the crimson-soaked dust. He was glaring into the deep woods on either side of the trail.

Balthus muttered a horrified oath. It was the body of a man which lay there in the trail, a short, fat man, clad in the gilt-worked boots and (despite the heat) the ermine-trimmed tunic of a wealthy merchant. His fat, pale face was set in a stare of frozen horror; his thick throat had been slashed from ear to ear as if by a razor-sharp blade. The short sword still in its scabbard seemed to indicate that he had been struck down without a chance to fight for his life.

"A Pict?" Balthus whispered, as he turned to peer into the deepening shadows of the forest.

Conan shook his head and straightened to scowl down at the dead man.

"A forest devil. This is the fifth, by Crom!"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever hear of a Pictish wizard called Zogar Sag?"

Balthus shook his head uneasily.

"He dwells in Gwawela, the nearest village across the river. Three months ago he hid beside this road and stole a string of pack-mules from a pack-train bound for the fort--drugged their drivers, somehow. The mules belonged to this man"--Conan casually indicated the corpse with his foot--"Tiberias, a merchant of Velitrium. They were loaded with ale-kegs, and old Zogar stopped to guzzle before he got across the river. A woodsman named Soractus trailed him, and led Valannus and three soldiers to where he lay dead drunk in a thicket. At

the importunities of Tiberias, Valannus threw Zogar Sag into a cell, which is the worst insult you can give a Pict. He managed to kill his guard and escape, and sent back word that he meant to kill Tiberias and the five men who captured him in a way that would make Aquilonians shudder for centuries to come.

"Well, Soractus and the soldiers are dead. Soractus was killed on the river, the soldiers in the very shadow of the fort. And now Tiberias is dead. No Pict killed any of them. Each victim--except Tiberias, as you see--lacked his head--which no doubt is now ornamenting the altar of Zogar Sag's particular god."

"How do you know they weren't killed by the Picts?" demanded Balthus.

Conan pointed to the corpse of the merchant.

"You think that was done with a knife or a sword? Look closer and you'll see that only a talon could have made a gash like that. The flesh is ripped, not cut."

"Perhaps a panther--" began Balthus, without conviction.

Conan shook his head impatiently.

"A man from the Tauran couldn't mistake the mark of a panther's claws. No. It's a forest devil summoned by Zogar Sag to carry out his revenge. Tiberias was a fool to start for Velitrium alone, and so close to dusk. But each one of the victims seemed to be smitten with madness just before doom overtook him. Look here; the signs are plain enough. Tiberias came riding along the trail on his mule, maybe with a bundle of choice otter pelts behind his saddle to sell in Velitrium, and the thing sprang on him from behind that bush. See where the branches are crushed down.

"Tiberias gave one scream, and then his throat was torn open and he was selling his otter skins in Hell. The mule ran away into the woods. Listen! Even now you can hear him thrashing about under the trees. The demon didn't have time to take Tiberias' head; it took fright as we came up."

"As you came up," amended Balthus. "It must not be a very terrible creature if it flees from one armed man. But how do you know it was not a Pict with some kind of a hook that rips instead of slicing? Did you see it?"

"Tiberias was an armed man," grunted Conan. "If Zogar Sag can bring demons to aid him, he can tell them which men to kill and which to let alone. No, I didn't see it. I only saw the bushes shake as it left the trail. But if you want further proof, look here!"

The slayer had stepped into the pool of blood in which the dead man sprawled. Under the bushes at the edge of the path there was a footprint, made in blood on the hard loam.

"Did a man make that?" demanded Conan.

Balthus felt his scalp prickle. Neither man nor any beast that he had ever seen could have left that strange, monstrous, three-toed print, that was curiously combined of the bird and the reptile, yet a true type of neither. He spread his fingers above the print, careful not to touch it, and grunted explosively. He could not span the mark.

"What is it?" he whispered. "I never saw a beast that left a spoor like that."

"Nor any other sane man," answered Conan grimly. "It's a swamp demon--they're thick as bats in the swamps beyond Black River. You can hear them howling like damned souls when the wind blows strong from the south on hot nights."

"What shall we do?" asked the Aquilonian, peering uneasily into the deep blue shadows. The frozen fear on the dead countenance haunted him. He wondered what hideous head the wretch had seen thrust grinning from among the leaves to chill his blood with terror.

"No use to try to follow a demon," grunted Conan, drawing a short woodman's ax from his girdle. "I tried tracking him after he killed Soractus. I lost his trail within a dozen steps. He might have grown himself wings and flown away, or sunk down through the earth to Hell. I don't know. I'm not going after the mule, either. It'll either wander back to the fort, or to some settler's cabin."

As he spoke Conan was busy at the edge of the trail with his ax. With a few strokes he cut a pair of saplings nine or ten feet long, and denuded them of their branches. Then he cut a length from a serpent-like vine that crawled among the bushes near by, and making one end fast to one of the poles, a couple of feet from the end, whipped the vine over the other sapling and interlaced it back and forth. In a few moments he had a crude but strong litter.

"The demon isn't going to get Tiberias' head if I can help it," he growled. "We'll carry the body into the fort. It isn't more than three miles. I never liked the fat fool, but we can't have Pictish devils making so cursed free with white men's heads."

The Picts were a white race, though swarthy, but the border men never spoke of them as such.

Balthus took the rear end of the litter, onto which Conan unceremoniously dumped the unfortunate merchant, and they moved on down the trail as swiftly as possible. Conan made no more noise laden with their grim burden than he had made when unencumbered. He had made a loop with the merchant's belt at the end of the poles, and was carrying his share of the load with one hand, while the other gripped his naked broadsword, and his restless gaze roved the sinister walls about them. The shadows were thickening. A darkening blue mist blurred the outlines of the foliage. The forest deepened in the twilight, became a blue haunt of mystery sheltering unguessed things.

They had covered more than a mile, and the muscles in Balthus' sturdy arms were beginning to ache a little, when a cry rang shuddering from the woods whose blue shadows were deepening into purple.

Conan started convulsively, and Balthus almost let go the poles.

"A woman!" cried the younger man. "Great Mitra, a woman cried out then!"

"A settler's wife straying in the woods," snarled Conan, setting down his end of the lifter. "Looking for a cow, probably, and--stay here!"

He dived like a hunting wolf into the leafy wall. Balthus' hair bristled.

"Stay here alone with this corpse and a devil hiding in the woods?" he yelped. "I'm coming with you!"

And suiting action to words, he plunged after the Cimmerian. Conan glanced back at him, but made no objection, though he did not moderate his pace to accommodate the shorter legs of his companion. Balthus wasted his wind in swearing as the Cimmerian drew away from him again, like a phantom between the trees, and then Conan burst into a dim glade and halted crouching, lips snarling, sword lifted.

"What are we stopping for?" panted Balthus, dashing the sweat out of his eyes and gripping his short sword.

"That scream came from this glade, or near by," answered Conan. "I don't mistake the location of sounds, even in the woods. But where--"

Abruptly the sound rang out again--behind them; in the direction of the trail they had just quitted. It rose piercingly and pitifully, the cry of a woman in frantic terror--and then, shockingly, it changed to a yell of mocking laughter that might have burst from the lips of a fiend of lower Hell.

"What in Mitra's name--" Balthus' face was a pale blur in the gloom.

With a scorching oath Conan wheeled and dashed back the way he had come, and the Aquilonian stumbled bewilderedly after him. He blundered into the Cimmerian as the latter stopped dead, and rebounded from his brawny shoulders as though from an iron statue. Gasping from the impact, he heard Conan's breath hiss through his teeth. The Cimmerian seemed frozen in his tracks.

Looking over his shoulder, Balthus felt his hair stand up stiffly. Something was moving through the deep bushes that fringed the trail--something that neither walked nor flew, but seemed to glide like a serpent. But it was not a serpent. Its outlines were indistinct, but it was taller than a man, and not very bulky. It gave off a glimmer of weird light, like a faint blue flame. Indeed, the eery fire was the only tangible thing about it. It might have been an embodied flame moving with reason and purpose through the blackening woods.

Conan snarled a savage curse and hurled his ax with ferocious will. But the thing glided on without altering its course. Indeed it was only a few instants' fleeting glimpse they had of it--a tall, shadowy thing of misty flame floating through the thickets. Then it was gone, and the forest crouched in breathless stillness.

With a snarl Conan plunged through the intervening foliage and into the trail. His profanity, as Balthus floundered after him, was lurid and impassioned. The Cimmerian was standing over the litter on which lay the body of Tiberias. And that body no longer possessed a head.

"Tricked us with its damnable caterwauling!" raved Conan, swinging his great sword about his head in his wrath. "I might have known! I might have guessed a trick! Now there'll be five heads to decorate Zogar's altar."

"But what thing is it that can cry like a woman and laugh like a devil, and shines like witch-fire as it glides through the trees?" gasped Balthus, mopping the sweat from his pale face.

"A swamp devil," responded Conan morosely. "Grab those poles. We'll take in the body, anyway. At least our load's a bit lighter."

With which grim philosophy he gripped the leathery loop and stalked down the trail.

Chapter 2. The Wizard of Gwawela

Fort Tuscelan stood on the eastern bank of Black River, the tides of which washed the foot of the stockade. The latter was of logs, as were all the buildings within, including the donjon (to dignify it by that appellation), in which were the governor's quarters, overlooking the stockade and the sullen river. Beyond that river lay a huge forest, which approached jungle-like density along the spongy shores. Men paced the runways along the log parapet day and night, watching that dense green wall. Seldom a menacing figure appeared, but the sentries knew that they too were watched, fiercely, hungrily, with the mercilessness of ancient hate. The forest beyond the river might seem desolate and vacant of life to the ignorant eye, but life teemed there, not alone of bird and beast and reptile, but also of men, the fiercest of all the hunting beasts.

There, at the fort, civilization ended. Fort Tuscelan was the last outpost of a civilized world; it represented the westernmost thrust of the dominant Hyborian races. Beyond the river the primitive still reigned in shadowy forests, brush-thatched huts where hung the grinning skulls of men, and mud-walled enclosures where fires flickered and drums rumbled, and spears were whetted in the hands of dark, silent men with tangled black hair and the eyes of serpents. Those eyes often glared through bushes at the fort across the river. Once dark-skinned men had built their huts where that fort stood, yes, and their huts had risen where now stood the fields and log cabins of fair-haired settlers, back beyond Velitrium, that raw, turbulent frontier town on the banks of Thunder River, to the shores of that other river that bounds the Bossonian marches. Traders had come, and priests of Mitra who walked with bare feet and empty hands, and died horribly, most of them; but soldiers had followed, men with axes in their hands and women and children in ox-drawn wains. Back to Thunder River, and still back, beyond Black River, the aborigines had been pushed, with slaughter and massacre. But the dark-skinned people did not forget that once Conajohara had been theirs.

The guard inside the eastern gate bawled a challenge. Through a barred aperture torchlight flickered, glinting on a steel headpiece and suspicious eyes beneath it.

"Open the gate," snorted Conan. "You see it's I, don't you?"

Military discipline put his teeth on edge.

The gate swung inward and Conan and his companion passed through. Balthus noted that the gate was flanked by a tower on each side, the summits of which rose above the stockade. He saw loopholes for arrows.

The guardsmen grunted as they saw the burden borne between the men. Their pikes jangled against each other as they thrust shut the gate, chin on shoulder, and Conan asked testily: "Have you never seen a headless body before?"

The faces of the soldiers were pallid in the torchlight.

"That's Tiberias," blurted one. "I recognize that fur-trimmed tunic. Valerius here owes me five lunas. I told him Tiberias had heard the loon call when he rode through the gate on his mule, with his glassy stare. I wagered he'd come back without his head."

Conan grunted enigmatically, motioned Balthus to ease the litter to the ground, and then strode off toward the governor's quarters, with the Aquilonian at his heels. The tousle-headed youth stared about him eagerly and curiously, noting the rows of barracks along the walls, the stables, the tiny merchants' stalls, the towering blockhouse, and the other buildings,

with the open square in the middle where the soldiers drilled, and where, now, fires danced and men off duty lounged. These were now hurrying to join the morbid crowd gathered about the litter at the gate. The rangy figures of Aquilonian pikemen and forest runners mingled with the shorter, stockier forms of Bossonian archers.

He was not greatly surprised that the governor received them himself. Autocratic society with its rigid caste laws lay east of the marches. Valannus was still a young man, well knit, with a finely chiseled countenance already carved into sober cast by toil and responsibility.

"You left the fort before daybreak, I was told," he said to Conan. "I had begun to fear that the Picts had caught you at last."

"When they smoke my head the whole river will know," grunted Conan. "They'll hear Pictish women wailing their dead as far as Velitrium--I was on a lone scout. I couldn't sleep. I kept hearing drums talking across the river."

"They talk each night," reminded the governor, his fine eyes shadowed, as he stared closely at Conan. He had learned the unwisdom of discounting wild men's instincts.

"There was a difference last night," growled Conan. "There has been ever since Zogar Sag got back across the river."

"We should either have given him presents and sent him home, or else hanged him," sighed the governor. "You advised that, but--"

"But it's hard for you Hyborians to learn the ways of the outlands," said Conan. "Well, it can't be helped now, but there'll be no peace on the border so long as Zogar lives and remembers the cell he sweated in. I was following a warrior who slipped over to put a few white notches on his bow. After I split his head I fell in with this lad whose name is Balthus and who's come from the Tauran to help hold the frontier."

Valannus approvingly eyed the young man's frank countenance and strongly-knit frame.

"I am glad to welcome you, young sir. I wish more of your people would come. We need men used to forest life. Many of our soldiers and some of our settlers are from the eastern provinces and know nothing of woodcraft, or even of agricultural life."

"Not many of that breed this side of Velitrium," grunted Conan. "That town's full of them, though. But listen, Valannus, we found Tiberias dead on the trail." And in a few words he related the grisly affair.

Valannus paled. "I did not know he had left the fort. He must have been mad!"

"He was," answered Conan. "Like the other four; each one, when his time came, went mad and rushed into the woods to meet his death like a hare running down the throat of a python. Something called to them from the deeps of the forest, something the men call a loon, for lack of a better name, but only the doomed ones could hear it. Zogar Sag has made a magic that Aquilonian civilization can't overcome."

To this thrust Valannus made no reply; he wiped his brow with a shaky hand.

"Do the soldiers know of this?"

"We left the body by the eastern gate."

"You should have concealed the fact, hidden the corpse somewhere in the woods. The soldiers are nervous enough already."

"They'd have found it out some way. If I'd hidden the body, it would have been returned to the fort as the corpse of Soractus was--tied up outside the gate for the men to find in the morning."

Valannus shuddered. Turning, he walked to a casement and stared silently out over the river, black and shiny under the glint of the stars. Beyond the river the jungle rose like an ebony wall. The distant screech of a panther broke the stillness. The night pressed in, blurring the sounds of the soldiers outside the blockhouse, dimming the fires. A wind whispered through the black branches, rippling the dusky water. On its wings came a low, rhythmic pulsing, sinister as the pad of a leopard's foot.

"After all," said Valannus, as if speaking his thoughts aloud, "what do we know--what does anyone know--of the things that jungle may hide? We have dim rumors of great swamps and rivers, and a forest that stretches on and on over everlasting plains and hills to end at last on the shores of the western ocean. But what things lie between this river and that ocean we dare not even guess. No white man has ever plunged deep into that fastness and returned alive to tell us what he found. We are wise in our civilized knowledge, but our knowledge extends just so far--to the western bank of that ancient river! Who knows what shapes earthly and unearthly may lurk beyond the dim circle of light our knowledge has cast?

"Who knows what gods are worshipped under the shadows of that heathen forest, or what devils crawl out of the black ooze of the swamps? Who can be sure that all the inhabitants of that black country are natural? Zogar Sag--a sage of the eastern cities would sneer at his primitive magic-making as the mummery of a fakir; yet he has driven mad and killed five men in a manner no man can explain. I wonder if he himself is wholly human."

"If I can get within ax-throwing distance of him I'll settle that question," growled Conan, helping himself to the governor's wine and pushing a glass toward Balthus, who took it hesitatingly, and with an uncertain glance toward Valannus.

The governor turned toward Conan and stared at him thoughtfully.

"The soldiers, who do not believe in ghosts or devils," he said, "are almost in a panic of fear. You, who believe in ghosts, ghouls, goblins, and all manner of uncanny things, do not seem to fear any of the things in which you believe."

"There's nothing in the universe cold steel won't cut," answered Conan. "I threw my ax at the demon, and he took no hurt, but I might have missed in the dusk, or a branch deflected its flight. I'm not going out of my way looking for devils; but I wouldn't step out of my path to let one go by."

Valannus lifted his head and met Conan's gaze squarely.

"Conan, more depends on you than you realize. You know the weakness of this province--a slender wedge thrust into the untamed wilderness. You know that the lives of all the people west of the marches depend on this fort. Were it to fall, red axes would be splintering the gates of Velitrium before a horseman could cross the marches. His Majesty, or his Majesty's advisers, have ignored my plea that more troops be sent to hold the frontier. They know nothing of border conditions, and are averse to expending any more money in this direction. The fate of the frontier depends upon the men who now hold it.

"You know that most of the army which conquered Conajohara has been withdrawn. You know the force left is inadequate, especially since that devil Zogar Sag managed to poison our water supply, and forty men died in one day. Many of the others are sick, or have been bitten by serpents or mauled by wild beasts which seem to swarm in increasing numbers in the vicinity of the fort. The soldiers believe Zogar's boast that he could summon the forest beasts to slay his enemies.

"I have three hundred pikemen, four hundred Bossonian archers, and perhaps fifty men who, like yourself, are skilled in woodcraft. They are worth ten times their number of soldiers, but there are so few of them. Frankly, Conan, my situation is becoming precarious. The soldiers whisper of desertion; they are low-spirited, believing Zogar Sag has loosed devils on us. They fear the black plague with which he threatened us--the terrible black death of the swamplands. When I see a sick soldier, I sweat with fear of seeing him turn black and shrivel and die before my eyes.

"Conan, if the plague is loosed upon us, the soldiers will desert in a body! The border will be left unguarded and nothing will check the sweep of the dark-skinned hordes to the very gates of Velitrium--maybe beyond! If we cannot hold the fort, how can they hold the town?

"Conan, Zogar Sag must die, if we are to hold Conajohara. You have penetrated the unknown deeper than any other man in the fort; you know where Gwawela stands, and something of the forest trails across the river. Will you take a band of men tonight and endeavor to kill or capture him? Oh, I know it's mad. There isn't more than one chance in a thousand that any of you will come back alive. But if we don't get him, it's death for us all. You can take as many men as you wish."

"A dozen men are better for a job like that than a regiment," answered Conan. "Five hundred men couldn't fight their way to Gwawela and back, but a dozen might slip in and out again. Let me pick my men. I don't want any soldiers."

"Let me go!" eagerly exclaimed Balthus. "I've hunted deer all my life on the Tauran."

"All right. Valannus, we'll eat at the stall where the foresters gather, and I'll pick my men. We'll start within an hour, drop down the river in a boat to a point below the village and then steal upon it through the woods. If we live, we should be back by daybreak."

Chapter 3. The Crawlers in the Dark

The river was a vague trace between walls of ebony. The paddles that propelled the long boat creeping along in the dense shadow of the eastern bank dipped softly into the water, making no more noise than the beak of a heron. The broad shoulders of the man in front of Balthus were a blue in the dense gloom. He knew that not even the keen eyes of the man who knelt in the prow would discern anything more than a few feet ahead of them. Conan was feeling his way by instinct and an intensive familiarity with the river.

No one spoke. Balthus had had a good look at his companions in the fort before they slipped out of the stockade and down the bank into the waiting canoe. They were of a new breed growing up in the world on the raw edge of the frontier--men whom grim necessity had taught woodcraft. Aquilonians of the western provinces to a man, they had many points in common. They dressed alike--in buckskin boots, leathern breeks and deerskin shirts, with broad girdles that held axes and short swords; and they were all gaunt and scarred and hard-eyed; sinewy and taciturn.

They were wild men, of a sort, yet there was still a wide gulf between them and the Cimmerian. They were sons of civilization, reverted to a semi-barbarism. He was a barbarian of a thousand generations of barbarians. They had acquired stealth and craft, but he had been born to these things. He excelled them even in lithe economy of motion. They were wolves, but he was a tiger.

Balthus admired them and their leader and felt a pulse of pride that he was admitted into their company. He was proud that his paddle made no more noise than did theirs. In that respect at least he was their equal, though woodcraft learned in hunts on the Tauran could never equal that ground into the souls of men on the savage border.

Below the fort the river made a wide bend. The lights of the outpost were quickly lost, but the canoe held on its way for nearly a mile, avoiding snags and floating logs with almost uncanny precision.

Then a low grunt from their leader, and they swung its head about and glided toward the opposite shore. Emerging from the black shadows of the brush that fringed the bank and coming into the open of the midstream created a peculiar illusion of rash exposure. But the stars gave little light, and Balthus knew that unless one were watching for it, it would be all but impossible for the keenest eye to make out the shadowy shape of the canoe crossing the river.

They swung in under the overhanging bushes of the western shore and Balthus groped for and found a projecting root which he grasped. No word was spoken. All instructions had been given before the scouting-party left the fort. As silently as a great panther, Conan slid over the side and vanished in the bushes. Equally noiseless, nine men followed him. To Balthus, grasping the root with his paddle across his knee, it seemed incredible that ten men should thus fade into the tangled forest without a sound.

He settled himself to wait. No word passed between him and the other man who had been left with him. Somewhere, a mile or so to the northwest, Zogar Sag's village stood girdled with thick woods. Balthus understood his orders; he and his companion were to wait for the return of the raiding-party. If Conan and his men had not returned by the first tinge of dawn, they were to race back up the river to the fort and report that the forest had again taken its immemorial toll of the invading race. The silence was oppressive. No sound came from the black woods, invisible beyond the ebony masses that were the overhanging bushes. Balthus no longer heard the drums. They had been silent for hours. He kept blinking, unconsciously trying to see through the deep gloom. The dank night-smells of the river and the damp forest oppressed him. Somewhere, near by, there was a sound as if a big fish had flopped and splashed the water. Balthus thought it must have leaped so close to the canoe that it had struck the side, for a slight quiver vibrated the craft. The boat's stern began to swing, slightly away from the shore. The man behind him must have let go of the projection he was gripping. Balthus twisted his head to hiss a warning, and could just make out the figure of his companion, a slightly blacker bulk in the blackness.

The man did not reply. Wondering if he had fallen asleep, Balthus reached out and grasped his shoulder. To his amazement, the man crumpled under his touch and slumped down in the canoe. Twisting his body half about, Balthus groped for him, his heart shooting into his throat. His fumbling fingers slid over the man's throat--only the youth's convulsive clenching of his jaws choked back the cry that rose to his lips. His finger encountered a gaping, oozing wound--his companion's throat had been cut from ear to ear.

In that instant of horror and panic Balthus started up--and then a muscular arm out of the darkness locked fiercely about his throat, strangling his yell. The canoe rocked wildly. Balthus' knife was in his hand, though he did not remember jerking it out of his boot, and he stabbed fiercely and blindly. He felt the blade sink deep, and a fiendish yell rang in his ear, a yell that was horribly answered. The darkness seemed to come to life about him. A bestial clamor rose on all sides, and other arms grappled him. Borne under a mass of hurtling bodies the canoe rolled sidewise, but before he went under with it, something cracked against Balthus' head and the night was briefly illuminated by a blinding burst of fire before it gave way to a blackness where not even stars shone.

Chapter 4. The Beasts of Zogar Sag

Fires dazzled Balthus again as he slowly recovered his senses. He blinked, shook his head. Their glare hurt his eyes. A confused medley of sound rose about him, growing more distinct as his senses cleared. He lifted his head and stared stupidly about him. Black figures hemmed him in, etched against crimson tongues of flame.

Memory and understanding came in a rush. He was bound upright to a post in an open space, ringed by fierce and terrible figures. Beyond that ring fires burned, tended by naked, dark-skinned women. Beyond the fires he saw huts of mud and wattle, thatched with brush. Beyond the huts there was a stockade with a broad gate. But he saw these things only incidentally. Even the cryptic dark women with their curious coiffures were noted by him only absently. His full attention was fixed in awful fascination on the men who stood glaring at him.

Short men, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, lean-hipped, they were naked except for scanty loin-clouts. The firelight brought out the play of their swelling muscles in bold relief. Their dark faces were immobile, but their narrow eyes glittered with the fire that burns in the eyes of a stalking tiger. Their tangled manes were bound back with bands of copper. Swords and axes were in their hands. Crude bandages banded the limbs of some, and smears of blood were dried on their dark skins. There had been fighting, recent and deadly.

His eyes wavered away from the steady glare of his captors, and he repressed a cry of horror. A few feet away there rose a low, hideous pyramid: it was built of gory human heads. Dead eyes glared glassily up the black sky. Numbly he recognized the countenances which were turned toward him. They were the heads of the men who had followed Conan into the forest. He could not tell if the Cimmerian's head were among them. Only a few faces were visible to him. It looked to him as if there must be ten or eleven heads at least. A deadly sickness assailed him. He fought a desire to retch. Beyond the heads lay the bodies of half a dozen Picts, and he was aware of a fierce exultation at the sight. The forest runners had taken toll, at least.

Twisting his head away from the ghastly spectacle, he became aware that another post stood near him--a stake painted black as was the one to which he was bound. A man sagged in his bonds there, naked except for his leathern breeks, whom Balthus recognized as one of Conan's woodsmen. Blood trickled from his mouth, oozed sluggishly from a gash in his side. Lifting his head as he licked his livid lips, he muttered, making himself heard with difficulty above the fiendish clamor of the Picts: "So they got you, too!"

"Sneaked up in the water and cut the other fellow's throat," groaned Balthus. "We never heard them till they were on us. Mitra, how can anything move so silently?"

"They're devils," mumbled the frontiersman. "They must have been watching us from the time we left midstream. We walked into a trap. Arrows from all sides were ripping into us before we knew it. Most of us dropped at the first fire. Three or four broke through the bushes and came to hand-grips. But there were too many. Conan might have gotten away. I haven't seen his head. Been better for you and me if they'd killed us outright. I can't blame Conan. Ordinarily we'd have gotten to the village without being discovered. They don't keep spies on the river bank as far down as we landed. We must have stumbled into a big party coming up the river from the south. Some devilment is up. Too many Picts here. These aren't all Gwaweli; men from the western tribes here and from up and down the river."

Balthus stared at the ferocious shapes. Little as he knew of Pictish ways, he was aware that the number of men clustered about them was out of proportion to the size of the village. There were not enough huts to have accommodated them all. Then he noticed that there was a difference in the barbaric tribal designs painted on their faces and breasts.

"Some kind of devilment," muttered the forest runner. "They might have gathered here to watch Zogar's magic-making. He'll make some rare magic with our carcasses. Well, a border-man doesn't expect to die in bed. But I wish we'd gone out along with the rest."

The wolfish howling of the Picts rose in volume and exultation, and from a movement in their ranks, an eager surging and crowding, Balthus deduced that someone of importance was coming. Twisting his head about, he saw that the stakes were set before a long building, larger than the other huts, decorated by human skulls dangling from the eaves. Through the door of that structure now danced a fantastic figure.

"Zogar!" muttered the woodsman, his bloody countenance set in wolfish lines as he unconsciously strained at his cords. Balthus saw a lean figure of middle height, almost hidden in ostrich plumes set on a harness of leather and copper. From amidst the plumes peered a hideous and malevolent face. The plumes puzzled Balthus. He knew their source lay half the width of a world to the south. They fluttered and rustled evilly as the shaman leaped and cavorted.

With fantastic bounds and prancings he entered the ring and whirled before his bound and silent captives. With another man it would have seemed ridiculous--a foolish savage prancing meaninglessly in a whirl of feathers. But that ferocious face glaring out from the billowing mass gave the scene a grim significance. No man with a face like that could seem ridiculous or like anything except the devil he was.

Suddenly he froze to statuesque stillness; the plumes rippled once and sank about him. The howling warriors fell silent. Zogar Sag stood erect and motionless, and he seemed to increase in height--to grow and expand. Balthus experienced the illusion that the Pict was towering above him, staring contemptuously down from a great height, though he knew the shaman was not as tall as himself. He shook off the illusion with difficulty.

The shaman was talking now, a harsh, guttural intonation that yet carried the hiss of a cobra. He thrust his head on his long neck toward the wounded man on the stake; his eyes shone red as blood in the firelight. The frontiersman spat full in his face.

With a fiendish howl Zogar bounded convulsively into the air, and the warriors gave tongue to a yell that shuddered up to the stars. They rushed toward the man on the stake, but the shaman beat them back. A snarled command sent men running to the gate. They hurled it open, turned and raced back to the circle. The ring of men split, divided with desperate haste to right and left. Balthus saw the women and naked children scurrying to the huts. They peeked out of doors and windows. A broad lane was left to the open gate, beyond which loomed the black forest, crowding sullenly in upon the clearing, unlighted by the fires.

A tense silence reigned as Zogar Sag turned toward the forest, raised on his tiptoes and sent a weird inhuman call shuddering out into the night. Somewhere, far out in the black forest, a deeper cry answered him. Balthus shuddered. From the timbre of that cry he knew it never came from a human throat. He remembered what Valannus had said--that Zogar boasted that he could summon wild beasts to do his bidding. The woodsman was livid beneath his mask of blood. He licked his lips spasmodically.

The village held its breath. Zogar Sag stood still as a statue, his plumes trembling faintly about him. But suddenly the gate was no longer empty.

A shuddering gasp swept over the village and men crowded hastily back, jamming one another between the huts. Balthus felt the short hair stir on his scalp. The creature that stood in the gate was like the embodiment of nightmare legend. Its color was of a curious pale quality which made it seem ghostly and unreal in the dim light. But there was nothing unreal about the low-hung savage head, and the great curved fangs that glistened in the firelight. On noiseless padded feet it approached like a phantom out of the past. It was a survival of an older, grimmer age, the ogre of many an ancient legend--a saber-tooth tiger. No Hyborian hunter had looked upon one of those primordial brutes for centuries. Immemorial myths lent the creatures a supernatural quality, induced by their ghostly color and their fiendish ferocity.

The beast that glided toward the men on the stakes was longer and heavier than a common, striped tiger, almost as bulky as a bear. Its shoulders and forelegs were so massive and mightily muscled as to give it a curiously top-heavy look, though its hindquarters were more powerful than that of a lion. Its jaws were massive, but its head was brutishly shaped. Its brain capacity was small. It had room for no instincts except those of destruction. It was a freak of carnivorous development, evolution run amuck in a horror of fangs and talons.

This was the monstrosity Zogar Sag had summoned out of the forest. Balthus no longer doubted the actuality of the shaman's magic. Only the black arts could establish a domination over that tiny-brained, mighty-thewed monster. Like a whisper at the back of his consciousness rose the vague memory of the name of an ancient god of darkness and primordial fear, to whom once both men and beasts bowed and whose children--men whispered--still lurked in dark corners of the world. New horror tinged the glare he fixed on Zogar Sag.

The monster moved past the heap of bodies and the pile of gory heads without appearing to notice them. He was no scavenger. He hunted only the living, in a life dedicated solely to slaughter. An awful hunger burned greenly in the wide, unwinking eyes; the hunger not alone of belly-emptiness, but the lust of death-dealing. His gaping jaws slavered. The shaman stepped back, his hand waved toward the woodsman.

The great cat sank into a crouch, and Balthus numbly remembered tales of its appalling ferocity: of how it would spring upon an elephant and drive its sword-like fangs so deeply into the titan's skull that they could never be withdrawn, but would keep it nailed to its victim, to die by starvation. The shaman cried out shrilly, and with an ear-shattering roar the monster sprang.

Balthus had never dreamed of such a spring, such a hurtling of incarnated destruction embodied in that giant bulk of iron thews and ripping talons. Full on the woodsman's breast it struck, and the stake splintered and snapped at the base, crashing to the earth under the impact. Then the saber-tooth was gliding toward the gate, half dragging, half carrying a hideous crimson hulk that only faintly resembled a man. Balthus glared almost paralyzed, his brain refusing to credit what his eyes had seen.

In that leap the great beast had not only broken off the stake, it had ripped the mangled body of its victim from the post to which it was bound. The huge talons in that instant of contact had disemboweled and partially dismembered the man, and the giant fangs had torn away the whole top of his head, shearing through the skull as easily as through flesh. Stout rawhide thongs had given way like paper; where the thongs had held, flesh and bones had not. Balthus retched suddenly. He had hunted bears and panthers, but he had never dreamed the beast lived which could make such a red ruin of a human frame in the flicker of an instant.

The saber-tooth vanished through the gate, and a few moments later a deep roar sounded through the forest, receding in the distance. But the Picts still shrank back against the huts, and the shaman still stood facing the gate that was like a black opening to let in the night.

Cold sweat burst suddenly out on Balthus' skin. What new horror would come through that gate to make carrion-meat of his body? Sick panic assailed him and he strained futilely at his thongs. The night pressed in very black and horrible outside the firelight. The fires themselves glowed lurid as the fires of Hell. He felt the eyes of the Picts upon him--hundreds of hungry, cruel eyes that reflected the lust of souls utterly without humanity as he knew it. They no longer seemed men; they were devils of this black jungle, as inhuman as the creatures to which the fiend in the nodding plumes screamed through the darkness.

Zogar sent another call shuddering through the night, and it was utterly unlike the first cry. There was a hideous sibilance in it--Balthus turned cold at the implication. If a serpent could hiss that loud, it would make just such a sound.

This time there was no answer--only a period of breathless silence in which the pound of Balthus' heart strangled him; and then there sounded a swishing outside the gate, a dry rustling that sent chills down Balthus' spine. Again the firelit gate held a hideous occupant.

Again Balthus recognized the monster from ancient legends. He saw and knew the ancient and evil serpent which swayed there, its wedge-shaped head, huge as that of a horse, as high as a tall man's head, and its palely gleaming barrel rippling out behind it. A forked tongue darted in and out, and the firelight glittered on bared fangs.

Balthus became incapable of emotion. The horror of his fate paralyzed him. That was the reptile that the ancients called Ghost Snake, the pale, abominable terror that of old glided into huts by night to devour whole families. Like the python it crushed its victim, but unlike other constrictors its fangs bore venom that carried madness and death. It too had long been

considered extinct. But Valannus had spoken truly. No white man knew what shapes haunted the great forests beyond Black River.

It came on silently, rippling over the ground, its hideous head on the same level, its neck curving back slightly for the strike. Balthus gazed with a glazed, hypnotized stare into that loathsome gullet down which he would soon be engulfed, and he was aware of no sensation except a vague nausea.

And then something that glinted in the firelight streaked from the shadows of the huts, and the great reptile whipped about and went into instant convulsions. As in a dream Balthus saw a short throwing-spear transfixing the mighty neck, just below the gaping jaws; the shaft protruded from one side, the steel head from the other.

Knotting and looping hideously, the maddened reptile rolled into the circle of men who stove back from him. The spear had not severed its spine, but merely transfixed its great neck muscles. Its furiously lashing tail mowed down a dozen men and its jaws snapped convulsively, splashing others with venom that burned like liquid fire. Howling, cursing, screaming, frantic, they scattered before it, knocking each other down in their flight, trampling the fallen, bursting through the huts. The giant snake rolled into a fire, scattering sparks and brands, and the pain lashed it to more frenzied efforts. A hut wall buckled under the ram-like impact of its flailing tail, disgorging howling people.

Men stampeded through the fires, knocking the logs right and left. The flames sprang up, then sank. A reddish dim glow was all that lighted that nightmare scene where the giant reptile whipped and rolled, and men clawed and shrieked in frantic flight.

Balthus felt something jerk at his wrists, and then, miraculously, he was free, and a strong hand dragged him behind the post. Dazedly he saw Conan, felt the forest man's iron grip on his arm.

There was blood on the Cimmerian's mail, dried blood on the sword in his right hand; he loomed dim and gigantic in the shadowy light.

"Come on! Before they get over their panic!"

Balthus felt the haft of an ax shoved into his hand. Zogar Sag had disappeared. Conan dragged Balthus after him until the youth's numb brain awoke, and his legs began to move of their own accord. Then Conan released him and ran into the building where the skulls hung. Balthus followed him. He got a glimpse of a grim stone altar, faintly lighted by the glow outside; five human heads grinned on that altar, and there was a grisly familiarity about the features of the freshest; it was the head of the merchant Tiberias. Behind the altar was an idol, dim, indistinct, bestial, yet vaguely man-like in outline. Then fresh horror choked Balthus as the shape heaved up suddenly with a rattle of chains, lifting long, misshapen arms in the gloom.

Conan's sword flailed down, crunching through flesh and bone, and then the Cimmerian was dragging Balthus around the altar, past a huddled shaggy bulk on the floor, to a door at the back of the long hut. Through this they burst, out into the enclosure again. But a few yards beyond them loomed the stockade.

It was dark behind the altar-hut. The mad stampede of the Picts had not carried them in that direction. At the wall Conan halted, gripped Balthus, and heaved him at arm's length into the air as he might have lifted a child. Balthus grasped the points of the upright logs set in the sun-dried mud and scrambled up on them, ignoring the havoc done his skin. He lowered a hand to the Cimmerian, when around a corner of the altar-hut sprang a fleeing Pict. He halted short, glimpsing the man on the wall in the faint glow of the fires. Conan hurled his ax with deadly aim, but the warrior's mouth was already open for a yell of warning, and it rang loud above the din, cut short as he dropped with a shattered skull.

Blinding terror had not submerged all ingrained instincts. As that wild yell rose above the clamor, there was an instant's lull, and then a hundred throats bayed ferocious answer and warriors came leaping to repel the attack presaged by the warning.

Conan leaped high, caught, not Balthus' hand but his arm near the shoulder, and swung himself up. Balthus set his teeth against the strain, and then the Cimmerian was on the wall beside him, and the fugitives dropped down on the other side.

Chapter 5. The Children of Jhebbal Sag

"Which way is the river?" Balthus was confused.

"We don't dare try for the river now," grunted Conan. "The woods between the village and the river are swarming with warriors. Come on! We'll head in the last direction they'll expect us to go--west!"

Looking back as they entered the thick growth, Balthus beheld the wall dotted with black heads as the savages peered over. The Picts were bewildered. They had not gained the wall in time to see the fugitives take cover. They had rushed to the wall expecting to repel an attack in force. They had seen the body of the dead warrior. But no enemy was in sight.

Balthus realized that they did not yet know their prisoner had escaped. From other sounds he believed that the warriors, directed by the shrill voice of Zogar Sag, were destroying the wounded serpent with arrows. The monster was out of the shaman's control. A moment later the quality of the yells was altered. Screeches of rage rose in the night.

Conan laughed grimly. He was leading Balthus along a narrow trail that ran west under the black branches, stepping as swiftly and surely as if he trod a well-lighted thoroughfare. Balthus stumbled after him, guiding himself by feeling the dense wall on either hand.

"They'll be after us now. Zogar's discovered you're gone, and he knows my head wasn't in the pile before the altar-hut. The dog! If I'd had another spear I'd have thrown it through him before I struck the snake. Keep to the trail. They can't track us by torchlight, and there are a score of paths leading from the village. They'll follow those leading to the river first--throw a cordon of warriors for miles along the bank, expecting us to try to break through. We won't take to the woods until we have to. We can make better time on this trail. Now buckle down to it and run was you never ran before."

"They got over their panic cursed quick!" panted Balthus, complying with a fresh burst of speed.

"They're not afraid of anything, very long," grunted Conan.

For a space nothing was said between them. The fugitives devoted all their attention to covering distance. They were plunging deeper and deeper into the wilderness and getting farther away from civilization at every step, but Balthus did not question Conan's wisdom. The Cimmerian presently took time to grunt: "When we're far enough away from the village we'll swing back to the river in a big circle. No other village within miles of Gwawela. All the Picts are gathered in that vicinity. We'll circle wide around them. They can't track us until daylight. They'll pick up our path then, but before dawn we'll leave the trail and take to the woods."

They plunged on. The yells died out behind them. Balthus' breath was whistling through his teeth. He felt a pain in his side, and running became torture. He blundered against the bushes on each side of the trail. Conan pulled up suddenly, turned and stared back down the dim path.

Somewhere the moon was rising, a dim white glow amidst a tangle of branches.

"Shall we take to the woods?" panted Balthus.

"Give me your ax," murmured Conan softly. "Something is close behind us."

"Then we'd better leave the trail!" exclaimed Balthus. Conan shook his head and drew his companion into a dense thicket. The moon rose higher, making a dim light in the path.

"We can't fight the whole tribe!" whispered Balthus.

"No human being could have found our trail so quickly, or followed us so swiftly," muttered Conan. "Keep silent."

There followed a tense silence in which Balthus felt that his heart could be heard pounding for miles away. Then abruptly, without a sound to announce its coming, a savage head appeared in the dim path. Balthus' heart jumped into his throat; at first glance he feared to look upon the awful head of the saber-tooth. But this head was smaller, more narrow; it was a leopard which stood there, snarling silently and glaring down the trail. What wind there was was blowing toward the hiding men, concealing their scent. The beast lowered his head and snuffed the trail, then moved forward uncertainly. A chill played down Balthus' spine. The brute was undoubtedly trailing them.

And it was suspicious. It lifted its head, its eyes glowing like balls of fire, and growled low in its throat. And at that instant Conan hurled the ax.

All the weight of arm and shoulder was behind the throw, and the ax was a streak of silver in the dim moon. Almost before he realized what had happened, Balthus saw the leopard rolling on the ground in its death-throes, the handle of the ax standing up from its head. The head of the weapon had split its narrow skull.

Conan bounded from the bushes, wrenched his ax free and dragged the limp body in among the trees, concealing it from the casual glance.

"Now let's go, and go fast!" he grunted, leading the way southward, away from the trail. "There'll be warriors coming after that cat. As soon as he got his wits back, Zogar sent him after us. The Picts would follow him, but he'd leave them far behind. He'd circle the village until he hit our trail and then come after us like a streak. They couldn't keep up with him, but they'll have an idea as to our general direction. They'd follow, listening for his cry. Well, they won't hear that, but they'll find the blood on the trail, and look around and find the body in the brush. They'll pick up our spoor there, if they can. Walk with care."

He avoided clinging briars and low-hanging branches effortlessly, gliding between trees without touching the stems and always planting his feet in the places calculated to show least evidence of his passing; but with Balthus it was slower, more laborious work.

No sound came from behind them. They had covered more than a mile when Balthus said: "Does Zogar Sag catch leopard-cubs and train them for bloodhounds?"

Conan shook his head. "That was a leopard he called out of the woods."

"But," Balthus persisted, "if he can order the beasts to do his bidding, why doesn't he rouse them all and have them after us? The forest is full of leopards; why send only one after us?"

Conan did not reply for a space, and when he did it was with a curious reticence.

"He can't command all the animals. Only such as remember Jhebbal Sag."

"Jhebbal Sag?" Balthus repeated the ancient name hesitantly. He had never heard it spoken more than three or four times in his whole life.

"Once all living things worshipped him. That was long ago, when beasts and men spoke one language. Men have forgotten him; even the beasts forget. Only a few remember. The men who remember Jhebbal Sag and the beasts who remember are brothers and speak the same tongue."

Balthus did not reply; he had strained at a Pictish stake and seen the nighted jungle give up its fanged horrors at a shaman's call.

"Civilized men laugh," said Conan. "But not one can tell me how Zogar Sag can call pythons and tigers and leopards out of the wilderness and make them do his bidding. They would say it is a lie, if they dared. That's the way with civilized men. When they can't explain something by their half-baked science, they refuse to believe it."

The people on the Tauran were closer to the primitive than most Aquilonians; superstitions persisted, whose sources were lost in antiquity. And Balthus had seen that which still prickled his flesh. He could not refute the monstrous thing which Conan's words implied.

"I've heard that there's an ancient grove sacred to Jhebbal Sag somewhere in this forest," said Conan. "I don't know. I've never seen it. But more beasts remember in this country than any I've ever seen."

"Then others will be on our trail?"

"They are now," was Conan's disquieting answer. "Zogar would never leave our tracking to one beast alone."

"What are we to do, then?" asked Balthus uneasily, grasping his ax as he stared at the gloomy arches above him. His flesh crawled with the momentary expectation of ripping talons and fangs leaping from the shadows.

"Wait!"

Conan turned, squatted and with his knife began scratching a curious symbol in the mold. Stooping to look at it over his shoulder, Balthus felt a crawling of the flesh along his spine, he knew not why. He felt no wind against his face, but there was a rustling of leaves above them and a weird moaning swept ghostily through the branches. Conan glanced up inscrutably, then rose and stood staring somberly down at the symbol he had drawn.

"What is it?" whispered Balthus. It looked archaic and meaningless to him. He supposed that it was his ignorance of artistry which prevented his identifying it as one of the conventional designs of some prevailing culture. But had he been the most erudite artist in the world, he would have been no nearer the solution.

"I saw it carved in the rock of a cave no human had visited for a million years," muttered Conan, "in the uninhabited mountains beyond the Sea of Vilayet, half a world away from this spot. Later I saw a black witch-finder of Kush scratch it in the sand of a nameless river. He told me part of its meaning--it's sacred to Jhebbal Sag and the creatures which worship him. Watch!"

They drew back among the dense foliage some yards away and waited in tense silence. To the east drums muttered and somewhere to north and west other drums answered. Balthus shivered, though he knew long miles of black forest separated him from the grim beaters of those drums, whose dull pulsing was a sinister overture that set the dark stage for bloody drama.

Balthus found himself holding his breath. Then with a slight shaking of the leaves, the bushes parted and a magnificent panther came into view. The moonlight dappling through the leaves shone on its glossy coat rippling with the play of the great muscles beneath it.

With its head low it glided toward them. It was smelling out their trail. Then it halted as if frozen, its muzzle almost touching the symbol cut in the mold. For a long space it crouched motionless; it flattened its long body and laid its head on the ground before the mark. And Balthus felt the short hairs stir on his scalp. For the attitude of the great carnivore was one of awe and adoration.

Then the panther rose and backed away carefully, belly almost to the ground. With his hind-quarters among the bushes he wheeled as if in sudden panic and was gone like a flash of dappled light.

Balthus mopped his brow with a trembling hand and glanced at Conan.

The barbarian's eyes were smoldering with fires that never lit the eyes of men bred to the ideas of civilization. In that instant he was all wild, and had forgotten the man at his side. In his burning gaze Balthus glimpsed and vaguely recognized pristine images and half-embodied memories, shadows from Life's dawn, forgotten and repudiated by sophisticated races--ancient, primeval fantasms unnamed and nameless.

Then the deeper fires were masked and Conan was silently leading the way deeper into the forest.

"We've no more to fear from the beasts," he said after a while, "but we've left a sign for men to read. They won't follow our trail very easily, and until they find that symbol they won't know for sure we've turned south. Even then it won't be easy to smell us out without the beasts to aid them. But the woods south of the trail will be full of warriors looking for us. If we keep moving after daylight, we'll be sure to run into some of them. As soon as we find a good place we'll hide and wait until another night to swing back and make the river. We've got to warn Valannus, but it won't help him any if we get ourselves killed."

"Warn Valannus?"

"Hell, the woods along the river are swarming with Picts! That's why they got us. Zogar's brewing war-magic; no mere raid this time. He's done something no Pict has done in my memory--united as many as fifteen or sixteen clans. His magic did it; they'll follow a wizard farther than they will a war-chief. You saw the mob in the village; and there were hundreds hiding along the river bank that you didn't see. More coming, from the farther villages. He'll have at least three thousand fighting-men. I lay in the bushes and heard their talk as they went past. They mean to attack the fort; when, I don't know, but Zogar doesn't dare delay long. He's gathered them and whipped them into a frenzy. If he doesn't lead them into battle quickly, they'll fall to quarreling with one another. They're like blood-mad tigers.

"I don't know whether they can take the fort or not. Anyway, we've got to get back across the river and give the warning. The settlers on the Velitrium road must either get into the fort or back to Velitrium. While the Picts are besieging the fort, war parties will range the road far to the east--might even cross Thunder River and raid the thickly settled country behind Velitrium."

As he talked he was leading the way deeper and deeper into the ancient wilderness. Presently he grunted with satisfaction. They had reached a spot where the underbrush was more scattered, and an outcropping of stone was visible, wandering off southward. Balthus felt more secure as they followed it. Not even a Pict could trail them over naked rock.

"How did you get away?" he asked presently.

Conan tapped his mail-shirt and helmet.

"If more borderers would wear harness there'd be fewer skulls hanging on the altar-huts. But most men make noise if they wear armor. They were waiting on each side of the path, without moving. And when a Pict stands motionless, the very beasts of the forest pass him without seeing him. They'd seen us crossing the river and got in their places. If they'd gone into ambush after we left the bank, I'd have had some hint of it. But they were waiting, and not even a leaf trembled. The devil himself couldn't have suspected anything. The first suspicion I had was when I heard a shaft rasp against a bow as it was pulled back. I dropped and yelled for the men behind me to drop, but they were too slow, taken by surprise like that.

"Most of them fell at the first volley that raked us from both sides. Some of the arrows crossed the trail and struck Picts on the other side. I heard them howl." He grinned with vicious satisfaction. "Such of us as were left plunged into the woods and closed with them. When I saw the others were all down or taken, I broke through and outfooted the painted devils through the darkness. They were all around me. I ran and crawled and sneaked, and sometimes I lay on my belly under the bushes while they passed me on all sides.

"I tried for the shore and found it lined with them, waiting for just such a move. But I'd have cut my way through and taken a chance on swimming, only I heard the drums pounding in the village and knew they'd taken somebody alive.

"They were all so engrossed in Zogar's magic that I was able to climb the wall behind the altar-hut. There was a warrior supposed to be watching at that point, but he was squatting behind the hut and peering around the corner at the ceremony. I came up behind him and broke his neck with my hands before he knew what was happening. It was his spear I threw into the snake, and that's his ax you're carrying."

"But what was that--that thing you killed in the altar-hut?" asked Balthus, with a shiver at the memory of the dim-seen horror.

"One of Zogar's gods. One of Jhebbal's children that didn't remember and had to be kept chained to the altar. A bull ape. The Picts think they're sacred to the Hairy One who lives on the moon--the gorilla-god of Gullah.

"It's getting light. Here's a good place to hide until we see how close they're on our trail. Probably have to wait until night to break back to the river."

A low hill pitched upward, girdled and covered with thick trees and bushes. Near the crest Conan slid into a tangle of jutting rocks, crowned by dense bushes. Lying among them they could see the jungle below without being seen. It was a good place to hide or defend. Balthus did not believe that even a Pict could have trailed them over the rocky ground for the past four or five miles, but he was afraid of the beasts that obeyed Zogar Sag. His faith in the curious symbol wavered a little now. But Conan had dismissed the possibility of beasts tracking them.

A ghostly whiteness spread through the dense branches; the patches of sky visible altered in hue, grew from pink to blue. Balthus felt the gnawing of hunger, though he had slaked his thirst at a stream they had skirted. There was complete silence, except for an occasional chirp of a bird. The drums were no longer to be heard. Balthus' thoughts reverted to the grim scene before the altar-hut.

"Those were ostrich plumes Zogar Sag wore," he said. "I've seen them on the helmets of knights who rode from the East to visit the barons of the marches. There are no ostriches in this forest, are there?"

"They came from Kush," answered Conan. "West of here, many marches, lies the seashore. Ships from Zingara occasionally come and trade weapons and ornaments and wine to the coastal tribes for skins and copper ore and gold dust. Sometimes they trade ostrich plumes they got from the Stygians, who in turn got them from the black tribes of Kush, which lies south of Stygia. The Pictish shamans place great store by them. But there's much risk in such trade. The Picts are too likely to try to seize the ship. And the coast is dangerous to ships. I've sailed along it when I was with the pirates of the Barachan Isles, which lie southwest of Zingara."

Balthus looked at his companion with admiration.

"I knew you hadn't spent your life on this frontier. You've mentioned several far places. You've traveled widely?"

"I've roamed far; farther than any other man of my race ever wandered. I've seen all the great cities of the Hyborians, the Shemites, the Stygians, and the Hyrkanians. I've roamed in the unknown countries south of the black kingdoms of Kush, and east of the Sea of Vilayet. I've been a mercenary captain, a corsair, a kozak, a penniless vagabond, a general--hell, I've been everything except a king of a civilized country, and I may be that, before I die." The fancy pleased him, and he grinned hardly. Then he shrugged his shoulders and stretched his mighty figure on the rocks. "This is as good a life as any. I don't know how long I'll stay on the frontier; a week, a month, a year. I have a roving foot. But it's as well on the border as anywhere."

Balthus set himself to watch the forest below them. Momentarily he expected to see fierce painted faces thrust through the leaves. But as the hours passed no stealthy footfall disturbed the brooding quiet. Balthus believed the Picts had missed their trail and given up the chase. Conan grew restless.

"We should have sighted parties scouring the woods for us. If they've quit the chase, it's because they're after bigger game. They may be gathering to cross the river and storm the fort."

"Would they come this far south if they lost the trail?"

"They've lost the trail, all right; otherwise they'd have been on our necks before now. Under ordinary circumstances they'd scour the woods for miles in every direction. Some of them should have passed without sight of this hill. They must be preparing to cross the river. We've got to take a chance and make for the river."

Creeping down the rocks Balthus felt his flesh crawl between his shoulders as he momentarily expected a withering blast of arrows from the green masses above them. He feared that the Picts had discovered them and were lying about in ambush. But Conan was convinced no enemies were near, and the Cimmerian was right.

"We're miles to the south of the village," grunted Conan. "We'll hit straight through for the river. I don't know how far down the river they've spread, We'll hope to hit it below them."

With haste that seemed reckless to Balthus they hurried eastward. The woods seemed empty of life. Conan believed that all the Picts were gathered in the vicinity of Gwawela, if, indeed, they had not already crossed the river. He did not believe they would cross in the daytime, however.

"Some woodsman would be sure to see them and give the alarm. They'll cross above and below the fort, out of sight of the sentries. Then others will get in canoes and make straight across for the river wall. As soon as they attack, those hidden in the woods on the east shore will assail the fort from the other sides. They've tried that before, and got the guts shot and hacked out of them. But this time they've got enough men to make a real onslaught of it."

They pushed on without pausing, though Balthus gazed longingly at the squirrels flitting among the branches, which he could have brought down with a cast of his ax. With a sigh he drew up his broad belt. The everlasting silence and gloom of the primitive forest was beginning to depress him. He found himself thinking of the open groves and sun-dappled meadows of the Tauran, of the bluff cheer of his father's steep-thatched, diamond-paned house, of the fat cows browsing through the deep lush grass, and the hearty fellowship of the brawny, bare-armed plowmen and herdsmen.

He felt lonely, in spite of his companion. Conan was as much a part of this wilderness as Balthus was alien to it. The Cimmerian might have spent years among the great cities of the world; he might have walked with the rulers of civilization; he might even achieve his wild whim some day and rule as king of a civilized nation; stranger things had happened. But he was no less a barbarian. He was concerned only with the naked fundamentals of life. The warm intimacies of small, kindly things, the sentiments and delicious trivialities that make up so much

of civilized men's lives were meaningless to him. A wolf was no less a wolf because a whim of chance caused him to run with the watch-dogs. Bloodshed and violence and savagery were the natural elements of the life Conan knew; he could not, and would never, understand the little things that are so dear to civilized men and women.

The shadows were lengthening when they reached the river and peered through the masking bushes. They could see up and down the river for about a mile each way. The sullen stream lay bare and empty. Conan scowled across at the other shore.

"We've got to take another chance here. We've got to swim the river. We don't know whether they've crossed or not. The woods over there may be alive with them. We've got to risk it. We're about six miles south of Gwawela."

He wheeled and ducked as a bowstring twanged. Something like a white flash of light streaked through the bushes. Balthus knew it was an arrow. Then with a tigerish bound Conan was through the bushes. Balthus caught the gleam of steel as he whirled his sword, and heard a death scream. The next instant he had broken through the bushes after the Cimmerian.

A Pict with a shattered skull lay face-down on the ground, his fingers spasmodically clawing at the grass. Half a dozen others were swarming about Conan, swords and axes lifted. They had cast away their bows, useless at such deadly close quarters. Their lower jaws were painted white, contrasting vividly with their dark faces, and the designs on their muscular breasts differed from any Balthus had ever seen.

One of them hurled his ax at Balthus and rushed after it with lifted knife. Balthus ducked and then caught the wrist that drove the knife licking at his throat. They went to the ground together, rolling over and over. The Pict was like a wild beast, his muscles hard as steel strings.

Balthus was striving to maintain his hold on the wild man's wrist and bring his own ax into play, but so fast and furious was the struggle that each attempt to strike was blocked. The Pict was wrenching furiously to free his knife hand, was clutching at Balthus' ax, and driving his knees at the youth's groin. Suddenly he attempted to shift his knife to his free hand, and in that instant Balthus, struggling up on one knee, split the painted head with a desperate blow of his ax.

He sprang up and glared wildly about for his companion, expecting to see him overwhelmed by numbers. Then he realized the full strength and ferocity of the Cimmerian. Conan bestrode two of his attackers, shorn half asunder by that terrible broadsword. As Balthus looked he saw the Cimmerian beat down a thrusting shortsword, avoid the stroke of an ax with a cat-like side-wise spring which brought him within arm's length of a squat savage stooping for a bow. Before the Pict could straighten, the red sword flailed down and clove him from shoulder to midbreastbone, where the blade stuck. The remaining warriors rushed in, one from either side. Balthus hurled his ax with an accuracy that reduced the attackers to one, and Conan, abandoning his efforts to free his sword, wheeled and met the remaining Pict with his bare hands. The stocky warrior, a head shorter than his tall enemy, leaped in, striking with his ax, at the same time stabbing murderously with his knife. The knife broke on the Cimmerian's mail, and the ax checked in midair as Conan's fingers locked like iron on the descending arm. A bone snapped loudly, and Balthus saw the Pict wince and falter. The next instant he was swept off his feet, lifted high above the Cimmerian's head--he writhed in midair for an instant, kicking and thrashing, and then was dashed headlong to the earth with such force that he rebounded, and then lay still, his limp posture telling of splintered limbs and a broken spine.

"Come on!" Conan wrenched his sword free and snatched up an ax. "Grab a bow and a handful of arrows, and hurry! We've got to trust to our heels again. That yell was heard. They'll be here in no time. If we tried to swim now, they'd feather us with arrows before we reached midstream!"

Chapter 6. Red Axes of the Border

Conan did not plunge deeply into the forest. A few hundred yards from the river, he altered his slanting course and ran parallel with it. Balthus recognized a grim determination not to be hunted away from the river which they must cross if they were to warn the men in the fort. Behind them rose more loudly the yells of the forest men. Balthus believed the Picts had reached the glade where the bodies of the slain men lay. Then further yells seemed to indicate that the savages were streaming into the woods in pursuit. They had left a trail any Pict could follow.

Conan increased his speed, and Balthus grimly set his teeth and kept on his heels, though he felt he might collapse any time. It seemed centuries since he had eaten last. He kept going more by an effort of will than anything else. His blood was pounding so furiously in his ear-drums that he was not aware when the yells died out behind them.

Conan halted suddenly.. Balthus leaned against a tree and panted.

"They've quit!" grunted the Cimmerian, scowling.

"Sneaking--up--on--us!" gasped Balthus.

Conan shook his head.

"A short chase like this they'd yell every step of the way. No. They've gone back. I thought I heard somebody yelling behind them a few seconds before the noise began to get dimmer. They've been recalled. And that's good for us, but damned bad for the men in the fort. It means the warriors are being summoned out of the woods for the attack. Those men we ran into were warriors from a tribe down the river. They were undoubtedly headed for Gwawela to join in the assault on the fort. Damn it, we're farther away than ever, now. We've got to get across the river."

Turning east he hurried through the thickets with no attempt at concealment. Balthus followed him, for the first time feeling the sting of lacerations on his breast and shoulder where the Pict's savage teeth had scored him. He was pushing through the thick bushes that hinged the bank when Conan pulled him back. Then he heard a rhythmic splashing, and peering through the leaves, saw a dugout canoe coming up the river, its single occupant paddling hard against the current. He was a strongly built Pict with a white heron feather thrust in a copper band that confined his square-cut mane.

"That's a Gwawela man," muttered Conan. "Emissary from Zogar. White plume shows that. He's carried a peace talk to the tribes down the river and now he's trying to get back and take a hand in the slaughter."

The lone ambassador was now almost even with their hiding-place, and suddenly Balthus almost jumped out of his skin. At his very ear had sounded the harsh gutturals of a Pict. Then he realized that Conan had called to the paddler in his own tongue. The man started, scanned the bushes and called back something, then cast a startled glance across the river, bent low and sent the canoe shooting in toward the western bank. Not understanding, Balthus saw Conan take from his hand the bow he had picked up in the glade, and notch an arrow.

The Pict had run his canoe in close to the shore, and staring up into the bushes, called out something. His answer came in the twang of the bow-string, the streaking flight of the arrow that sank to the feathers in his broad breast. With a choking gasp he slumped sidewise and rolled into the shallow water. In an instant Conan was down the bank and wading into the water to grasp the drifting canoe. Balthus stumbled after him and somewhat dazedly crawled into the canoe. Conan scrambled in, seized the paddle and sent the craft shooting toward the eastern shore. Balthus noted with envious admiration the play of the great muscles beneath the sun-burnt skin. The Cimmerian seemed an iron man, who never knew fatigue.

"What did you say to the Pict?" asked Balthus.

"Told him to pull into shore; said there was a white forest runner on the bank who was trying to get a shot at him."

"That doesn't seem fair," Balthus objected. "He thought a friend was speaking to him. You mimicked a Pict perfectly--"

"We needed his boat," grunted Conan, not pausing in his exertions. "Only way to lure him to the bank. Which is worse--to betray a Pict who'd enjoy skinning us both alive, or betray the men across the river whose lives depend on our getting over?"

Balthus mulled over this delicate ethical question for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and asked: "How far are we from the fort?"

Conan pointed to a creek which flowed into Black River from the east, a few hundred yards below them.

"That's South Creek; it's ten miles from its mouth to the fort. It's the southern boundary of Conajohara. Marshes miles wide south of it. No danger of a raid from across them. Nine miles above the fort North Creek forms the other boundary. Marshes beyond that, too. That's why an attack must come from the west, across Black River. Conajohara's just like a spear, with a point nineteen miles wide, thrust into the Pictish wilderness."

"Why don't we keep to the canoe and make the trip by water?"

"Because, considering the current we've got to brace, and the bends in the river, we can go faster afoot. Besides, remember Gwawela is south of the fort; if the Picts are crossing the river we'd run right into them."

Dusk was gathering as they stepped upon the eastern bank. Without pause Conan pushed on northward, at a pace that made Balthus' sturdy legs ache.

"Valannus wanted a fort built at the mouths of North and South Creeks," grunted the Cimmerian. "Then the river could be patrolled constantly. But the government wouldn't do it.

"Soft-bellied fools sitting on velvet cushions with naked girls offering them iced wine on their knees.--I know the breed. They can't see any farther than their palace wall. Diplomacy--hell! They'd fight Picts with theories of territorial expansion. Valannus and men like him have to obey the orders of a set of damned fools. They'll never grab any more Pictish land, any more than they'll ever rebuild Venarium. The time may come when they'll see the barbarians swarming over the walls of the eastern cities!"

A week before, Balthus would have laughed at any such preposterous suggestion. Now he made no reply. He had seen the unconquerable ferocity of the men who dwelt beyond the frontiers.

He shivered, casting glances at the sullen river, just visible through the bushes, at the arches of the trees which crowded close to its banks. He kept remembering that the Picts might have crossed the river and be lying in ambush between them and the fort. It was fast growing dark.

A slight sound ahead of them jumped his heart into his throat, and Conan's sword gleamed in the air. He lowered it when a dog, a great, gaunt, scarred beast, slunk out of the bushes and stood staring at them.

"That dog belonged to a settler who tried to build his cabin on the bank of the river a few miles south of the fort," grunted Conan. "The Picts slipped over and killed him, of course, and burned his cabin. We found him dead among the embers, and the dog lying senseless among three Picts he'd killed. He was almost cut to pieces. We took him to the fort and dressed his wounds, but after he recovered he took to the woods and turned wild.--What now, Slasher, are you hunting the men who killed your master?"

The massive head swung from side to side and the eyes glowed greenly. He did not growl or bark. Silently as a phantom he slid in behind them.

"Let him come," muttered Conan. "He can smell the devils before we can see them."

Balthus smiled and laid his hand caressingly on the dog's head. The lips involuntarily writhed back to display the gleaming fangs; then the great beast bent his head sheepishly, and his tall moved with jerky uncertainty, as if the owner had almost forgotten the emotions of friendliness. Balthus mentally compared the great gaunt hard body with the fat sleek hounds tumbling vociferously over one another in his father's kennel yard. He sighed. The frontier was no less hard for beasts than for men. This dog had almost forgotten the meaning of kindness and friendliness.

Slasher glided ahead, and Conan let him take the lead. The last tinge of dusk faded into stark darkness. The miles fell away under their steady feet. Slasher seemed voiceless. Suddenly he halted, tense, ears lifted. An instant later the men heard it--a demoniac yelling up the river ahead of them, faint as a whisper.

Conan swore like a madman.

"They've attacked the fort! We're too late! Come on!"

He increased his pace, trusting to the dog to smell out ambushes ahead. In a flood of tense excitement, Balthus forgot his hunger and weariness. The yells grew louder as they advanced, and above the devilish screaming they could hear the deep shouts of the soldiers. Just as Balthus began to fear they would run into the savages who seemed to be howling just ahead of them, Conan swung away from the river in a wide semicircle that carried them to a low rise from which they could look over the forest. They saw the fort, lighted with torches

thrust over the parapets on long poles. These cast a flickering, uncertain light over the clearing, and in that light they saw throngs of naked, painted figures along the fringe of the clearing. The river swarmed with canoes. The Picts had the fort completely surrounded.

An incessant hail of arrows rained against the stockade from the woods and the river. The deep twanging of the bowstrings rose above the howling. Yelling like wolves, several hundred naked warriors with axes in their hands ran from under the trees and raced toward the eastern gate. They were within a hundred and fifty yards of their objective when a withering blast of arrows from the wall littered the ground with corpses and sent the survivors fleeing back to the trees. The men in the canoes rushed their boats toward the river-wall, and were met by another shower of clothyard shafts and a volley from the small ballistae mounted on towers on that side of the stockade. Stones and logs whirled through the air and splintered and sank half a dozen canoes, killing their occupants, and the other boats drew back out of range. A deep roar of triumph rose from the walls of the fort, answered by bestial howling from all quarters.

"Shall we try to break through?" asked Balthus, trembling with eagerness.

Conan shook his head. He stood with his arms folded, his head slightly bent, a somber and brooding figure.

"The fort's doomed. The Picts are blood-mad, and won't stop until they're all killed. And there are too many of them for the men in the fort to kill. We couldn't break through, and if we did, we could do nothing but die with Valannus."

"There's nothing we can do but save our own hides, then?"

"Yes. We've got to warn the settlers. Do you know why the Picts are not trying to burn the fort with fire-arrows? Because they don't want a flame that might warn the people to the east. They plan to stamp out the fort, and then sweep east before anyone knows of its fall. They may cross Thunder River and take Velitrium before the people know what's happened. At least they'll destroy every living thing between the fort and Thunder River.

"We've failed to warn the fort, and I see now it would have done no good if we had succeeded. The fort's too poorly manned. A few more charges and the Picts will be over the walls and breaking down the gates. But we can start the settlers toward Velitrium. Come on! We're outside the circle the Picts have thrown around the fort. We'll keep clear of it."

They swung out in a wide arc, hearing the rising and falling of the volume of the yells, marking each charge and repulse. The men in the fort were holding their own; but the shrieks of the Picts did not diminish in savagery. They vibrated with a timbre that held assurance of ultimate victory.

Before Balthus realized they were close to it, they broke into the road leading east.

"Now run!" grunted Conan. Balthus set his teeth. It was nineteen miles to Velitrium, a good five to Scalp Creek beyond which began the settlements. It seemed to the Aquilonian that they had been fighting and running for centuries. But the nervous excitement that rioted through his blood stimulated him to herculean efforts.

Slasher ran ahead of them, his head to the ground, snarling low, the first sound they had heard from him.

"Picts ahead of us!" snarled Conan, dropping to one knee and scanning the ground in the starlight. He shook his head, baffled. "I can't tell how many. Probably only a small party. Some that couldn't wait to take the fort. They've gone ahead to butcher the settlers in their beds! Come on!"

Ahead of them presently they saw a small blaze through the trees, and, heard a wild and ferocious chanting. The trail bent there, and leaving it, they cut across the bend, through the thickets. A few moments later they were looking on a hideous sight. An ox-wain stood in the road piled with meager household furnishings; it was burning; the oxen lay near with their throats cut. A man and a woman lay in the road, stripped and mutilated. Five Picts were dancing about them with fantastic leaps and bounds, waving bloody axes; one of them brandished the woman's red-smeared gown.

At the sight a red haze swam before Balthus. Lifting his bow he lined the prancing figure, black against the fire, and loosed. The slayer leaped convulsively and fell dead with the arrow through his heart. Then the two white men and the dog were upon the startled survivors. Conan was animated merely by his fighting spirit and an old, old racial hate, but Balthus was afire with wrath.

He met the first Pict to oppose him with a ferocious swipe that split the painted skull, and sprang over his failing body to grapple with the others. But Conan had already killed one of the two he had chosen, and the leap of the Aquilonian was a second late. The warrior was down with the long sword through him even as Balthus' ax was lifted. Turning toward the remaining Pict, Balthus saw Slasher rise from his victim, his great jaws dripping blood.

Balthus said nothing as he looked down at the pitiful forms in the road beside the burning wain. Both were young, the woman little more than a girl. By some whim of chance the Picts had left her face unmarred, and even in the agonies of an awful death it was beautiful. But her soft young body had been hideously slashed with many knives--a mist clouded Balthus' eyes and he swallowed chokingly. The tragedy momentarily overcame him. He felt like falling upon the ground and weeping and biting the earth.

"Some young couple just hitting out on their own," Conan was saying as he wiped his sword unemotionally. "On their way to the fort when the Picts met them. Maybe the boy was going to enter the service; maybe take up land on the river. Well, that's what will happen to every man, woman, and child this side of Thunder River if we don't get them into Velitrium in a hurry."

Balthus' knees trembled as he followed Conan. But there was no hint of weakness in the long easy stride of the Cimmerian. There was a kinship between him and the great gaunt brute that glided beside him. Slasher no longer growled with his head to the trail. The way was clear before them. The yelling on the river came faintly to them, but Balthus believed the fort was still holding. Conan halted suddenly, with an oath.

He showed Balthus a trail that led north from the road. It was an old trail, partly grown with new young growth, and this growth had recently been broken down. Balthus realized this fact more by feel than sight, though Conan seemed to see like a cat in the dark. The Cimmerian showed him where broad wagon tracks turned off the main trail, deeply indented in the forest mold.

"Settlers going to the licks after salt," he grunted. "They're at the edges of the marsh, about nine miles from here. Blast it! They'll be cut off and butchered to a man! Listen! One man can warn the people on the road. Go ahead and wake them up and herd them into Velitrium. I'll go and get the men gathering the salt. They'll be camped by the licks. We won't come back to the road. We'll head straight through the woods."

With no further comment Conan turned off the trail and hurried down the dim path, and Balthus, after staring after him for a few moments, set out along the road. The dog had remained with him, and glided softly at his heels. When Balthus had gone a few rods he heard the animal growl. Whirling, he glared back the way he had come, and was startled to see a vague ghostly glow vanishing into the forest in the direction Conan had taken. Slasher rumbled deep in his throat, his hackles stiff and his eyes balls of green fire. Balthus remembered the grim apparition that had taken the head of the merchant Tiberias not far from that spot, and he hesitated. The thing must be following Conan. But the giant Cimmerian had repeatedly demonstrated his ability to take care of himself, and Balthus felt his duty lay toward the helpless settlers who slumbered in the path of the red hurricane. The horror of the fiery phantom was overshadowed by the horror of those limp, violated bodies beside the burning ox-wain.

He hurried down the road, crossed Scalp Creek and came in sight of the first settler's cabin--a, long, low structure of ax-hewn logs. In an instant he was pounding on the door. A sleepy voice inquired his pleasure.

"Get up! The Picts are over the river!"

That brought instant response. A low cry echoed his words and then the door was thrown open by a woman in a scanty shift. Her hair hung over her bare shoulders in disorder; she held a candle in one hand and an ax in the other. Her face was colorless, her eyes wide with terror.

"Come in!" she begged. "We'll hold the cabin."

"No. We must make for Velitrium. The fort can't hold them back. It may have fallen already. Don't stop to dress. Get your children and come on."

"But my man's gone with the others after salt!" she wailed, wringing her hands. Behind her peered three tousled youngsters, blinking and bewildered.

"Conan's gone after them. He'll fetch them through safe. We must hurry up the road to warn the other cabins."

Relief flooded her countenance.

"Mitra be thanked!" she cried. "If the Cimmerian's gone after them, they're safe if mortal man can save them!"

In a whirlwind of activity she snatched up the smallest child and herded the others through the door ahead of her. Balthus took the candle and ground it out under his heel. He listened an instant. No sound came up the dark road.

"Have you got a horse?"

"In the stable," she groaned. "Oh, hurry!"

He pushed her aside as she fumbled with shaking hands at the bars. He led the horse out and lifted the children on its back, telling them to hold to its mane and to one another. They stared at him seriously, making no outcry. The woman took the horse's halter and set out up the road. She still gripped her ax and Balthus knew that if cornered she would fight with the desperate courage of a she-panther.

He held behind, listening. He was oppressed by the belief that the fort had been stormed and taken, that the dark-skinned hordes were already streaming up the road toward Velitrium, drunken on slaughter and mad for blood. They would come with the speed of starving wolves.

Presently they saw another cabin looming ahead. The woman started to shriek a warning, but Balthus stopped her. He hurried to the door and knocked. A woman's voice answered him. He repeated his warning, and soon the cabin disgorged its occupants--an old woman, two young women, and four children. Like the other woman's husband, their men had gone to the salt licks the day before, unsuspecting of any danger. One of the young women seemed dazed, the other prone to hysteria. But the old woman, a stern old veteran of the frontier, quieted them harshly; she helped Balthus get out the two horses that were stabled in a pen behind the cabin and put the children on them. Balthus urged that she herself mount with them, but she shook her head and made one of the younger women ride.

"She's with child," grunted the old woman. "I can walk--and fight, too, if it comes to that."

As they set out, one of the young women said: "A young couple passed along the road about dusk; we advised them to spend the night at our cabin, but they were anxious to make the fort tonight. Did--did--"

"They met the Picts," answered Balthus briefly, and the woman sobbed in horror.

They were scarcely out of sight of the cabin when some distance behind them quavered a long high-pitched yell.

"A wolf!" exclaimed one of the women.

"A painted wolf with an ax in his hand," muttered Balthus. "Go! Rouse the other settlers along the road and take them with you. I'll scout along behind."

Without a word the old woman herded her charges ahead of her. As they faded into the darkness, Balthus could see the pale ovals that were the faces of the children twisted back over their shoulders to stare toward him. He remembered his own people on the Tauran and a moment's giddy sickness swam over him. With momentary weakness he groaned and sank down in the road, his muscular arm fell over Slasher's massive neck and he felt the dog's warm moist tongue touch his face.

He lifted his head and grinned with a painful effort.

"Come on, boy," he mumbled, rising. "We've got work to do."

A red glow suddenly became evident through the trees. The Picts had fired the last hut. He grinned. How Zogar Sag would froth if he knew his warriors had let their destructive natures get the better of them. The fire would warn the people farther up the road. They would be awake and alert when the fugitives reached them. But his face grew grim. The women

were traveling slowly, on foot and on the overloaded horses. The swift-footed Picts would run them down within a mile, unless--he took his position behind a tangle of fallen logs beside the trail. The road west of him was lighted by the burning cabin, and when the Picts came he saw them first--black furtive figures etched against the distant glare.

Drawing a shaft to the head, he loosed and one of the figures crumpled. The rest melted into the woods on either side of the road. Slasher whimpered with the killing lust beside him. Suddenly a figure appeared on the fringe of the trail, under the trees, and began gliding toward the fallen timbers. Balthus' bow-string twanged and the Pict yelped, staggered and fell into the shadows with the arrow through his thigh. Slasher cleared the timbers with a bound and leaped into the bushes. They were violently shaken and then the dog slunk back to Balthus' side, his jaws crimson.

No more appeared in the trail; Balthus began to fear they were stealing past his position through the woods, and when he heard a faint sound to his left he loosed blindly. He cursed as he heard the shaft splinter against a tree, but Slasher glided away as silently as a phantom, and presently Balthus heard a thrashing and a gurgling; then Slasher came like a ghost through the bushes, snuggling his great, crimson-stained head against Balthus' arm. Blood oozed from a gash in his shoulder, but the sounds in the wood had ceased for ever.

The men lurking on the edges of the road evidently sensed the fate of their companion, and decided that an open charge was preferable to being dragged down in the dark by a devil-beast they could neither see nor hear. Perhaps they realized that only one man lay behind the logs. They came with a sudden rush, breaking cover from both sides of the trail. Three dropped with arrows through them--and the remaining pair hesitated. One turned and ran back down the road, but the other lunged over the breastwork, his eyes and teeth gleaming in the dim light, his ax lifted. Balthus' foot slipped as he sprang up, but the slip saved his life. The descending ax shaved a lock of hair from his head, and the Pict rolled down the logs from the force of his wasted blow. Before he could regain his feet Slasher tore his throat out.

Then followed a tense period of waiting, in which time Balthus wondered if the man who had fled had been the only survivor of the party. Obviously it had been a small band that had either left the fighting at the fort, or was scouting ahead of the main body. Each moment that passed increased the chances for safety of the women and children hurrying toward Velithum.

Then without warning a shower of arrows whistled over his retreat. A wild howling rose from the woods along the trail. Either the survivor had gone after aid, or another party had joined the first. The burning cabin still smoldered, lending a little light. Then they were after him, gliding through the trees beside the trail. He shot three arrows and threw the bow away. As if sensing his plight, they came on, not yelling now, but in deadly silence except for a swift pad of many feet.

He fiercely hugged the head of the great dog growling at his side, muttered: "All right, boy, give 'em hell!" and sprang to his feet, drawing his ax. Then the dark figures flooded over the breastworks and closed in a storm of flailing axes, stabbing knives and ripping fangs.

Chapter 7. The Devil in the Fire

When Conan turned from the Velitrium road, he expected a run of some nine miles and set himself to the task. But he had not gone four when he heard the sounds of a party of men ahead of him. From the noise they were making in their progress he knew they were not Picts. He hailed them.

"Who's there?" challenged a harsh voice. "Stand where you are until we know you, or you'll get an arrow through you."

"You couldn't hit an elephant in this darkness," answered Conan impatiently. "Come on, fool; it's I--Conan. The Picts are over the river."

"We suspected as much," answered the leader of the men, as they strode forward--tall, rangy men, stern-faced, with bows in their hands. "One of our party wounded an antelope and tracked it nearly to Black River. He heard them yelling down the river and ran back to our camp. We left the salt and the wagons, turned the oxen loose, and came as swiftly as we could. If the Picts are besieging the fort, war-parties will be ranging up the road toward our cabins."

"Your families are safe," grunted Conan. "My companion went ahead to take them to Velitrium. If we go back to the main road, we may run into the whole horde. We'll strike southeast, through the timber. Go ahead. I'll scout behind."

A few moments later the whole band was hurrying southeastward. Conan followed more slowly, keeping just within ear-shot. He cursed the noise they were making; that many Picts or Cimmerians would have moved through the woods with no more noise than the wind makes as it blows through the black branches. He had just crossed a small glade when he wheeled, answering the conviction of his primitive instincts that he was being followed. Standing motionless among the bushes he heard the sounds of the retreating settlers fade away. Then a voice called faintly back along the way he had come: "Conan! Conan! Wait for me, Conan!"

"Balthus!" he swore bewilderedly. Cautiously he called: "Here I am!"

"Wait for me, Conan!" the voice came more distinctly.

Conan moved out of the shadows, scowling. "What the devil are you doing here?--Crom!"

He half crouched, the flesh prickling along his spine. It was not Balthus who was emerging from the other side of the glade. A weird glow burned through the trees. It moved toward him, shimmering weirdly--a green witch-fire that moved with purpose and intent.

It halted some feet away and Conan glared at it, trying to distinguish its fire-misted outlines. The quivering flame had a solid core; the flame was but a green garment that masked some animate and evil entity; but the Cimmerian was unable to make out its shape or likeness. Then, shockingly, a voice spoke to him from amidst the fiery column.

"Why do you stand like a sheep waiting for the butcher, Conan?"

The voice was human but carried strange vibrations that were not human.

"Sheep?" Conan's wrath got the best of his momentary awe. "Do you think I'm afraid of a damned Pictish swamp devil? A friend called me."

"I called in his voice," answered the other. "The men you follow belong to my brother; I would not rob his knife of their blood. But you are mine. O fool, you have come from the far gray hills of Cimmeria to meet your doom in the forests of Conajohara."

"You've had your chance at me before now," snorted Conan. "Why didn't you kill me then, if you could?"

"My brother had not painted a skull black for you and hurled it into the fire that burns for ever on Gullah's black altar. He had not whispered your name to the black ghosts that haunt the uplands of the Dark Land. But a bat has flown over the Mountains of the Dead and drawn your image in blood on the white tiger's hide that hangs before the long hut where sleep the Four Brothers of the Night. The great serpents coil about their feet and the stars burn like fireflies in their hair."

"Why have the gods of darkness doomed me to death?" growled Conan.

Something--a hand, foot or talon, he could not tell which, thrust out from the fire and marked swiftly on the mold. A symbol blazed there, marked with fire, and faded, but not before he recognized it.

"You dared make the sign which only a priest of Jhebbal Sag dare make. Thunder rumbled through the black Mountain of the Dead and the altar-hut of Gullah was thrown down by a wind from the Gulf of Ghosts. The loon which is messenger to the Four Brothers of the Night flew swiftly and whispered your name in my ear. Your race is run. You are a dead man already. Your head will hang in the altar-hut of my brother. Your body will be eaten by the black-winged, sharp-beaked Children of Jhil."

"Who the devil is your brother?" demanded Conan. His sword was naked in his hand, and he was subtly loosening the ax in his belt.

"Zogar Sag; a child of Jhebbal Sag who still visits his sacred groves at times. A woman of Gwawela slept in a grove holy to Jhebbal Sag. Her babe was Zogar Sag. I too am a son of Jhebbal Sag, out of a fire-being from a far realm. Zogar Sag summoned me out of the Misty Lands. With incantations and sorcery and his own blood he materialized me in the flesh of his own planet. We are one, tied together by invisible threads. His thoughts are my thoughts; if he is struck, I am bruised. If I am cut, he bleeds. But I have talked enough. Soon your ghost will talk with the ghosts of the Dark Land, and they will tell you of the old gods which are not dead, but sleep in the outer abysses, and from time to time awake."

"I'd like to see what you look like," muttered Conan, working his ax free, "you who leave a track like a bird, who burn like a flame and yet speak with a human voice."

"You shall see," answered the voice from the flame, "see, and carry the knowledge with you into the Dark Land."

The flames leaped and sank, dwindling and dimming. A face began to take shadowy form. At first Conan thought it was Zogar Sag himself who stood wrapped in green fire. But the face was higher than his own, and there was a demoniac aspect about it--Conan had noted various abnormalities about Zogar Sag's features--an obliqueness of the eyes, a sharpness of the ears, a wolfish thinness of the lips: these peculiarities were exaggerated in the apparition which swayed before him. The eyes were red as coals of living fire.

More details came into view: a slender torso, covered with snaky scales, which was yet man-like in shape, with man like arms, from the waist upward, below, long crane-like legs ended in splay, three-toed feet like those of huge bird. Along the monstrous limbs the blue fire fluttered and ran. He saw it as through a glistening mist.

Then suddenly it was towering over him, though he had not seen it move toward him. A long arm, which for the first time he noticed was armed with curving, sickle-like talons, swung high and swept down at his neck. With a fierce cry he broke the spell and bounded aside, hurling his ax. The demon avoided the cast with an unbelievably quick movement of its narrow head and was on him again with a hissing rush of leaping flames.

But fear had fought for it when it slew its other victims and Conan was not afraid. He knew that any being clothed in material flesh can be slain by material weapons, however grisly its form may be.

One flailing talon-armed limb knocked his helmet from his head. A little lower and it would have decapitated him. But fierce joy surged through him as his savagely driven sword sank deep in the monster's groin. He bounded backward from a flailing stroke, tearing his sword free as he leaped. The talons raked his breast, ripping through mail-links as if they had been cloth. But his return spring was like that of a starving wolf. He was inside the lashing arms and driving his sword deep in the monster's belly--felt the arms lock about him and the talons ripping the mail from his back as they sought his vitals--he was lapped and dazzled by blue flame that was chill as ice--then he had torn fiercely away from the weakening arms and his sword cut the air in a tremendous swipe.

The demon staggered and fell sprawling sidewise, its head hanging only by a shred of flesh. The fires that veiled it leaped fiercely upward, now red as gushing blood, hiding the figure from view. A scent of burning flesh filled Conan's nostrils. Shaking the blood and sweat from his eyes, he wheeled and ran staggering through the woods. Blood trickled down his limbs. Somewhere, miles to the south, he saw the faint glow of flames that might mark a burning cabin. Behind him, toward the road, rose a distant howling that spurred him to greater efforts.

Chapter 8. Conajohara No More

There had been fighting on Thunder River; fierce fighting before the walls of Velitrium; ax and torch had been plied up and down the bank, and many a settler's cabin lay in ashes before the painted horde was rolled back.

A strange quiet followed the storm, in which people gathered and talked in hushed voices, and men with red-stained bandages drank their ale silently in the taverns along the river bank.

There, to Conan the Cimmerian, moodily quaffing from a great wine-glass, came a gaunt forester with a bandage about his head and his arm in a sling. He was the one survivor of Fort Tuscelan.

"You went with the soldiers to the ruins of the fort?"

Conan nodded.

"I wasn't able," murmured the other. "There was no fighting?"

"The Picts had fallen back across Black River. Something must have broken their nerve, though only the devil who made them knows what."

The woodsman glanced at his bandaged arm and sighed.

"They say there were no bodies worth disposing of."

Conan shook his head. "Ashes. The Picts had piled them in the fort and set fire to the fort before they crossed the river. Their own dead and the men of Valannus."

"Valannus was killed among the last--in the hand-to-hand fighting when they broke the barriers. They tried to take him alive, but he made them kill him. They took ten of the rest of us prisoners when we were so weak from fighting we could fight no more. They butchered nine of us then and there. It was when Zogar Sag died that I got my chance to break free and run for it."

"Zogar Sag's dead?" ejaculated Conan.

"Aye. I saw him die That's why the Picts didn't press the fight against Velitrium as fiercely as they did against the fort. It was strange. He took no wounds in battle. He was dancing among the slain, waving an ax with which he'd just brained the last of my comrades. He came at me, howling like a wolf--and then he staggered and dropped the ax, and began to reel in a circle screaming as I never heard a man or beast scream before. He fell between me and the fire they'd built to roast me, gagging and frothing at the mouth, and all at once he went rigid and the Picts shouted that he was dead. It was during the confusion that I slipped my cords and ran for the woods.

"I saw him lying in the firelight. No weapon had touched him. Yet there were red marks like the wounds of a sword in the groin, belly, and neck--the last as if his head had been almost severed from his body. What do you make of that?"

Conan made no reply, and the forester, aware of the reticence of barbarians on certain matters, continued: "He lived by magic, and somehow, he died by magic. It was the mystery of his death that took the heart out of the Picts. Not a man who saw it was in the fighting before Velitrium. They hurried back across Black River. Those that struck Thunder River were warriors who had come on before Zogar Sag died. They were not enough to take the city by themselves.

"I came along the road, behind their main force, and I know none followed me from the fort. I sneaked through their lines and got into the town. You brought the settlers through all right, but their women and children got into Velitrium just ahead of those painted devils. If the youth Balthus and old Slasher hadn't held them up awhile, they'd have butchered every woman and child in Conajohara. I passed the place where Balthus and the dog made their last stand. They were lying amid a heap of dead Picts--I counted seven, brained by his ax, or disemboweled by the dog's fangs, and there were others in the road with arrows sticking in them. Gods, what a fight that must have been!"

"He was a man," said Conan. "I drink to his shade, and to the shade of the dog, who knew no fear." He quaffed part of the wine, then emptied the rest upon the floor, with a curious heathen gesture, and smashed the goblet. "The heads of ten Picts shall pay for his, and seven heads for the dog, who was a better warrior than many a man."

And the forester, staring into the moody, smoldering blue eyes, knew the barbaric oath would be kept.

"They'll not rebuild the fort?"

"No; Conajohara is lost to Aquilonia. The frontier has been pushed back. Thunder River will be the new border."

The woodsman sighed and stared at his calloused hand, worn from contact with ax-haft and sword-hilt. Conan reached his long arm for the wine-jug. The forester stared at him, comparing him with the men about them, the men who had died along the lost river, comparing him with those other wild men over that river. Conan did not seem aware of his gaze.

"Barbarism is the natural state of mankind," the borderer said, still staring somberly at the Cimmerian. "Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph."

THE END

Contents

THE HOUR OF THE DRAGON

by Robert E. Howard

The Lion banner sways and falls in the horror-haunted gloom; A scarlet Dragon rustles by, borne on winds of doom. In heaps the shining horsemen lie, where the thrusting lances break, And deep in the haunted mountains, the lost, black gods awake. Dead hands grope in the shadows, the stars turn pale with fright, For this is the Dragon's Hour, the triumph of Fear and Night.

Chapter 1

: O Sleeper, Awake!

THE LONG TAPERS flickered, sending the black shadows wavering along the walls, and the velvet tapestries rippled. Yet there was no wind in the chamber. Four men stood about the ebony table on which lay the green sarcophagus that gleamed like carven jade. In the upraised right hand of each man a curious black candle burned with a weird greenish light. Outside was night and a lost wind moaning among the black trees.

Inside the chamber was tense silence, and the wavering of the shadows, while four pairs of eyes, burning with intensity, were fixed on the long green case across which cryptic hieroglyphics writhed, as if lent life and movement by the unsteady light. The man at the foot of the sarcophagus leaned over it and moved his candle as if he were writing with a pen, inscribing a mystic symbol' in the air. Then he set down the candle in its black gold stick at the foot of the case, and, mumbling some formula unintelligible to his companions, he thrust a broad white hand into his fur-trimmed robe. When he brought it forth again it was as if he cupped in his palm a ball of living fire.

The other three drew in their breath sharply, and the dark, powerful man who stood at the head of the sarcophagus whispered: "The Heart of Ahriman!" The other lifted a quick hand for silence. Somewhere a dog began howling dolefully, and a stealthy step padded outside the barred and bolted door. But none looked aside from the mummy-case over which the man in the ermine-trimmed robe was now moving the great flaming jewel while he muttered an incantation that was old when Atlantis sank. The glare of the gem dazzled their eyes, so that they could not be sure of what they saw; but with a splintering crash, the carven lid of the sarcophagus burst outward as if from some irresistible pressure applied from within, and the four men, bending eagerly forward, saw the occupant--a huddled, withered, wizened shape, with dried brown limbs like dead wood showing through moldering bandages.

"Bring that thing back?" muttered the small dark man who stood on the right, with a short, sardonic laugh. "It is ready to crumble at a touch. We are fools--"

"Shhh!" It was an urgent hiss of command from the large man who held the jewel. Perspiration stood upon his broad white forehead and his eyes were dilated. He leaned forward, and, without touching the thing with his hand, laid on the breast of the mummy the blazing jewel. Then he drew back and watched with fierce intensity, his lips moving in soundless invocation.

It was as if a globe of living fire nickered and burned on the dead, withered bosom. And breath sucked in, hissing, through the clenched teeth of the watchers. For as they watched, an awful transmutation became apparent. The withered shape in the sarcophagus was expanding, was growing, lengthening. The bandages burst and fell into brown dust. The shiveled limbs swelled, straightened. Their dusky hue began to fade.

"By Mitra!" whispered the tall, yellow-haired man on the left. "He was not a Stygian. That part at least was true."

Again a trembling finger warned for silence. The hound outside was no longer howling. He whimpered, as with an evil dream, and then that sound, too, died away in silence, in which the yellow-haired man plainly heard the straining of the heavy door, as if something outside pushed powerfully upon it. He half turned, his hand at his sword, but the man in the ermine robe hissed an urgent warning: "Stay! Do not break the chain! And on your life do not go to the door!"

The yellow-haired man shrugged and turned back, and then he stopped short, staring. In the Jade sarcophagus lay a living man: a tall, lusty man, naked, white of skin, and dark of hair and beard. He lay motionless, his eyes wide open, and blank and unknowing as a newborn babe's. On his breast the great jewel smoldered and sparkled.

The man in ermine reeled as if from some let-down of extreme tension.

"Ishtar!" he gasped. "It is Xaltotun!--and he lives! Valerius! Tarascus! Amalric! Do you see? Do you see? You doubted me--but I have not failed! We have been close to the open gates of hell this night, and the shapes of darkness have gathered close about us---aye, they followed him to the very door--but we have brought the great magician back to life."

"And damned our souls to purgatories everlasting, I doubt not," muttered the small, dark man, Tarascus.

The yellow-haired man, Valerius, laughed harshly.

"What purgatory can be worse than life itself? So we are all damned together from birth. Besides, who would not sell his miserable soul for a throne?"

"There is no intelligence in his stare, Orastes," said the large man.

"He has long been dead," answered Orastes. "He is as one newly awakened. His mind is empty after the long sleep--nay, he was dead, not sleeping. We brought his spirit back over the voids and gulfs of night and oblivion. I will speak to him."

He bent over the foot of the sarcophagus, and fixing his gaze on the wide dark eyes of the man within, he said, slowly: "Awake, Xaltotun!"

The lips of the man moved mechanically. "Xaltotun!" he repeated in a groping whisper.

"You are Xaltotun!" exclaimed Orastes, like a hypnotist driving home his suggestions. "You are Xaltotun of Python, in Acheron."

A dim flame flickered in the dark eyes.

"I was Xaltotun," he whispered. "I am dead."

"You are Xaltotun!" cried Qrastes. "You are not dead! You live!"

"I am Xaltotun," came the eery whisper. "But I am dead. In my house in Khemi, in Stygia, there I died."

"And the priests who poisoned you mummified your body with their dark arts, keeping all your organs intact!" exclaimed Orastes. "But now you live again! The Heart of Ahriman has restored your life, drawn your spirit back from space and eternity."

"The Heart of Ahriman!" The flame of remembrance grew stronger. "The barbarians stole it from me!"

"He remembers," muttered Orastes. "Lift him from the case."

The others obeyed hesitantly, as if reluctant to touch the man they had recreated, and they seemed not easier in their minds when they felt firm muscular flesh, vibrant with blood and life, beneath their fingers. But they lifted him upon the table, and Orastes clothed him in a curious dark velvet robe, splashed with gold stars and cresent moons, and fastened a cloth-of-gold, fillet about his temples, confining the black wavy locks that fell to his shoulders. He let them do as they would, saying nothing, not even when they set him in a carven throne-like chair with a high ebony back and wide silver arms, and feet like golden claws. He sat there motionless, and slowly intelligence grew in his dark eyes and made them deep and strange and luminous. It was as if long-sunken witch-lights floated slowly up through midnight pools of darkness.

Orastes cast a furtive glance at his companions, who stood staring in morbid fascination at their strange guest. Their iron nerves had withstood an ordeal that might have driven weaker men mad. He knew it was with no weaklings that he conspired, but men whose courage was as profound as their lawless ambitions and capacity for evil. He turned his attention to the figure in the ebon-black chair. And this one spoke at last.

"I remember," he said in a strong, resonant voice, speaking Nemedian with a curious, archaic accent. "I am Xaltotun, who was high priest of Set in Python, which was in Acheron. The Heart of Ahriman-I dreamed I had found it again-where is it?"

Orastes placed it in his hand, and he drew breath deeply as he gazed into the depths of the terrible jewel burning in his grasp.

"They stole it from me, long ago," he said. "The red heart of the night it is, strong to save or to damn. It came from afar, and from long ago. While I held it, none could stand before me. But it was stolen from me, and Acheron fell, and I fled an exile into dark Stygia. Much I remember, but much I have forgotten. I have been in a far land, across misty voids and gulfs and unlit oceans. What is the year?"

Orastes answered him. "It is the waning of the Year of the Lion, three thousand years after the fall of Acheron."

"Three thousand years!" murmured the other. "So long? Who are you?"

"I am Orastes, once a priest of Mitra. This man is Amalric, baron of Tor, in Nemedia; this other is Tarascus, younger brother of the king of Nemedia; and this tall man is Valerius, rightful heir of the throne of Aquilonia."

"Why have you given me life?" demanded Xaltotun. "What do you require of me?"

The man was now fully alive and awake, his keen eyes reflecting the working of an unclouded brain. There was no hesitation or uncertainty in his manner. He came directly to the point, as one who knows that no man gives something for nothing. Orastes met him with equal candor.

"We have opened the doors of hell this night to free your soul and return it to your body because we need your aid. We wish to place Tarascus on the throne of Nemedia, and to win for Valerius the crown of Aquilonia. With your necromancy you can aid us."

Xaltotun's mind was devious and full of unexpected slants.

"You must be deep in the arts yourself, Orastes, to have been able to restore my life. How is it that a priest of Mitra knows of the Heart of Ahriman, and the incantations of Skelos?"

"I am no longer a priest of Mitra," answered Orastes. "I was cast forth from my order because of my delving in black magic. But for Amalric there I might have been burned as a magician.

"But that left me free to pursue my studies. I journeyed in Zamora, in Vendhya, in Stygia, and among the haunted jungles of Khitai. I read the ironbound books of Skelos, and talked with unseen creatures in deep wells, and faceless shapes in black reeking jungles. I obtained a glimpse of your sarcophagus in the demon-haunted crypts below the black giant-walled temple of Set in the hinterlands of Stygia, and I learned of the arts that would bring back life to your shriveled corpse. From moldering manuscripts I learned of the Heart of Ahriman. Then for a year I sought its hiding-place, and at last I found it."

"Then why trouble to bring me back to life?" demanded Xaltotun, with his piercing gaze fixed on the priests. "Why did you not employ the Heart to further your own power?"

"Because no man today knows the secrets of the Heart," answered Orastes. "Not even in legends live the arts by which to loose its full powers. I knew it could restore life; of its deeper secrets I am ignorant. I merely used it to bring you back to life. It is the use of your knowledge we seek. As for the Heart, you alone know its awful secrets."

Xaltotun shook his head, staring broodingly into the flaming depths.

"My necromantic knowledge is greater than the sum of all the knowledge of other men," he said; "yet I do not know the full power of the jewel. I did not invoke it in the old days; I guarded it lest it be used against me. At last it was stolen, and in the hands of a feathered shaman of the barbarians it defeated all my mighty sorcery. Then it vanished, and I was poisoned by the jealous priests of Stygia before I could learn where it was hidden."

"It was hidden in a cavern below the temple of Mitra, in Taran-tia," said Orastes. "By devious ways I discovered this, after I had located your remains in Set's subterranean temple in Stygia.

"Zamorian thieves, partly protected by spells I learned from sources better left unmentioned, stole your mummy-case from under the very talons of those which guarded it in the dark, and by camel-caravan and galley and ox-wagon it came at last to this city.

"Those same thieves-or rather those of them who still lived after their frightful quest-stole the Heart of Ahriman from its haunted cavern below the temple of Mitra, and all the skill of men and the spells of sorcerers nearly failed. One man of them lived long enough to reach me and give the jewel into my hands, before he died slavering and gibbering of what he had seen in that accursed crypt. The thieves of Zamora are the most faithful of men to their trust. Even with my conjurements, none but them could have stolen the Heart from where it has lain in demon-guarded darkness since the fall of Acheron, three thousand years ago."

Xaltotun lifted his lion-like head and stared far off into space, as if plumbing the lost centuries.

"Three thousand years!" he muttered. "Set! Tell me what has chanced in the world."

"The barbarians who overthrew Acheron set up new kingdoms," quoted Orastes. "Where the empire had stretched now rose realms called Aquilonia, and Nemedia, and Argos, from the tribes that founded them. The older kingdoms of Ophir, Corinthia and western Koth, which had been subject to the kings of Acheron, regained their independence with the fall of the empire."

"And what of the people of Acheron?" demanded Orastes. "When I fled into Stygia, Python was in ruins, and all the great, purple-towered cities of Acheron fouled with blood and trampled by the sandals of the barbarians."

"In the hills small groups of folk still boast descent from Acheron," answered Orastes. "For the rest, the tide of my barbarian ancestors rolled over them and wiped them out. They-my ancestors-had suffered much from the kings of Acheron."

A grim and terrible smile curled the Pythonian's lips.

"Aye! Many a barbarian, both man and woman, died screaming on the altar under this hand. I have seen their heads piled to make a pyramid in the great square in Python when the kings returned from the west with their spoils and naked captives."

"Aye. And when the day of reckoning came, the sword was not spared. So Acheron ceased to be, and purple-towered Python became a memory of forgotten days. But the younger kingdoms rose on the imperial ruins and waxed great. And now we have brought you back to aid us to rule these kingdoms, which, if less strange and wonderful than Acheron of old, are yet rich and powerful, well worth fighting for. Look!" Orastes unrolled before the stranger a map drawn cunningly on vellum.

Xaltotun regarded it, and then shook his head, baffled.

"The very outlines of the land are changed. It is like some familiar thing seen in a dream, fantastically distorted."

"Howbeit," answered Orastes, tracing with his forefinger, "here is Belverus, the capital of Nemedia, in which we now are. Here run the boundaries of the land of Nemedia. To the south and southeast are Ophir and Corinthia, to the east Brythunia, to the west Aquilonia."

"It is the map of a world I do not know," said Xaltotun softly, but Orastes did not miss the lurid fire of hate that flickered in his dark eyes.

"It is a map you shall help us change," answered Orastes. "It is our desire first to set Tarascus on the throne of Nemedia. We wish to accomplish this without strife, and in such a way that no suspicion will rest on Tarascus. We do not wish the land to be torn by civil wars, but to reserve all our power for the conquest of Aquilonia.

"Should King Nimed and his sons die naturally, in a plague for instance, Tarascus would mount the throne as the next heir, peacefully and unopposed."

Xaltotun nodded, without replying, and Orastes continued.

"The other task will be more difficult. We cannot set Valerius on the Aquilonian throne without a war, and that kingdom is a formidable foe. Its people are a hardy, war-like race, toughened by continual wars with the Picts, Zingarians and Cimmerians. For five hundred years Aquilonia and Nemedia have intermittently waged war, and the ultimate advantage has always lain with the Aquilonians.

"Their present king is the most renowned warrior among the western nations. He is an outlander, an adventurer who seized the crown by force during a time of civil strife, strangling King Namedides with his own hands, upon the very throne. His name is Conan, and no man can stand before him in battle.

"Valerius is now the rightful heir of the throne. He had been driven into exile by his royal kinsman, Namedides, and has been away from his native realm for years, but he is of the blood of the old dynasty, and many of the barons would secretly hail the overthrow of Conan, who is a nobody without royal or even noble blood. But the common people are loyal to him, and the nobility of the outlying provinces. Yet if his forces were overthrown in the battle that must first take place, and Conan himself slain, I think it would not be difficult to put Valerius on the throne. Indeed, with Conan slain, the only center of the government would be gone. He is not part of a dynasty, but only a lone adventurer."

"I wish that I might see this king," mused Xaltotun, glancing toward a silvery mirror which formed one of the panels of the wall. This mirror cast no reflection, but Xaltotun's expression showed that he understood its purpose, and Orastes nodded with the pride a good craftsman takes in the recognition of his accomplishments by a master of his craft.

"I will try to show him to you," he said. And seating himself before the mirror, he gazed hypnotically into its depths, where presently a dim shadow began to take shape.

It was uncanny, but those watching knew it was no more than the reflected image of Orastes' thought, embodied in that mirror as a wizard's thoughts are embodied in a magic crystal. It floated hazily, then leaped into startling clarity-a tall man, mightily shouldered and deep of chest, with a massive corded neck and heavily muscled limbs. He was clad in silk and velvet, with the royal lions of Aquilonia worked in gold upon his rich jupon, and the crown of Aquilonia shone on his square-cut black mane; but the great sword at his side seemed more natural to him than the regal accouterments. His brow was low and broad, his eyes a volcanic blue that smoldered as if with some inner fire. His dark, scarred, almost sinister face was that of a fighting- man, and his velvet garments could not conceal the hard, dangerous lines of his limbs.

"That man is no Hyborian!" exclaimed Xaltotun.

"No; he is a Cimmerian, one of those wild tribesmen who dwell in the gray hills of the north."

"I fought his ancestors of old," muttered Xaltotun. "Not even the kings of Acheron could conquer them."

"They still remain a terror to the nations of the south," answered Orastes. "He is a true son of that savage race, and has proved himself, thus far, unconquerable."

Xaltotun did not reply; he sat staring down at the pool of living fire that shimmered in his hand. Outside, the hound howled again, long and shudderingly.

Chapter 2
: The Black Wind Blows

THE YEAR OF THE DRAGON had birth in war and pestilence and unrest. The black plague stalked through the streets of Belverus, striking down the merchant in his stall, the serf in his kennel, the knight at his banquet board. Before it the arts of the leeches were helpless. Men said it had been sent from hell as punishment for the sins of pride and lust. It was swift and deadly as the stroke of an adder. The victim's body turned purple and then black, and within a few minutes he sank down dying, and the stench of his own putrefaction was in his nostrils even before death wrenched his soul from his rotting body. A hot, roaring wind blew incessantly from the south, and the crops withered in the fields, the cattle sank and died in their tracks.

Men cried out on Mitra, and muttered against the king; for somehow, throughout the kingdom, the word was whispered that the king was secretly addicted to loathsome practises and foul debauches in the seclusion of his nighted palace. And then in that palace death stalked grinning on feet about which swirled the monstrous vapors of the plague. In one night the king died with his three sons, and the drums that thundered their dirge drowned the grim and ominous bells that rang from the carts that lumbered through the streets gathering up the rotting dead.

That night, just before dawn, the hot wind that had blown for weeks ceased to rustle evilly through the silken window curtains. Out of the north rose a great wind that roared among the towers, and there was cataclysmic thunder, and blinding sheets of lightning, and driving rain. But the dawn shone clean and green and clear; the scorched ground veiled itself in grass, the thirsty crops sprang up anew, and the plague was gone-its miasma swept clean out of the land by the mighty wind.

Men said the gods were satisfied because the evil king and his spawn were slain, and when his young brother Tarascus was crowned in the great coronation hall, the populace cheered until the towers rocked, acclaiming the monarch on whom the gods smiled.

Such a wave of enthusiasm and rejoicing as swept the land is frequently the signal for a war of conquest. So no one was surprized when it was announced that King Tarascus had declared the truce made by the late king with their western neighbors void, and was gathering his hosts to invade Aquilonia. His reason was candid; his motives, loudly proclaimed, gilded his actions with something of the glamor of a crusade. He espoused the cause of Valerius, "rightful heir to the throne"; he came, he proclaimed, not as an enemy of Aquilonia, but as a friend, to free the people from the tyranny of a usurper and a foreigner.

If there were cynical smiles in certain quarters, and whispers concerning the king's good friend Amalric, whose vast personal wealth seemed to be flowing into the rather depleted royal treasury, they were unheeded in the general wave of fervor and zeal of Tarascus's popularity. If any shrewd individuals suspected that Amalric was the real ruler of Nemedia, behind the scenes, they were careful not to voice such heresy. And the war went forward with enthusiasm.

The king and his allies moved westward at the head of fifty thousand men-knights in shining armor with their pennons streaming above their helmets, pikemen in steel caps and brigan-dines, crossbowmen in leather jerkins. They crossed the border, took a frontier castle and burned three mountain villages, and then, in the valley of the Valkia, ten miles west of the boundary line, they met the hosts of Conan, king of Aquilonia-forty-five thousand knights, archers and men-at-arms, the flower of Aquilonian strength and chivalry. Only the knights of Poitain, under Prospero, had not yet arrived, for they had far to ride up from the southwestern comer of the kingdom. Tarascus had struck without warning. His invasion had come on the heels of his proclamation, without formal declaration of war.

The two hosts confronted each other across a wide, shallow valley, with rugged cliffs, and a shallow stream winding through masses of reeds and willows down the middle of the vale. The camp-followers of both hosts came down to this stream for water, and shouted insults and hurled stones across at one another. The last glints of the sun shone on the golden banner of Nemedia with the scarlet dragon, unfurled in the breeze above the pavilion of King Tarascus on an eminence near the eastern cliffs. But the shadow of the western cliffs fell like a vast purple pall across the tents and the army of Aquilonia, and upon the black banner with its golden lion that floated above King Conan's pavilion.

All night the fires flared the length of the valley, and the wind brought the call of trumpets, the clangor of arms, and the sharp challenges of the sentries who paced their horses along either edge of the willow-grown stream.

It was in the darkness before dawn that King Conan stirred on his couch, which was no more than a pile of silks and furs thrown on a dais, and awakened. He started up, crying out sharply and clutching at his sword. Pallantides, his commander, rushing in at the cry, saw his king sitting upright, his hand on his hilt, and perspiration dripping from his strangely pale face.

"Your Majesty!" exclaimed Pallantides. "Is aught amiss?"

"What of the camp?" demanded Conan. "Are the guards out?"

"Five hundred horsemen patrol the stream, Your Majesty," answered the general. "The Nemedians have not offered to move against us in the night. They wait for dawn, even as we."

"By Crom," muttered Conan. "I awoke with a feeling that doom was creeping on me in the night."

He stared up at the great golden lamp which shed a soft glow over the velvet hangings and carpets of the great tent. They were alone; not even a slave or a page slept on the carpeted floor; but Conan's eyes blazed as they were wont to blaze in the teeth of great peril, and the sword quivered in his hand. Pallantides watched him uneasily. Conan seemed to be listening.

"Listen!" hissed the king. "Did you hear it? A furtive step!"

"Seven knights guard your tent, Your Majesty," said Pallantides. "None could approach it unchallenged."

"Not outside," growled Conan. "It seemed to sound inside the tent."

Pallantides cast a swift, startled look around. The velvet hangings merged with shadows in the comers, but if there had been anyone in the pavilion besides themselves, the general would have seen him. Again he shook his head.

"There is no one here, sure. You sleep in the midst of your host."

"I have seen death strike a king in the midst of thousands," muttered Conan. "Something that walks on invisible feet and is not seen--"

"Perhaps you were dreaming. Your Majesty," said Pallantides, somewhat perturbed.

"So I was," grunted Conan. "A devilish dream it was, too. I trod again all the long, weary roads I traveled on my way to the kingship."

He fell silent, and Pallantides stared at him unspeaking. The. king was an enigma to the general, as to most of his civilized subjects. Pallantides knew that Conan had walked many strange roads in his wild, eventful life, and had been many things before a twist of Fate set him on the throne of Aquilonia.

"I saw again in the battlefield whereon I was born," said Conan, resting his chin moodily on a massive fist. "I saw myself in a pantherskin loin-clout, throwing my spear at the the mountain beasts. I was a mercenary swordsman again, a het-man of the kozaki who dwell along the Zaporoska River, a corsair looting the coasts of Kush, a pirate of the Barachan Isles, a chief of the Himelian hillmen. All these things I've been, and of all these things I dreamed; all the shapes that have been I passed like an endless procession, and their feet beat out a dirge in the sounding dust.

"But throughout my dreams moved strange, veiled figures and ghostly shadows, and a far-away voice mocked me. And toward the last I seemed to see myself lying on this dais in my tent, and a shape bent over me, robed and hooded. I lay unable to move, and then the hood fell away and a moldering skull grinned down at me. Then it was that I awoke."

"This is an evil dream. Your Majesty," said Pallantides, suppressing a shudder. "But no more."

Conan shook his head, more in doubt than in denial. He came of a barbaric race, and the superstitions and instincts of his heritage lurked close beneath the surface of his consciousness.

"I've dreamed many evil dreams," he said, "and most of them were meaningless. But by Crom, this was not like most dreams! I wish this battle were fought and won, for I've had a grisly premonition ever since King Nimed died in the black plague. Why did it cease when he died?"

"Men say he sinned--"

"Men are fools, as always," grunted Conan. "If the plague struck all who sinned, then by Crom there wouldn't be enough left to count the living! Why should the gods-who the priests tell me are just-slay five hundred peasants and merchants and nobles before they slew the king, if the whole pestilence were aimed at him? Were the gods smiting blindly, like swordsmen in a fog? By Mitra, if I aimed my strokes no straighter, Aquilonia would have 'had a new king long ago.

"No! The black plague's no common pestilence. It lurks in Stygian tombs, and is called forth into being only by wizards. I was a swordsman in Prince Almuric's army that invaded Stygia, and of his thirty thousand, fifteen thousand perished by Stygian arrows, and the rest by the black plague that rolled on us like a wind out of the south. I was the only man who lived."

"Yet only five hundred died in Nemedia," argued Pallantides.

"Whoever called it into being knew how to cut it short at will," answered Conan. "So I know there was something planned and diabolical about it. Someone called it forth, someone banished it when the work was completed-when Tarascus was safe on the throne and being hailed as the deliverer of the people from the wrath of the gods. By Crom, I sense a black, subtle brain behind all this. What of this stranger who men say gives counsel to Tarascus?"

"He wears a veil," answered Pallantides; "they say he is a foreigner; a stranger from Stygia."

"A stranger from Stygia!" repeated Conan scowling. "A stranger from hell, more like!-Ha! What is that?"

"The trumpets of the Nemedians!" exclaimed Pallantides. "And hark, how our own blare upon their heels! Dawn is breaking, and the captains are marshaling the hosts for the onset! Mitra be with them, for many will not see the sun go down behind the crags."

"Send my squires to me!" exclaimed Conan, rising with alacrity and casting off his velvet night-garment; he seemed to have forgotten his forebodings at the prospect of action. "Go to the captains and see that all is in readiness. I will be with you as soon as I don my armor."

Many of Conan's ways were inexplicable to the civilized people he ruled, and one of them was his insistence on sleeping alone in his chamber or tent. Pallantides hastened from the pavilion, clanking in the armor he had donned at midnight after a few hours' sleep. He cast a swift glance over the camp, which was beginning to swarm with activity, mail clinking and men moving about dimly in the uncertain light, among the long lines of tents. Stars still glimmered palely in the western sky, but long pink streamers stretched along the eastern horizon, and against them the dragon banner of Nemedia flung out its billowing silken folds.

Pallantides turned toward a smaller tent near by, where slept the royal squires. These were tumbling out already, roused by the trumpets. And as Pallantides called to them to hasten, he was frozen speechless by a deep fierce shout and the impact of a heavy blow inside the king's tent, followed by a heart-stopping crash of a falling body. There sounded a low laugh that turned the general's blood to ice.

Echoing the cry, Pallantides wheeled and rushed back into the pavilion. He cried out again as he saw Conan's powerful frame stretched out on the carpet. The king's great two-handed sword lay near his hand, and a shattered tent-pole seemed to show where his sword had fallen. Pallantides' sword was out, and he glared about the tent, but nothing met his gaze. Save for the king and himself it was empty, as it had been when he left it.

"Your Majesty!" Pallantides threw himself on his knee beside the fallen giant.

Conan's eyes were open; they blazed up at him with full intelligence and recognition. His lips writhed, but no sound came forth. He seemed unable to move.

Voices sounded without. Pallantides rose swiftly and stepped to the door. The royal squires and one of the knights who guarded the tent stood there. "We heard a sound within," said the knight apologetically. "Is all well with the king?"

Pallantides regarded him searchingly.

"None has entered or left the pavilion this night?"

"None save yourself, my lord," answered the knight, and Pallantides could not doubt his honesty.

"The king stumbled and dropped his sword," said Pallantides briefly. "Return to your post."

As the knight turned away, the general covertly motioned to the five royal squires, and when they had followed him in, he drew the flap closely. They turned pale at the sight of the king stretched upon the carpet, but Pallantides' quick gesture checked their exclamations.

The general bent over him agan, and again Conan made an effort to speak. The veins in his temples and the cords in his neck swelled with his efforts, and he lifted his head clear off the ground. Voice came at last, mumbling and half intelligible.

"The thing-the thing in the corner!"

Pallantides lifted his head and looked fearfully about him. He saw the pale faces of the squires in the lamplight, the velvet shadows that lurked along the walls of the pavilion. That was all.

"There is nothing here. Your Majesty," he said.

"It was there, in the comer," muttered the king, tossing his lion- maned head from side to side in his efforts to rise. "A man-at least he looked like a man-wrapped in rags like a mummy's bandages, with a moldering cloak drawn about him, and a hood. All I could see was his eyes, as he crouched there in the shadows. I thought he was a shadow himself, until I saw his eyes. They were like black jewels.

"I made at him and swung my sword, but I missed him clean--how, Crom knows--and splintered that pole instead. He caught my wrist as I staggered off balance, and his fingers burned like hot iron. All the strength went out of me, and the floor rose and struck me like a club. Then he was gone, and I was down, and--curse him!--I can't move! I'm paralyzed!"

Pallantides lifted the giant's hand, and his flesh crawled. On the king's wrist showed the blue marks of long, lean fingers. What hand could grip so hard as to leave its print on that thick wrist? Pallantides remembered that low laugh he had heard as he rushed into the tent, and cold perspiration beaded his skin. It had not been Conan who laughed.

"This is a thing diabolical!" whispered a trembling squire. "Men say the children of darkness war for Tarascus!"

"Be silent!" ordered Pallantides sternly.

Outside, the dawn was dimming the stars. A light wind sprang up from the peaks, and brought the fanfare of a thousand trumpets. At the sound a convulsive shudder ran through the king's mighty form. Again the veins in his temples knotted as he strove to break the invisible shackles which crushed him down.

"Put my harness on me and tie me into my saddle," he whispered. "I'll lead the charge yet!"

Pallantides shook his head, and a squire plucked his skirt.

"My lord, we are lost if the host learns the king has been smitten! Only he could have led us to victory this day."

"Help me lift him on the dais," answered the general.

They obeyed, and laid the helpless giant on the furs, and spread a silken cloak over him. Pallantides turned to the five squires and searched their pale faces long before he spoke.

"Our lips must be sealed for ever as to what happens in this tent," he said at last. "The kingdom of Aquilonia depends upon it. One of you go and fetch me the officer Valannus, who is a captain of the Pellian spearmen."

The squire indicated bowed and hastened from the tent, and Pallantides stood staring down at the stricken king, while outside trumpets blared, drums thundered, and the roar of the multitudes rose in the growing dawn. Presently the squire returned with the officer Pallantides had named-a tall man, broad and powerful, built much like the king. Like him, also, he had thick black hair. But his eyes were gray and he did not resemble Conan in his features.

"The king is stricken by a strange malady," said Pallantides briefly. "A great honor is yours; you are to wear his armor and ride at the head of the host today. None must know that it is not the king who rides."

"It is an honor for which a man might gladly give up his life," stammered the captain, overcome by the suggestion. "Mitra grant that I do not fail of this mighty trust!"

And while the fallen king stared with burning eyes that reflected the bitter rage and humiliation that ate his heart, the squires stripped Valannus of mail shirt, burganet and leg-pieces, and clad him in Conan's armor of black plate-mail, with the vizored salade, and the dark plumes nodding over the wivern crest. Over all they put the silken surcoat with the royal lion worked in gold upon the breast, and they girt him with a broad gold-buckled belt which supported a jewel- hilted broad-sword in a cloth-of-gold scabbard. While they worked, trumpets clamored outside, arms clanged, and across the river rose a deep-throated roar as squadron after squadron swung into place.

Full-armed, Vallanus dropped to his knee and bent his plumes before the figure that lay on the dais.

"Lord king, Mitra grant that I do not dishonor the harness I wear this day!"

"Bring me Tarascus's head and I'll make you a baron!" In the stress of his anguish Conan's veneer of civilization had fallen from him. His eyes flamed, he ground his teeth in fury and blood-lust, as barbaric as any tribesmen in the Crimmerian hills.

Chapter 3

: The Cliffs Reel

THE AQUILONIAN HOST was drawn up, long serried lines of pikemen and horsemen in gleaming steel, when a giant figure in black armor emerged from the royal pavilion, and as he swung up into the saddle of the black stallion held by four squires, a roar that shook the mountains went up from the host. They shook their blades and thundered forth their acclaim of their warrior king--knights in gold-chased armor, pikemen in mail coats and basinets, archers in their leather jerkins, with their longbows in their left hand.

The host on the opposite side of the valley was in motion, trotting down the long gentle slope toward the river; their steel shone through the mists of morning that swirled about their horses' feet.

The Aquilonian host moved leisurely to meet them. The measured tramp of the armored horses made the ground tremble. Banners flung out long silken folds in the morning wind; lances swayed like a bristling forest, dipped and sank, their pennons fluttering about them.

Ten men-at-arms, grim, taciturn veterans who could hold their tongues, guarded the royal pavilion. One squire stood in the tent, peering out through a slit in the doorway. But for the handful in the secret, no one else in the vast host knew that it was not Conan who rode on the great stallion at the head of the army.

The Aquilonian host had assumed the customary formation:

The strongest part was the center, composed entirely of heavily armed knights; the wings were made up of smaller bodies of horsemen, mounted men-at-arms, mostly, supported by pikemen and archers. The latter were Bossonians from the western marches, strongly built men of medium stature, in leathern jackets and iron head-pieces.

The Nemedian army came on in similar formation and the two hosts moved toward the river, the wings, in advance of the centers. In the center of the Aquilonian host the great lion banner streamed its billowing black folds over the steel-clad figure on the black stallion.

But on his dais in the royal pavilion Conan groaned in anguish of spirit, and cursed with strange heathen oaths.

"The hosts move together," quoth the squire, watching from the door. "Hear the trumpets peal! Ha! The rising sun strikes fire from lance- heads and helmets until I am dazzled. It turns the river crimson--aye, it will be truly crimson before this day is done!

"The foe have reached the river. Now arrows fly between the hosts like stinging clouds that hide the sun. Ha! Well loosed, bowman! The Bossonians have the better of it! Hark to them shout!"

Faintly in the ears of the king, above the din of trumpets and clanging steel, came the deep fierce shout of the Bossonians as they drew and loosed in perfect unison.

"Their archers seek to hold ours in play while their knights ride into the river," said the squire. "The banks are not steep; they slope to the water's edge. The knights come on, they crash through the willows. By Mitra, the clothyard shafts find every crevice of their harness! Horses and men go down, struggling and thrashing in the water. It is not deep, nor is the current swift, but men are drowning there, dragged under by their armor, and trampled by the frantic horses. Now the knights of Aquilonia advance. They ride into the water and engage the knights of Nemedia. The water swirls about their horses' bellies and the clang of sword against sword is deafening."

"Crom!" burst in agony from Conan's lip. Life was coursing sluggishly back into his veins, but still he could not lift his mighty frame from the dais.

"The wings close in," said the squire. "Pikemen and swordsmen fight hand to hand in the stream, and behind them the bowmen ply their shafts.

"By Mitra, the Nemedian arbalesters are sorely harried, and the Bossonians arch their arrows to drop amid the rear ranks. Their center gains not a foot, and their wings are pushed back up from the stream again."

"Crom, Ymir, and Mitra!" raged Conan. "Gods and devils, could I but reach the fighting, if but to die at the first blow!"

Outside through the long hot day the battle stormed and thundered. The valley shook to charge and counter-charge, to the whistling of shafts, and the crash of rending shields and splintering lances. But the hosts of Aquilonia held fast. Once they were forced back from the bank, but a counter-charge, with the black banner flowing over the black stallion, regained the lost ground. And like an iron rampart they held the right bank of the stream, and at last the squire gave Conan the news that the Nemedians were falling back from the river.

"Their wings are in confusion!" he cried. "Their knights reel back from the sword-play. But what is this? Your banner is in motion-the center sweeps into the stream! By Mitra, Valannus is leading the host across the river!"

"Fool!" groaned Conan. "It may be a trick. He should hold his position; by dawn Prospero will be here with the Poitanian levies."

"The knights ride into a hail of arrows!" cried the squire. "But they do not falter! They sweep on-they have crossed! They charge up the slope! Pallantides has hurled the wings across the river to their support! It is all he can do. The lion banner dips and staggers above the melee.

"The knights of Nemedia make a stand. They are broken! They fall back! Their left wing is in full flight, and our pikemen cut them down as they run! I see Valannus, riding and smiting like a madman. He is carried beyond himself by the fighting-lust. Men no longer look to Pallantides. They follow Valannus, deeming him Conan, as he rides with closed vizor.

"But look! There is method in his madness! He swings wide of the Nemedian front, with five thousand knights, the pick of the army. The main host of the Nemedians is in confusion-and look! Their flank is protected by the cliffs, but there is a defile left unguarded! It is like a great cleft in the wall that opens again behind the Nemedian lines. By Mitra, Valannus sees and seizes the opportunity! He has driven their wing before him, and he leads his knights toward that defile. They swing wide of the main battle; they cut through a line of spearmen, they charge into the defile!"

"An ambush!" cried Conan, striving to struggle upright.

"No!" shouted the squire exultantly. "The whole Nemedian host is in full sight! They have forgotten the defile! They never expected to be pushed back that far. Oh, fool, fool, Tarascus, to make such a blunder! Ah, I see lances and pennons pouring from the farther mouth of the defile, beyond the Nemedian lines. They will smite those ranks from the rear and crumple them. Mitra, what is this?"

He staggered as the walls of the tent swayed drunkenly. Afar over the thunder of the fight rose a deep bellowing roar, indescribably ominous.

"The cliffs reel!" shrieked the squire. "Ah, gods, what is this? The river foams out of its channel, and the peaks are crumbling!"

"The ground shakes and horses and riders in armor are overthrown! The cliffs! The cliffs are falling!"

With his words there came a grinding rumble and a thunderous concussion, and the ground trembled. Over the roar of the battle sounded screams of mad terror.

"The cliffs have crumbled!" cried the livid squire. "They have thundered down into the defile and crushed every living creature in it! I saw the lion banner wave an instant amid the dust and falling stones, and then it vanished! Ha, the Nemedians shout with triumph! Well may they shout, for the fall of the cliffs has wiped out five thousand of our bravest knights-hark!"

To Conan's ears came a vast torrent of sound, rising and rising in frenzy: "The king is dead! The king is dead! Flee! Flee! The king is dead!"

"Liars!" panted Conan. "Dogs! Knaves! Cowards! Oh, Crom, if I could but stand-but crawl to the river with my sword in my teeth! How, boy, do they flee?"

"Aye!" sobbed the squire. "They spur for the river; they are broken, hurled on like spume before a storm. I see Pallantides striving to stem the torrent-he is down, and the horses trample him! They rush into the river, knights, bowmen, pikemen, all mixed and mingled in one mad torrent of destruction. The Nemedians are on their heels, cutting them down like corn."

"But they will make a stand on this side of the river!" cried the king. With an effort that brought the sweat dripping from his temples, he heaved himself up on his elbows.

"Nay!" cried the squire. "They cannot! They are broken! Routed! Oh gods, that I should live to see this day!"

Then he remembered his duty and shouted to the men-at-arms who stood stolidly watching the flight of their comrades. "Get a horse, swiftly, and help me lift the king upon it. We dare not bide here."

But before they could do his bidding, the first drift of the storm was upon them. Knights and spearmen and archers fled among the tents, stumbling over ropes and baggage, and mingled with them were Nemedian riders, who smote right and left at all alien figures. Tent-ropes were cut, fire sprang up in a hundred places, and the plundering had already begun. The grim guardsmen about Conan's tent died where they stood, smiting and thrusting, and over their mangled corpses beat the hoofs of the conquerors.

But the squire had drawn the flap close, and in the confused madness of the slaughter none realized that the pavilion held an occupant. So the flight and the pursuit swept past, and roared away up the valley, and the squire looked out presently to see a cluster of men approaching the royal tent with evident purpose.

"Here comes the king of Nemedia with four companions and his squire," quoth he. "He will accept your surrender, my fair lord--"

"Surrender the devil's heart!" gritted the king.

He had forced himself up to a sitting posture. He swung his legs painfully off the dais, and staggered upright, reeling drunkenly. The squire ran to assist him, but Conan pushed him away.

"Give me that bow!" he gritted, indicating a longbow and quiver that hung from a tent-pole.

"But Your Majesty!" cried the squire in great perturbation. "The battle is lost! It were the part of majesty to yield with the dignity becoming one of royal blood!"

"I have no royal blood," ground Conan. "I am a barbarian and the son of a blacksmith."

Wrenching away the bow and an arrow he staggered toward the opening of the pavilion. So formidable was his appearance, naked but for short leather breeks and sleeveless shirt, open to reveal his great, hairy chest, with his huge limbs and his blue eyes blazing under his tangled black mane, that the squire shrank back, more afraid of his king than of the whole Nemedian host.

Reeling on wide-braced legs Conan drunkenly tore the door-flap open and staggered out under the canopy. The king of Nemedia and his companions had dismounted, and they halted short, staring in wonder at the apparition confronting them.

"Here I am, you jackals!" roared the Cimmerian. "I am the king! Death to you, dog-brothers!"

He jerked the arrow to its head and loosed, and the shaft feathered itself in the breast of the knight who stood beside Tarascus. Conan hurled the bow at the king of Nemedia.

"Curse my shaky hand! Come in and take me if you dare!"

Reeling backward on unsteady legs, he fell with his shoulders against a tent-pole, and propped upright, he lifted his great sword with both hands.

"By Mitra, it is the king!" swore Tarascus. He cast a swift look about him, and laughed. "That other was a jackal in his harness! In, dogs, and take his head!"

The three soldiers-men-at-arms wearing the emblem of the royal guards- rushed at the king, and one felled the squire with a blow of a mace. The other two fared less well. As the fast rushed in, lifting his sword, Conan met him with a sweeping stroke that severed mail-links like cloth, and sheared the Nemedian's arm and shoulder clean from his body. His corpse, pitching backward, fell across his companion's legs. The man stumbled, and before he could recover, the great sword was through him.

Conan wrenched out his steel with a racking gasp, and staggered back against the tent-pole. His great limbs trembled, his chest heaved, and sweat poured down his face and neck. But his eyes flamed with exultant savagery and he panted: "Why do you stand afar off, dog of Belverus? I can't reach you; come in and die!" Tarascus hesitated, glanced at the remaining man-at-arms, and his squire, a gaunt, saturnine man in black mail, and took a step forward. He was far inferior in size and strength to the giant Cimmerian, but he was in full armor, and was famed in all the western nations as a swordsman. But his squire caught his arm.

"Nay, Your Majesty, do not throw away your life. I will summon archers to shoot this barbarian, as we shoot lions."

Neither of them had noticed that a chariot had approached while the fight was going on, and now came to a halt before them. But Conan saw, looking over their shoulders, and a queer chill sensation crawled along his spine. There was something vaguely unnatural about the appearance of the black horses that drew the vehicle, but it was the occupant of the chariot that arrested the king's attention.

He was a tall man, superbly built, clad in a long unadorned silk robe. He wore a Shemitish head-dress, and its lower folds hid his features, except for the dark, magnetic eyes. The hands that grasped the reins, pulling the rearing horses back on their haunches, were white but strong. Conan glared at the stranger, all his primitive instincts roused. He sensed an aura of menace and power that exuded from this veiled figure, a menace as definite as the windless waving of tall grass that marks the path of the serpent.

"Hail, Xaltotun!" exclaimed Tarascus. "Here is the king of Aquilonia! He did not die in the landslide as we thought."

"I know," answered the other, without bothering to say how he knew. "What is your present intention?"

"I will summon the archers to slay him," answered the Nemedian. "As long as he lives he will be dangerous to us."

"Yet even a dog has uses," answered Xaltotun. "Take turn alive."

Conan laughed raspingly. "Come in and try!" he challenged. "But for my treacherous legs I'd hew you out of that chariot like a woodman hewing a tree. But you'll never take me alive, damn you!"

"He speaks the truth, I fear," said Tarascus. "The man is a barbarian, with the senseless ferocity of a wounded tiger. Let me summon the archers."

"Watch me and learn wisdom," advised Xaltotun.

His hand dipped into his robe and came out with something shining-a glistening sphere. This he threw suddenly at Conan. The Cimmerian contemptuously struck it aside with his sword-at the instant of contact there was a sharp explosion, a flare of white, blinding flame, and Conan pitched senseless to the ground.

"He is dead?" Tarascus's tone was more assertion than inquiry.

"No. He is but senseless. He will recover his senses in a few hours. Bid your men bind his arms and legs and lift him into my chariot."

With a gesture Tarascus did so, and they heaved the senseless king into the chariot, grunting with their burden. Xaltotun threw a velvet cloak over his body, completely covering him from any who might peer in. He gathered the reins in his hands.

"I'm for Belverus," he said. "Tell Amalric that I will be with him if he needs me. But with Conan out of the way, and his army broken, lance and sword should suffice for the rest of the conquest. Prospero cannot be bringing more than ten thousand men to the field, and will doubtless fall back to Tarantia when he hears the news of the battle. Say nothing to Amalric or Valerius or anyone about our capture. Let them think Conan died in the fall of the cliffs."

He looked at the man-at-arms for a long space, until the guardsman moved restlessly, nervous under the scrutiny.

"What is that about your waist?" Xaltotun demanded.

"Why, my girdle, may it please you, my lord!" stuttered the amazed guardsman.

"You lie!" Xaltotun's laugh was merciless as a sword-edge. "It is a poisonous serpent! What a fool you are, to wear a reptile about your waist!"

With distended eyes the man looked down; and to his utter horror he saw the buckle of his girdle rear up at him. It was a snake's head! He saw the evil eyes and the dripping fangs, heard the hiss and felt the loathsome contact of the thing about his body. He screamed hideously and struck at it with his naked hand, felt its fangs flesh themselves in that hand-and then he stiffened and fell heavily. Tarascus looked down at him without expression. He saw only the leathern girdle and the buckle, the pointed tongue of which was stuck in the guardsman's palm. Xaltotun turned his hypnotic gaze on Tarascus's squire, and the man turned ashen and began to tremble, but the king interposed: "Nay, we can trust him."

The sorcerer tautened the reins and swung the horses around. "See that this piece of work remains secret. If I am needed, let Altaro, Orastes' servant, summon me as I have taught him. I will be in your palace at Belverus."

Tarascus lifted his hand in salutation, but his expression was not pleasant to see as he looked after the departing mesmerist.

"Why should he spare the Cimmerian?" whispered the frightened squire.

"That I am wondering myself," grunted Tarascus. Behind the rumbling chariot the dull roar of battle and pursuit faded in the distance; the setting sun rimmed the dins with scarlet flame, and the chariot moved into the vast blue shadows floating up out of the east.

Chapter 4

: "From What Hell Have You Crawled?"

OF THAT LONG ride in the chariot of Xaltotun, Conan knew nothing. He lay like a dead man while the bronze wheels clashed over the stones of mountain roads and swished through the deep grass of fertile valleys, and finally dropping down from the rugged heights, rumbled rhythmically along the broad white road that winds through the rich meadowlands to the walls of Belverus.

Just before dawn some faint reviving of life touched him. He heard a mumble of voices, the groan of ponderous hinges. Through a slit in the cloak that covered him he saw, faintly in the lurid glare of torches, the great black arch of a gateway, and the bearded faces of men-at- arms, the torches striking fire from their spearheads and helmets.

"How went the battle, my fair lord?" spoke an eager voice, in the Nemedian tongue.

"Well indeed," was the curt reply. "The king of Aquilonia lies slain and his host is broken."

A babble of excited voices rose, drowned the next instant by the whirling wheels of the chariot on the flags. Sparks flashed from under the revolving rims as Xaltotun lashed his steeds through the arch. But Conan heard one of the guardsmen mutter: "From beyond the border to Belverus between sunset and dawn! And the horses scarcely sweating! By Mitra, they--" Then silence drank the voices, and there was only the clatter of hoofs and wheels along the shadowy street.

What he had heard registered itself on Conan's brain but suggested nothing to him. He was like a mindless automaton that hears and sees, but does not understand. Sights and sounds flowed meaninglessly about him. He lapsed again into a deep lethargy, and was only dimly aware when the chariot halted in a deep, high-walled court, and he was lifted from it by many hands and borne up a winding stone stair, and down a long dim corridor. Whispers, stealthy footsteps, unrelated sounds surged or rustled about him, irrelevant and far away.

Yet his ultimate awakening was abrupt and crystal-clear. He possessed full knowledge of the battle in the mountains and its sequences, and he had a good idea of where he was.

He lay on a velvet couch, clad as he was the day before, but With his limbs loaded with chains not even he could break. The room in which he lay was furnished with somber magnificence, the walls covered with black velvet tapestries, the floor with heavy purple carpets. There was no sign of door or window, and one curiously carven gold lamp, swinging from the fretted ceiling, shed a lurid light over all.

In that light the figure seated in a silver, throne-like chair before him seemed unreal and fantastic, with an illusiveness of outline that was heightened by a filmy silken robe. But the features were distinct- unnaturally so in that uncertain light. It was almost as if a weird nimbus played about the man's head, casting the bearded face into bold relief, so that it was the only definite and distinct reality in that mystic, ghostly chamber.

It was a magnificent face, with strongly chiseled features of classical beauty. There was, indeed, something disquieting about the calm tranquility of its aspect, a suggestion of more than human knowledge, of a profound certitude beyond human assurance. Also an uneasy sensation of familiarity twitched at the back of Oman's consciousness. He had never seen this man's face before, he well knew; yet those features reminded him of something or someone. It was like encountering in the flesh some dream-image that had haunted one in nightmares.

"Who are you?" demanded the king belligerently, struggling to a sitting position in spite of his chains.

"Men call me Xaltotun," was the reply, in a strong, golden voice.

"What place is this?" the Cimmerian next demanded.

"A chamber in the palace of King Tarascus, in Belverus."

Conan was not surprized. Belverus, the capital, was at the same time the largest Nemedian city so near the border.

"And where's Tarascus?"

"With the army."

"Well," growled Conan, "if you mean to murder me, why don't you do it and get it over with?"

"I did not save you from the king's archers to murder you in Belverus," answered Xaltotun.

"What the devil did you do to me?" demanded Conan.

"I blasted your consciousness," answered Xaltotun. "How, you would not understand. Call it black magic, if you will."

Conan had already reached that conclusion, and was mulling over something else.

"I think I understand why you spared my life," he rumbled. "Amalric wants to keep me as a check on Valerius, in case the impossible happens and he becomes king of Aquilonia. It's well known that the baron of Tor is behind this move to seat Valerius on my throne. And if I know Amalric, he doesn't intend that Valerius shall be anything more than a figurehead, as Tarascus is now."

"Amalric knows nothing of your capture," answered Xaltotun. "Neither does Valerius. Both think you died at Valkia."

Conan's eyes narrowed as he stared at the man in silence.

"I sensed a brain behind all this," he muttered, "but I thought it was Amalric's. Are Amalric, Tarascus and Valerius all but puppets dancing on your string? Who are you?"

"What does it matter? If I told you, you would not believe me. What if I told you I might set you back on the throne of Aquilonia?"

Conan's eyes burned on him like a wolf.

"What's your price?"

"Obedience to me."

"Go to hell with your offer!" snarled Conan. "I'm no figurehead. I won my crown with my sword. Besides, it's beyond your power to buy and sell the throne of Aquilonia at your will. The kingdom's not conquered; one battle doesn't decide a war."

"You war against more than swords," answered Xaltotun. "Was it a mortal's sword that felled you in your tent before the fight? Nay, it was a child of the dark, a waif of outer space, whose fingers were afire with the frozen coldness of the black gulfs, which froze the blood in your veins and the marrow of your thews. Coldness so cold it burned your flesh like white-hot iron!"

"Was it chance that led the man who wore your harness to lead his knights into the defile?-chance that brought the cliffs crashing down upon them?"

Conan glared at him unspeaking, feeling a chill along his spine. Wizards and sorcerers abounded in his barbaric mythology, and any fool could tell that this was no common man. Conan sensed an inexplicable something about him that set him apart-an alien aura of Time and Space, a sense of tremendous and sinister antiquity. But his stubborn spirit refused to flinch.

"The fall of the cliffs was chance," he muttered truculently. "The charge into the defile was what any man would have done."

"Not so. You would not have led a charge into it. You would have suspected a trap. You would never have crossed the river in the first place, until you were sure the Nemedian rout was real. Hypnotic suggestions would not have invaded your mind, even in the madness of battle, to make you mad, and rush blindly into the trap laid for you, as it did the lesser man who masqueraded as you."

"Then if this was all planned," Conan grunted skeptically, "all a plot to trap my host, why did not the 'child of darkness' kill me in my tent?"

"Because I wished to take you alive. It took no wizardry to predict that Pallantides would send another man out in your harness. I wanted you alive and unhurt. You may fit into my scheme of things. There is a vital power about you greater than the craft and cunning of my allies. You are a bad enemy, but might make a fine vassal."

Conan spat savagely at the word, and Xaltotun, ignoring his fury, took a crystal globe from a near-by table and placed it before him. He did not support it in any way, nor place it on anything, but it hung motionless in midair, as solidly as if it rested on an iron pedestal. Conan snorted at this bit of necromancy, but he was nevertheless impressed.

"Would you know of what goes on in Aquilonia?" he asked.

Conan did not reply, but the sudden rigidity of his form betrayed his interest.

Xaltotun stared into the cloudy depths, and spoke: "It is now the evening of the day after the battle of Vallda. Last night the main body of the army camped by Valkia, while squadrons of knights harried the fleeing Aquilonians. At dawn the host broke camp and pushed westward through the mountains. Prospero, with ten thousand Poitanians, was miles from the battlefield when he met the fleeing survivors in the early dawn. He had pushed on all night, hoping to reach the field before the battle joined. Unable to rally the remnants of the broken host, he fell back toward Tarantia. Riding hard, replacing his wearied horses with steeds seized from the countryside, he approaches Tarantia.

"I see his weary knights, their armor gray with dust, their pennons drooping as they push their tired horses through the plain. I see, also, the streets of Tarantia. The city is in turmoil. Somehow word has reached the people of the defeat and the death of King Conan. The mob is mad with fear, crying out that the king is dead, and there is none to lead them against the Nemedians. Giant shadows rush on Aquilonia from the east, and the sky is black with vultures."

Conan cursed deeply.

"What are these but words? The raggedest beggar in the street might prophesy as much. If you say you saw all that in the glass ball, then you're a liar as well as a knave, of which last there's no doubt! Prospero will hold Tarantia, and the barons will rally to him. Count Trocero of Poitain commands the kingdom in my absence, and he'll drive these Nemedian dogs howling back to their kennels. What are fifty thousand Nemedians? Aquilonia will swallow them up. They'll never see Belverus again. It's not Aquilonia which was conquered at Valkia; it was only Conan."

"Aquilonia is doomed," answered Xaltotun, unmoved. "Lance and ax and torch shall conquer her; or if they fail, powers from the dark of ages shall march against her. As the cliffs fell at Valkia, so shall walled cities and mountains fall, if the need arise, and rivers roar from their channels to drown whole provinces.

"Better if steel and bowstring prevail without further aid from the arts, for the constant use of mighty spells sometimes sets forces in motion that might rock the universe."

"From what hell have you crawled, you nighted dog?" muttered Conan, staring at the man. The Cimmerian involuntarily shivered; he sensed something incredibly ancient, incredibly evil.

Xaltotun lifted his head, as if listening to whispers across the void. He seemed to have forgotten his prisoner. Then he shook his head impatiently, and glanced impersonally at Conan.

"What? Why, if I told you, you would not believe me. But I am wearied of conversation with you; it is less fatiguing to destroy a walled city than it is to frame my thoughts in words a brainless barbarian can understand."

"If my hands were free," opined Conan, "I'd soon make a brainless corpse out of you."

"I do not doubt it, if I were fool enough to give you the opportunity," answered Xaltotun, clapping his hands. ',' His manner had changed; there was impatience in his tone, and a certain nervousness in his manner, though Conan did not think this attitude was in any way connected with himself.

"Consider what I have told you, barbarian," said Xaltotun.

"You will have plenty of leisure. I have not yet decided what I shall do with you. It depends on circumstances yet unborn. But let this be impressed upon you: that if I decide to use you in my game, it will be better to submit without resistance than to suffer my wrath." Conan spat a curse at him, just as hangings that masked a door swung apart and four giant negroes entered. Each was clad only in a silken breech- clout supported by a girdle, from which hung a great key.

Xaltotun gestured impatiently toward the king and turned away, as if dismissing the matter entirely from his mind. His fingers twitched queeriy. From a cavern green jade box he took a handful of shimmering black dust, and placed it in a brazier which stood on a golden tripod at his elbow. The crystal globe, which he seemed to have forgotten, fell suddenly to the floor, as if its invisible support had been removed.

Then the blacks had lifted Conan-for so loaded with chains was he that he could not walk-and carried him from the chamber. A glance back, before the heavy, gold-bound teak door was closed, showed him Xaltotun leaning back in his throne-like chair, his arms folded, while a thin wisp of smoke curled up from the brazier. Oman's scalp prickled. In Stygia, that ancient and evil kingdom that lay far to the south, he had seen such black dust before. It was the pollen of the black lotus, which creates death-like sleep and monstrous dreams; and he knew that only the grisly wizards of the Black Ring, which is the nadir of evil, voluntarily seek the scarlet nightmares of the black lotus, to revive their necromantic powers.

The Black Ring was a fable and a lie to most folk of the western world, but Conan knew of its ghastly reality, and its grim votaries who practise their abominable sorceries amid the black vaults of Stygia and the nighted domes of accursed Sabatea. He glanced back at the cryptic, gold-bound door, shuddering at what it hid.

Whether it was day or night the king could not tell. The palace of King Tarascus seemed a shadowy, nighted place, that shunned natural illumination. The spirit of darkness and shadow hovered over it, and that spirit, Conan felt, was embodied in the stranger Xaltotun. The negroes carried the king along a winding corridor so dimly lighted that they moved through it like black ghosts bearing a dead man, and down a stone stair that wound endlessly? A torch in the hand of one cast the great deformed shadows streaming along the wall; it was like the descent into hell of a corpse borne by dusky demons.

At last they reached the foot of the stair, and then they traversed a long straight corridor, with a blank wall on one hand pierced by an occasional arched doorway with a stair leading up behind it, and on the other hand another wall showing heavy barred doors at regular intervals of a few feet.

Halting before one of these doors, one of the blacks produced the key that hung at his girdle, and turned it in the lock. Then, pushing open the grille, they entered with their captive. They were in a small dungeon with heavy stone walls, floor and ceiling, and in the opposite wall there was another grilled door. What lay beyond that door Conan could not tell, but he did not believe it was another corridor. The glimmering light of the torch, flickering through the bars, hinted at shadowy spaciousness and echoing depths.

In one corner of the dungeon, near the door through which they had entered, a cluster of rusty chains hung from a great iron ring set in the stone. In these chains a skeleton dangled. Conan glared at it with some curiosity, noticing the state of the bare bones, most of which were splintered and broken; the skull which had fallen from the vertebrae, was crushed as if by some savage blow of tremendous force.

Stolidly one of the blacks, not the one who had opened the door, removed the chains from the ring, using his key on the massive lock, and dragged the mass of rusty metal and shattered bones over to one side. Then they fastened Conan's chains to that ring, and the third black turned his key in the lock of the farther door, grunting when he had assured himself that it was properly fastened.

Then they regarded Conan cryptically, slit-eyed ebony giants, the torch striking highlights from their glossy skin.

He who held the key to the nearer door was moved to remark, gutturally: "This your palace now, white dog-king! None but master and we know. All palace sleep. We keep secret. You live and die here, maybe. Like him!" He contemptuously kicked the shattered skull and sent it clattering across the stone floor.

Conan did not deign to reply to the taunt and the black, galled perhaps by his prisoner's silence, muttered a curse, stooped and spat full in the king's face. It was an unfortunate move for the black. Conan was seated on the floor, the chains about his waist; ankles and wrists locked to the ring in the wall. He could neither rise, nor move more than a yard out from the wall. But there was considerable slack in the chains that shackled his wrists, and before the bullet-shaped head could be withdrawn out of reach, the king gathered this slack in his mighty hand and smote the black on the head. The man fell like a butchered ox and his comrades stared to see him lying with his scalp laid open, and blood oozing from his nose and ears.

But they attempted no reprisal, nor did they accept Conan's urgent invitation to approach within reach of the bloody chain in his hand. Presently, grunting in their ape-like speech, they lifted the senseless black and bore him out like a sack of wheat, arms and legs dangling. They used his key to lock the door behind them, but did not remove it from the gold chain that fastened it to his girdle. They took the torch with them, and as they moved up the corridor the darkness slunk behind them like an animate thing. Their soft padding footsteps died away, with the glimmer of their torch, and darkness and silence remained unchallenged.

Chapter 5

: The Haunter of the Pits

CONAN LAY STILL, enduring the weight of his chains and the despair of his position with the stoicism of the wilds that had bred him. He did not move, because the jangle of his chains, when he shifted his body, sounded startlingly loud in the darkness and stillness, and it was his instinct, born of a thousand wilderness-bred ancestors, not to betray his position in his helplessness. This did not result from a logical reasoning process; he did not lie quiet because he reasoned that the darkness hid lurking dangers that might discover him in his helplessness. Xaltotun had assured him that he was not to be harmed, and Conan believed that it was in the man's interest to preserve him, at least for the time being. But the instincts of the wild were there, that had caused him in his childhood to lie hidden and silent while wild beasts prowled about his covert.

Even his keen eyes could not pierce the solid darkness. Yet aftera while, after a period of time he had no way of estimating, a faint glow became apparent, a sort of slanting gray beam, by which Conan could see, vaguely, the bars of the door at his elbow, and even make out the skeleton of the other grille. This puzzled him, until at last he realized the explanation. He was far below ground, in the pits below the palace; yet for some reason a shaft had been constructed from somewhere above. Outside, the moon had risen to a point where its light slanted dimly down the shaft. He reflected that in this manner he could tell the passing of the days and nights. Perhaps the sun, too, would shine down that shaft, though on the other hand it might be closed by day. Perhaps it was a subtle method of torture, allowing a prisoner but a glimpse of daylight or moonlight.

His gaze fell on the broken bones in the farther comer, glimmering dimly. He did not tax his brain with futile speculation as to who the wretch had been and for what reason he had been doomed, but he wondered at the shattered condition of the bones. They had not been broken on a rack. Then, as he looked, another unsavory detail made itself evident. The shin-bones were split lengthwise, and there was but one explanation; they had been broken in that manner in order to obtain the marrow. Yet what creature but man breaks bones for their marrow? Perhaps those remnants were mute evidence of a horrible, cannibalistic feast, of some wretch driven to madness by starvation. Conan wondered if his own bones would be found at some future date, hanging in their rusty chains. He fought down the unreasoning panic of a trapped wolf.

The Cimmerian did not curse, scream, weep or rave as a civilized man might have done. But the pain and turmoil in his bosom were none the less fierce. His great limbs quivered with the intensity of his emotions. Somewhere, far to the westward, the Nemedian host was slashing and burning its way through the heart of his kingdom. The small host of Poitanians could not stand before them. Prospero might be able to hold Tarantia for weeks, or months; but eventually, if not relieved, he must surrender to greater numbers. Surely the barons would rally to him against the invaders. But in the meanwhile he, Conan, must lie helpless in a darkened cell, while others led his spears and fought for his kingdom. The king ground his powerful teeth in red rage.

Then he stiffened as outside the farther door he heard a stealthy step. Straining his eyes he made out a bent, indistinct figure outside the grille. There was a rasp of metal against metal, and he heard the clink of tumblers, as if a key had been turned in the lock. Then the figure moved silently out of his range of vision. Some guard, he supposed, trying the lock. After a while he heard the sound repeated faintly somewhere farther on, and that was followed by the soft opening of a door, and then a swift scurry of softly shod feet retreated in the distance. Then silence fell again.

Conan listened for what seemed a long time, but which could not have been, for the moon still shone down the hidden shaft, but he heard no further sound. He shifted his position at last, and his chains clanked. Then he heard another, lighter footfall-a soft step outside the nearer door, the door though which he had entered the cell. An instant later a slender figure was etched dimly in the gray light.

"King Conan!" a soft voice intoned urgently. "Oh, my lord, are you there?"

"Where else?" he answered guardedly, twisting his head about to stare at the apparition.

It was a girl who stood grasping the bars with her slender fingers. The dim glow behind her outlined her supple figure through the wisp of silk twisted about her loins, and shone vaguely on jeweled breast- plates. Her dark eyes gleamed in the shadows, her white limbs glistened softly, like alabaster. Her hair was a mass of dark foam, at the burnished luster of which the dim light only hinted.

"The keys to your shackles and to the farther door!" she whispered, and a slim White hand came through the bars and dropped three objects with a clink to the flags beside him.

"What game is this?" he demanded. "You speak in the Nemedian tongue, and I have no friends in Nemedia. What deviltry is your master up to now? Has he sent you here to mock me?"

"It is no mockery!" The girl was trembling violently. Her bracelets and breast-plates clinked against the bars she grasped. "I swear by Mitra! I stole the keys from the black jailers. They are the keepers of the pits, and each bears a key which will open only one set of locks. I made them drunk. The one whose head you broke was carried away to a leech, and I could not get his key. But the others I stole. Oh, please do not loiter! Beyond these dungeons lie the pits which are the doors to hell."

Somewhat impressed, Conan tried the keys dubiously, expecting to meet only failure and a burst of mocking laughter. But he was galvanized to discover that one, indeed, loosed him of his shackles, fitting not only the lock that held them to the ring, but the locks on his limbs as well. A few seconds later he stood upright, exulting fiercely in his comparative freedom. A quick stride carried him to the grille, and his fingers closed about a bar and the slender wrist that was pressed against it, imprisoning the owner, who lifted her face bravely to his fierce gaze.

"Who are you, girl?" he demanded. "Why do you do this?"

"I am only Zenobia," she murmured, with a catch of breathlessness, as if in fright; "only a girl of the king's seraglio."

"Unless this is some cursed trick," muttered Conan, "I cannot see why you bring me these keys."

She bowed her dark head, and then lifted it and looked full into his suspicious eyes. Tears sparkled like jewels on her long dark lashes.

"I am only a girl of the king's seraglio," she said, with a certain humility. "He has never glanced at me, and probably never will. I am less than one of the dogs that gnaw the bones in his banquet hall.

"But I am no painted toy; I am of flesh and blood. I breathe, hate, fear, rejoice and love. And I have loved you. King Conan, ever since I saw you riding at the head of your knights along the streets of Belverus when you visited King Nimed, years ago. My heart tugged at its strings to leap from my bosom and fall in the dust of the street under your horse's hoofs."

Color flooded her countenance as she spoke, but her dark eyes did not waver. Conan did not at once reply; wild and passionate and untamed he was, yet any but the most brutish of men must be touched with a certain awe or wonder at the baring of a woman's naked soul.

She bent her head then, and pressed her red lips to the fingers that imprisoned her slim wrist. Then she flung up her head as if in sudden recollection of their position, and terror flared in her dark eyes. "Haste!" she whispered urgently. "It is past midnight. You must be gone."

"But won't they skin you alive for stealing these keys?"

"They'll never know. If the black men remember in the morning who gave them the wine, they will not dare admit the keys were stolen from them while they were drunk. The key that I could not obtain is the one that unlocks this door. You must make your way to freedom through the pits. What awful perils lurk beyond that door I cannot even guess. But greater danger lurks for you if you remain in this cell.

"King Tarascus has returned--"

"What? Tarascus?"

"Aye! He has returned, in great secrecy, and not long ago he descended into the pits and then came out again, pale and shaking, like a man who had dared a great hazard. I heard him whisper to his squire, Arideus, that despite Xaltotun you should die."

"What of Xaltotun?" murmured Conan. He felt her shudder.

"Do not speak of him!" she whispered. "Demons are often summoned by the sound of their names. The slaves say that he lies in his chamber, behind a bolted door, dreaming the dreams of the black lotus. I believe that even Tarascus secretly fears him, or he would slay you openly. But he has been in the pits tonight, and what he did here, only Mitra knows."

"I wonder if that could have been Tarascus who fumbled at my cell door awhile ago?" muttered Conan.

"Here is a dagger!" she whispered, pressing something through the bars. His eager fingers closed on an object familiar to their touch. "Go quickly through yonder door, turn to the left and make your way along the cells until you come to a stone stair. On your life do not stray from the line of the cells! Climb the stair and open the door at the top; one of the keys will fit it. If it be the will of Mitra, I will await you there." Then she was gone, with a patter of light slippered feet.

Conan shrugged his shoulders, and turned toward the farther grille. This might be some diabolical trap planned by Tarascus, but plunging headlong into a snare was less abhorrent to Conan's temperament than sitting meekly to await his doom. He inspected the weapon the girl had given him, and smiled grimly. Whatever else she might be, she was proven by that dagger to be a person of practical intelligence. It was no slender stiletto, selected because of a jeweled hilt or gold guard, fitted only for dainty murder in milady's boudoir; it was a forthright poniard, a warrior's weapon, broad-bladed, fifteen inches in length, tapering to a diamond-sharp point.

He grunted with satisfaction. The feel of the hilt cheered him and gave him a glow of confidence. Whatever webs of conspiracy were drawn about him, whatever trickery and treachery ensnared him, this knife was real. The great muscles of his right arm swelled in anticipation of murderous blows.

He tried the farther door, rumbling with the keys as he did so. It was not locked. Yet he remembered the black man locking it. That furtive, bent figure, then, had been no jailer seeing that the bolts were in place. He had unlocked the door, instead. There was a sinister suggestion about that unlocked door. But Conan did not hesitate. He pushed open the grille and stepped from the dungeon into the outer darkness.

As he had thought, the door did not open into another corridor. The flagged floor stretched away under his feet, and the line of cells ran away to right and left behind him, but he could not make out the other limits of the place into which he had come. He could see neither the roof nor any other wall. The moonlight filtered into that vastness only through the grilles of the cells, and was almost lost in the darkness. Less keen eyes than his could scarcely have discerned the dim gray patches that floated before each cell door.

Turning to the left, he moved swiftly and noiselessly along the line of dungeons, his bare feet making no sound on the flags. He glanced briefly into each dungeon as he passed it. They were all empty, but locked. In some he caught the glimmer of naked white bones. These pits were a relic of a grimmer age, constructed long ago when Belverus was a fortress rather than a city. But evidently their more recent use had been more extensive than the world guessed.

Ahead of him, presently, he saw the dim outline of a stair sloping sharply upward, and knew it must be the stair he sought. Then he whirled suddenly, crouching in the deep shadows at its foot.

Somewhere behind him something was moving-something bulky and stealthy that padded on feet which were not human feet. He was looking down the long row of cells, before each one of which lay a square of dim gray light that was little more than a patch of less dense darkness. But he saw something moving along these squares. What it was he could not tell, but it was heavy and huge, and yet it moved with more than human ease and swiftness. He glimpsed it as it moved across the squares of gray, then lost it as it merged in the expanses of shadow between. It was uncanny, in its stealthy advance, appearing and disappearing like a blur of the vision.

He heard the bars rattle as it tried each door in turn. Now it had reached the cell he had so recently quitted, and the door swung open as it tugged. He saw a great bulky shape limned faintly and briefly in the gray doorway, and then the thing had vanished into the dungeon. Sweat beaded Conan's face and hands. Now he knew why Tarascus had come so subtly to his door, and later had fled so swiftly. The king had unlocked his door, and, somewhere in these hellish pits, had opened a cell or cage that held some grim monstrosity.

Now the thing was emerging from the cell and was again advancing up the corridor, its misshapen head close to the ground. It paid no more heed to the locked doors. It was smelling out his trail. He saw it more plainly now; the gray light limned a giant anthropomorphic body, but vaster of bulk and girth than any man. It went on two legs, though it stooped forward, and it was grayish and shaggy, its thick coat shot with silver. Its head was a grisly travesty of the human, its long arms hung nearly to the ground.

Conan knew it at last-understood the meaning of those crushed and broken bones in the dungeon, and recognized the haunter of the pits. It was a gray ape, one of the grisly man-eaters from the forests that wave on the mountainous eastern shores of the Sea of Vilayet. Half mythical and altogether horrible, these apes were the goblins of Hyborian legendry, and were in reality ogres of the natural world, cannibals and murderers of the nighted forests.

He knew it scented his presence, for it was coming swiftly now, rolling its barrel-like body rapidly along on its short, mighty bowed legs. He cast a quick glance up the long stair, but knew that the thing would be on his back before he could mount to the distant door. He chose to meet it face to face.

Conan stepped out into the nearest square of moonlight, so as to have all the advantage of illumination that he could; for the beast, he knew, could see better than himself in the dark. Instantly the brute saw him; its great yellow tusks gleamed in the shadows, but it made no sound. Creatures of night and the silence, the gray apes of Vilayet were voiceless. But in its dim, hideous features, which were a bestial travesty of a human face, showed ghastly exultation.

Conan stood poised, watching the oncoming monster without a quiver. He knew he must stake his life on one thrust; there would be no chance for another; nor would there be time to strike and spring away. The first blow must kill, and kill instantly, if he hoped to survive that awful grapple. He swept his gaze over the short, squat throat, the hairy swagbelly, and the mighty breast, swelling in giant arches like twin shields. It must be the heart; better to risk the blade being deflected by the heavy ribs than to strike in where a stroke was not instantly fatal. With full realization of the odds, Conan matched his speed of eye and hand and his muscular power against the brute might and ferocity of the man-eater. He must meet the brute breast to breast, strike a deathblow, and then trust to the ruggedness of his frame to survive the instant of manhandling that was certain to be his.

As the ape came rolling in on him, swinging wide its terrible arms, he plunged in between them and struck with all his desperate power. He felt the blade sink to the hilt in the hairy breast, and instantly, releasing it, he ducked his head and bunched his whole body into one compact mass of knotted muscles, and as he did so he grasped the closing arms and drove his knee fiercely into the monster's belly, bracing himself against that crushing grapple.

For one dizzy instant he felt as if he were being dismembered in the grip of an earthquake; then suddenly he was free, sprawling on the floor, and the monster was gasping out its life beneath him, its red eyes turned upward, the hilt of the poniard quivering in its breast. His desperate stab had gone home.

Conan was panting as if after long conflict, trembling in every limb. Some of his joints felt as if they had been dislocated, and blood dripped from scratches on his sidn where the monster's talons had ripped; his muscles and tendons had been savagely wrenched and twisted. If the beast had lived a second longer, it would surely have dismembered him. But the Cimmerian's mighty strength had resisted, for the fleeting instant it had endured, the dying convulsion of the ape that would have torn a lesser man limb from limb.

Chapter 6

: The Thrust of a Knife

CONAN STOOPED AND tore the knife from the monster's breast. Then he went swiftly up the stair. What other shapes of fear the darkness held he could not guess, but he had no desire to encounter any more. This touch-and-go sort of battling was too strenuous even for the giant Cimmerian. The moonlight was fading from the floor, the darkness closing in, and something like panic pursued him up the stair. He breathed a gusty sigh of relief when he reached the head, and felt the third key turn in the lock. He opened the door slightly, and craned his neck to peer through, half expecting an attack from some human or bestial enemy.

He looked into a bare stone corridor, dimly lighted, and a slender, supple figure stood before the door.

"Your Majesty!" It was a low, vibrant cry, half in relief and half in fear. The girl sprang to his side, then hesitated as if abashed.

"You bleed," she said. "You have been hurt!"

He brushed aside the implication with an impatient hand.

"Scratches that wouldn't hurt a baby. Your skewer came in handy, though. But for it Tarascus's monkey would be cracking my shin-bones for the marrow right now. But what now?"

"Follow me," she whispered. "I will lead you outside the city wall. I have a horse concealed there."

She turned to lead the way down the corridor, but he laid a heavy hand on her naked shoulder.

"Walk beside me," he instructed her softly, passing his massive arm about her lithe waist. "You've played me fair so far, and I'm inclined to believe in you; but I've lived this long only because I've trusted no one too far, man or woman. So! Now if you play me false you won't live to enjoy the jest."

She did not flinch at sight of the reddened poniard or the contact of his hard muscles about her supple body.

"Cut me down without mercy if I play you false," she answered. "The very feel of your arm about me, even in menace, is as the fulfillment of a dream."

The vaulted corridor ended at a door, which she opened. Outside lay another black man, a giant in turban and silk loincloth, with a curved sword lying on the flags near his band. He did not move.

"I drugged his wine," she whispered, swerving to avoid the recumbent figure. "He is the last, and outer, guard of the pits. None ever escaped from them before, and none has ever wished to seek them; so only these black men guard them. Only these of all the servants knew it was King Conan that Xaltotun brought a prisoner in his chariot. I was watching, sleepless, from an upper casement that opened into the court, while the other girls slept; for I knew that a battle was being fought, or had been fought, in the west, and I feared for you.

"I saw the blacks carry you up the stair, and I recognized you in the torchlight. I slipped into this wing of the palace tonight, in time to see them carry you to the pits. I had not dared come here before nightfall. You must have lain in drugged senselessness all day in Xaltotun's chamber.

"Oh, let us be wary! Strange things are afoot in the palace tonight. The slaves said that Xaltotun slept as he often sleeps, drugged by the lotus of Stygia, but Tarascus is in the palace. He entered secretly, through the postern, wrapped in his cloak which was dusty as with long travel, and attended only by his squire, the lean silent Arideus. I cannot understand, but I am afraid."

They came out at the foot of a narrow, winding stair, and mounting it, passed through a narrow panel which she slid aside. When they had passed through, she slipped it back in place, and it became merely a portion of the ornate wall. They were in a more spacious corridor, carpeted and tapestried, over which hanging lamps shed a golden glow.

Conan listened intently, but he heard no sound throughout the palace. He did not know in what part of the palace he was, or in which direction lay the chamber of Xaltotun. The girl was trembling as she drew him along the corridor, to halt presently beside an alcove masked with satin tapestry. Drawing this aside, she motioned for him to step into the niche, and whispered: "Wait here! Beyond that door at the end of the corridor we are likely to meet slaves or eunuchs at any time of the day or night. I will go and see if the way is clear, before we essay it." Instantly his hair-trigger suspicions were aroused. "Are you leading me into a trap?"

Tears sprang into her dark eyes. She sank to her knees and seized his muscular hand. "Oh, my king, do not mistrust me now!" Her voice shook with desperate urgency. "If you doubt and hesitate, we are lost! Why should I bring you up out of the pits to betray you now?"

"All right," he muttered. "I'll trust you; though, by Crom, the habits of a lifetime are not easily put aside. Yet I wouldn't harm you now, if you brought all the swordsmen in Nemedia upon me. But for you Tarascus's cursed ape would have come upon me in chains and unarmed. Do as you wish, girl."

Kissing his hands, she sprang lithely up and ran down the corridor, to vanish through a heavy double door.

He glanced after her, wondering if he was a fool to trust her; then he shrugged his mighty shoulders and pulled the satin hangings together, masking his refuge. It was not strange that a passionate young beauty should be risking her life to aid him; such things had happened often enough in his life. Many women had looked on him with favor, in the days of his wanderings, and in the time of his kingship.

Yet he did not remain motionless in the alcove, waiting for her return. Following his instincts, he explored the niche for another exit, and presently found one-the opening of a narrow passage, masked by the tapestries, that ran to an ornately carved door, barely visible in the dim light that filtered in from the outer corridor. And as he stared into it, somewhere beyond that carven door he heard the sound of another door opening and shutting, and then a low mumble of voices. The familiar sound of one of those voices caused a sinister expression to cross his dark face. Without hesitation he glided down the passage, and crouched like a stalking panther beside the door. It was not locked, and manipulating it delicately, he pushed it open a crack, with a reckless disregard for possible consequences that only he could have explained or defended.

It was masked on the other side by tapestries, but through a thin slit in the velvet he looked into a chamber lit by a candle on an ebony table. There were two men in that chamber. One was a scarred, sinister-looking ruffian in leather breeks and ragged cloak; the other was Tarascus, king of Nemedia.

Tarascus seemed ill at ease. He was slightly pale, and he kept starting and glancing about him, as if expecting and fearing to hear some sound or footstep.

"Go swiftly and at once," he was saying. "He is deep in drugged slumber, but I know not when he may awaken."

"Strange to hear words of fear issuing from the lips of Tarascus," rumbled the other in a harsh, deep voice.

The king frowned.

"I fear no common man, as you well know. But when I saw the cliffs fall at Valkia I knew that this devil we had resurrected was no charlatan. I fear his powers, because I do not know the full extent of them. But I know that somehow they are connected with this accursed thing which I have stolen from him. It brought him back to life; so it must be the source of his sorcery.

"He had it hidden well; but following my secret order a slave spied on him and saw him place it in a golden chest, and saw where he hid the chest. Even so, I would not have dared steal it had Xaltotun himself not been sunk in lotus slumber.

"I believe it is the secret of his power. With it Orastes brought him back to life. With it he will make us all slaves, if we are not wary. So take it and cast it into the sea as I have bidden you. And be sure you are so far from land that neither tide nor storm can wash it up on the beach. You have been paid."

"So I have," grunted the ruffian. "And I owe more than gold to you, king; I owe you a debt of gratitude. Even thieves can be grateful."

"Whatever debt you may feel you owe me," answered Tarascus, "will be paid when you have hurled this thing into the sea."

"I'll ride for Zingara and take ship from Kordava," promised the other. "I dare not show my head in Argos, because of the matter of a murder or so--"

"I care not, so it is done. Here it is; a horse awaits you in the court. Go, and go swiftly!"

Something passed between them, something that flamed like living fire. Conan had only a brief glimpse of it; and then the ruffian pulled a slouch hat over his eyes, drew his cloak about his shoulder, and hurried from the chamber. And as the door closed behind him, Conan moved with the devastating fury of unchained blood-lust. He had held himself in check as long as he could. The sight of his enemy so near him set his wild blood seething and swept away all caution and restraint.

Tarascus was turning toward an inner door when Conan tore aside the hangings and leaped like a blood-mad panther into the room. Tarascus wheeled, but even before he could recognize his attacker, Conan's poniard ripped into him.

But the blow was not mortal, as Conan knew the instant he struck. His foot had caught in a fold of the curtains and tripped him as he leaped. The point fleshed itself in Tarascus's shoulder and plowed down along his ribs, and the king of Nemedia screamed.

The impact of the blow and Conan's lunging body hurled him back against the table and it toppled and the candle went out. They were both carried to the floor by the violence of Conan's rush, and the foot of the tapestry hampered them both in its folds. Conan was stabbing blindly in the dark, Tarascus screaming in a frenzy of panicky terror. As if fear lent him superhuman energy, Tarascus tore free and blundered away in the darkness, shrieking:

"Help! Guards! Arideus! Orastes! Orastes!"

Conan rose, kicking himself free of the tangling tapestries and the broken table, cursing with the bitterness of his blood-thirsty disappointment. He was confused, and ignorant of the plan of the palace. The yells of Tarascus were still resounding in the distance, and a wild outcry was bursting forth in answer. The Nemedian had escaped him in the darkness, and Conan did not know which way he had gone. The Cimmerian's rash stroke for vengeance had failed, and there remained only the task of saving his own hide if he could.

Swearing luridly, Conan ran back down the passage and into the alcove, glaring out into the lighted corridor, just as Zenobia came running up it, her dark eyes dilated with terror.

"Oh, what has happened?" she cried. "The palace is roused! I swear I have not betrayed you--"

"No, it was I who stirred up the hornet's nest," he grunted. "I tried to pay off a score. What's the shortest way out of this?"

She caught his wrist and ran fleetly down the corridor. But before they reached the heavy door at the other end, muffled shouts arose from behind it and the portals began to shake under an assault from the other side. Zenobia wrung her hands and whimpered.

"We are cut off! I locked that door as I returned through it. But they will burst it in in a moment. The way to the postern gate lies through it."

Conan wheeled. Up the corridor, though still out of sight, he heard a rising clamor that told him his foes were behind as well as before him-

"Quick! Into this door!" the girl cried desperately, running across the corridor and throwing open the door of a chamber.

Conan followed her through, and then threw the gold catch behind them. They stood in an ornately furnished chamber, empty but for themselves, and she drew him to a gold-barred window, through which he saw trees and shrubbery.

"You are strong," she panted. "If you can tear these bars away, you may yet escape. The garden is full of guards, but the shrubs are thick, and you may avoid them. The southern wall is also the outer wall of the city. Once over that, you have a chance to get away. A horse is hidden for you in a thicket beside the road that runs westward, a few hundred paces to the south of the fountain of Thrallos. You know where it is?"

"Aye! But what of you? I had meant to take you with me,"

A flood of joy lighted her beautiful face.

"Then my cup of happiness is brimming! But I will not hamper your escape. Burdened with me you would fail. Nay, do not fear for me. They will never suspect that I aided you willingly. Go! What you have just said will glorify my life throughout the long years."

He caught her up in his iron arms, crushed her slim, vibrant figure to him and kissed her fiercely on eyes, cheeks, throat and lips, until she lay panting in his embrace; gusty and tempestuous as a storm-wind, even his love-making was violent.

"I'll go," he muttered. "But by Crom, I'll come for you some day!"

Wheeling, he gripped the gold bars and tore them from their sockets with one tremendous wrench; threw a leg over the sill and went down swiftly, clinging to the ornaments on the wall. He hit the ground running and melted like a shadow into the maze of towering rosebushes and spreading trees. The one look he cast back over his shoulder showed him Zenobia leaning over the window-sill, her arms stretched after him in mute farewell and renunciation.

Guards were running through the garden, all converging toward the palace, where the clamor momentarily grew louder-tall men in burnished cuirasses and crested helmets of polished bronze. The starlight struck glints from their gleaming armor, among the trees, betraying their every movement; but the sound of their coming ran far before them. To Conan, wilderness-bred, their rush through the shrubbery was like the blundering stampede of cattle. Some of them passed within a few feet of where he lay flat in a thick cluster of bushes, and never guessed his presence. With the palace as their goal, they were oblivious to all else about them. When they had gone shouting on, he rose and fled through the garden with no more noise than a panther would have made.

So quickly he came to the southern wall, and mounted the steps that led to the parapet. The wall was made to keep people out, not in. No sentry patrolling the battlements was in sight. Crouching by an embrasure he glanced back at the great palace rearing above the cypresses behind him. Lights blazed from every window, and he could see figures flitting back and forth across them like puppets on invisible strings. He grinned hardly, shook his fist in a gesture of farewell and menace, and let himself over the outer rim of the parapet.

A low tree, a few yards below the parapet, received Conan's weight, as he dropped noiselessly into the branches. An instant later he was racing through the shadows with the swinging hill-man's stride that eats up long miles.

Gardens and pleasure villas surrounded the walls of Belverus. Drowsy slaves, sleeping by their watchman's pikes, did not see the swift and furtive figure that scaled walls, crossed alleys made by the arching branches of trees, and threaded a noiseless way through orchards and vineyards. Watch-dogs woke and lifted their deep-booming clamor at a gliding shadow, half scented, half sensed, and then it was gone.

In a chamber of the palace Tarascus writhed and cursed on a blood- spattered couch, under the deft, quick fingers of Orastes. The palace was thronged with wide-eyed, trembling servitors, but the chamber where the king lay was empty save for himself and the renegade priest.

"Are you sure he still sleeps?" Tarascus demanded again, setting his teeth against the bite of the herb juices with which Orastes was bandaging the long, ragged gash in his shoulder and ribs. "Ishtar, Mitra and Set! That bums like molten pitch of hell!"

"Which you would be experiencing even now, but for your good fortune," remarked Orastes. "Whoever wielded that knife struck to kill. Yes, I have told you that Xaltotun still sleeps. Why are you so urgent upon that point? What has he to do with this?"

"You know nothing of what has passed in the palace tonight?" Tarascus searched the priest's countenance with burning intensity.

"Nothing. As you know, I have been employed in translating manuscripts for Xaltotun, for some months now, transcribing esoteric volumes written in the younger languages into script he can read. He was well versed in all the tongues and scripts of his day, but he has not yet learned all the newer languages, and to save time he has me translate these works for him, to learn if any new knowledge has been discovered since his time. I did not know that he had returned last night until he sent for me and told me of the battle. Then I returned to my studies, nor did I know that you had returned until the clamor in the palace brought me out of my cell." "Then you do not know that Xaltotun brought the king of Aquilonia a captive to this palace?" Orastes shook his head, without particular surprize. "Xaltotun merely said that Conan would oppose us no more. I supposed that he had fallen, but did not ask the details."

"Xaltotun saved his life when I would have slain him," snarled Tarascus. "I saw his purpose instantly. He would hold Conan captive to use as a club against us-against Amalric, against Valerius, and against myself. So long as Conan lives he is a threat, a unifying factor for Aquilonia, that might be used to compel us into courses we would not otherwise follow. I mistrust this undead Pythonian. Of late I have begun to fear him.

"I followed him, some hours after he had departed eastward. I wished to learn what he intended doing with Conan. I found that he had imprisoned him in the pits. I intended to see that the barbarian died, in spite of Xaltotun. And I accomplished--" A cautious knock sounded at the door. "That's Arideus," grunted Tarascus. "Let him in." The saturnine squire entered, his eyes blazing with suppressed excitement. "How, Arideus?" exclaimed Tarascus. "Have you found the man who attacked me?"

"You did not see him, my lord?" asked Arideus, as one who would assure himself of a fact he already knows to exist. "You did not recognize him?"

"No. It happened so quick, and the candle was out-all I could think of was that it was some devil loosed on me by Xaltotun's magic--"

"The Pythonian sleeps in his barred and bolted room. But I have been in the pits." Arideus twitched his lean shoulders excitedly.

"Well, speak, man!" exclaimed Tarascus impatiently. "What did you find there?"

"An empty dungeon," whispered the squire. "The corpse of the great ape!"

"What?" Tarascus started upright, and blood gushed from his opened wound.

"Aye! The man-eater is dead-stabbed through the heart-and Conan is gone!"

Tarascus was gray of face as he mechanically allowed Orastes to force him prostrate again and the priest renewed work upon his mangled flesh.

"Conan!" he repeated. "Not a crushed corpse-escaped! Mitra! He is no man; but a devil himself! I thought Xaltotun was behind this wound. I see now. Gods and devils! It was Conan who stabbed me! Arideus!"

"Aye, your Majesty!"

"Search every nook in the palace. He may be skulking through the dark corridors now like a hungry tiger. Let no niche escape your scrutiny, and beware. It is not a civilized man you hunt, but a blood-mad barbarian whose strength and ferocity are those of a wild beast. Scour the palace-grounds and the city. Throw a cordon about the walls. If you find he has escaped from the city, as he may well do, take a troop of horsemen and follow him. Once past the walls it will be like hunting a wolf through the hills. But haste, and you may yet catch him."

"This is a matter which requires more than ordinary human wits," said Orastes. "Perhaps we should seek Xaltotun's advice."

"No!" exclaimed Tarascus violently. "Let the troopers pursue Conan and slay him. Xaltotun can hold no grudge against us if we kill a prisoner to prevent his escape."

"Well," said Orastes, "I am no Acheronian, but I am versed in some of the arts, and the control of certain spirits which have cloaked themselves in material substance. Perhaps I can aid you in this matter."

The fountain of Thrallos stood in a clustered ring of oaks beside the road a mile from the walls of the city. Its musical tinkle reached Conan's ears through the silence of the starlight. He drank deep of its icy stream, and then hurried southward toward a small, dense thicket he saw there. Rounding it, he saw a great white horse tied among the bushes. Heaving a deep gusty sigh he reached it with one stride-a mocking laugh brought him about, glaring.

A dully glinting, mail-clad figure moved out of the shadows into the starlight. This was no plumed and burnished palace guardsman. It was a tall man in morion and gray chain-mail-one of the Adventurers, a class of warriors peculiar to Nemedia; men who had not attained to the wealth and position of knighthood, or had fallen from that estate; hard-bitten fighters, dedicating their lives to war and adventure. They constituted a class of their own, sometimes commanding troops, but themselves accountable to no man but the king. Conan knew that he could have been discovered by no more dangerous a foeman.

A quick glance among the shadows convinced him that the man was alone, and he expanded his great chest slightly, digging his toes into the turf, as his thews coiled tensely.

"I was riding for Belverus on Amalric's business," said the Adventurer, advancing warily. The starlight was a long sheen on the great two-handed sword he bore naked in his hand. "A horse whinnied to mine from the thicket. I investigated and thought it strange a steed should be tethered here. I waited-and lo, I have caught a rare prize!"

The Adventurers lived by their swords.

"I know you," muttered the Nemedian. "You are Conan, king of Aquilonia. I thought I saw you die in the valley of the Valkia, but--" Conan sprang as a dying tiger springs. Practised fighter though the Adventurer was, he did not realize the desperate quickness that lurks in barbaric sinews. He was caught off guard, his heavy sword half lifted. Before he could either strike or parry, the king's poniard sheathed itself in his throat, above the gorget, slanting downward into his heart. With a choked gurgle he reeled and went down, and Conan ruthlessly tore his blade free as his victim fell. The white horse snorted violently and shied at the sight and scent of blood on the sword.

Glaring down at his lifeless enemy, dripping poniard in hand, sweat glistening on his broad breast, Conan poised like a statue, listening intently. In the woods about there was no sound, save for the sleepy cheep of awakened birds. But in the city, a mile away, he heard the strident blare of a trumpet.

Hastily he bent over the fallen man. A few seconds' search convinced him that whatever message the man might have borne was intended to be conveyed by word of mouth. But he did not pause in his task. It was not many hours until dawn. A few minutes later the white horse was galloping westward along the white road, and the rider wore the gray mail of a Nemedian Adventurer.

Chapter 7

: The Rending of the Veil

CONAN KNEW HIS only chance of escape lay in speed. He did not even consider hiding somewhere near Belverus until the chase passed on; he was certain that the uncanny ally of Tarascus would be able to ferret him out. Besides, he was not one to skulk and hide; an open fight or an open chase, either suited his temperament better. He had a long start, he knew. He would lead them a grinding race for the border.

Zenobia had chosen well to selecting the white horse. His speed, toughness and endurance were obvious. The girl knew weapons and horses, and, Conan reflected with some satisfaction, she knew men. He rode westward at a gait that ate up the miles.

It was a sleeping land through which he rode, past grove-sheltered villages and white-walled villas amid spacious fields and orchards that grew sparser as he fared westward. As the villages thinned, the land grew more rugged, and the keeps that frowned from eminences told of centuries of border war. But none rode down from those castles to challenge or halt him. The lords of the keeps were following the banner of Amalric; the pennons that were wont to wave over these towers were now floating over the Aquilonian plains.

When the last huddled village fell behind him, Conan left the road, which was beginning to bend toward the northwest, toward the distant passes. To keep to the road would mean to pass by border towers, still garrisoned with armed men who would not allow him to pass unquestioned. He knew there would be no patrols riding the border marches on either side, as to ordinary times, but there were those towers, and with dawn there would probably be cavalcades of returning soldiers with wounded men to ox-carts.

This road from Belverus was the only road that crossed the border for fifty miles from north to south. It followed a series of passes through the hills, and on either hand lay a wide expanse of a wild, sparsely inhabited mountains. He maintained his due westerly direction, intending to cross the border deep to the wilds of the hills that lay to the south of the passes. It was a shorter route, more arduous, but safer for a hunted fugitive. One man on a horse could traverse country an army would find impassable.

But at dawn he had not reached the hills; they were a long, low, blue rampart stretching along the horizon ahead of him. Here there were neither farms nor villages, no white-walled villas loom-tog among clustering trees. The dawn wind stirred the tall stiff grass, and there was nothing but the long rolling swells of brown earth, covered with dry grass, and to the distance the gaunt walls of a stronghold on a low hill. Too many Aquilonian raiders had crossed the mountains to not too-distant days for the countryside to be thickly settled as it was farther to the east.

Dawn ran like a prairie fire across the grasslands, and high overhead sounded a weird crying as a straggling wedge of wild geese winged swiftly southward. In a grassy swale Conan halted and unsaddled his mount. Its sides were heaving, its coat plastered with sweat. He had pushed it unmercifully through the hours before dawn.

While it munched the brittle grass and rolled, he lay at the crest of the low slope, staring eastward. Far away to the northward he could see the road he had left, streaming like a white ribbon over a distant rise. No black dots moved along that glistening ribbon. There was no sign about the castle to the distance to indicate that the keepers had noticed the lone wayfarer.

An hour later the land still stretched bare. The only sign of life was a glint of steel on the far-off battlements, a raven to the sky that wheeled backward and forth, dipping and rising as if seeking something. Conan saddled and rode westward at a more leisurely gait.

As he topped the farther crest of the slope, a raucous screaming burst out over his head, and looking up, he saw the raven flapping high above him, cawing incessantly. As he rode on, it followed him, maintaining its position and making the morning hideous with its strident cries, heedless of his efforts to drive it away.

This kept up for hours, until Conan's teeth were on edge, and he felt that he would give half his kingdom to be allowed to wring that black neck.

"Devils of hell!" he roared to futile rage, shaking his mailed fist at the frantic bird. "Why do you harry me with your squawking? Begone, you black spawn of perdition, and peck for wheat to the farmers' fields!"

He was ascending the first pitch of the hills, and he seemed to hear an echo of the bird's clamor far behind him. Turning to his saddle, he presently made out another black dot hangtoa to the blue. Beyond that again he caught the glint of the afternoon sun on steel. That could mean only one thing: armed men. And they were not riding along the beaten road, which was out of his sight beyond the horizon. They were following him. His face grew grim and he shivered slightly as he stared at the raven that wheeled high above him.

"So it is more than the whim of a brainless beast?" he muttered. "Those riders cannot see you, spawn of hell; but the other bird can see you, and they can see him. You follow me, he follows you, and they follow him. Are you only a craftily trained feathered creature, or some devil in the form of a bird? Did Xaltotun set you on my trail? Are you Xaltotun?"

Only a strident screech answered him, a screech vibrating with harsh mockery.

Conan wasted no more breath on his dusky betrayer. Grimly he settled to the long grind of the hills, fee dared not push the horse too hard; the rest he had allowed it had not been enough to freshen it. He was still far ahead of his pursuers, but they would cut down that lead steadily. It was almost a certainty that their horses were fresher than his, for they had undoubtedly changed mounts at that castle he had passed.

The going grew rougher, the scenery more rugged, steep grassy slopes pitching up to densely timbered mountainsides. Here, he knew, he might elude his hunters, but for that hellish bird that squalled incessantly above him. He could no longer see them in this broken country, but he was certain that they still followed him, guided unerringly by their feathered allies. That black shape became like a demoniac incubus, hounding him through measureless hells. The stones he hurled with a curse went wide or fell harmless, though in his youth he had felled hawks on the wing.

The horse was tiring fast. Conan recognized the grim finality of his position. He sensed an inexorable driving fate behind all this. He could not escape. He was as much a captive as he had been in the pits of Belverus. But he was no son of the Orient to yield passively to what seemed inevitable. If he could not escape, he would at least take some of his foes into eternity with him. He turned into a wide thicket of larches that masked a slope, looking for a place to turn at bay.

Then ahead of him there rang a strange, shrill scream, human yet weirdly timbred. An instant later he had pushed through a screen of branches, and saw the source of that eldritch cry. In a small glade below him four soldiers in Nemedian chain-mail were binding a noose about the neck of a gaunt old woman in peasant garb. A heap of fagots, bound with cord on the ground near by, showed what her occupation had been when surprized by these stragglers.

Conan felt slow fury swell his heart as he looked silently down and saw the ruffians dragging her toward a tree whose low-spreading branches were obviously intended to act as a gibbet. He had crossed the frontier an hour ago. He was standing on his own soil, watching the murder of one of his own subjects. The old woman was struggling with surprizing strength and energy, and as he watched, she lifted her head and voiced again the strange, weird, far-carrying call he had heard before. It was echoed as if in mockery by the raven flapping above the trees. The soldiers laughed roughly, and one struck her in the mouth.

Conan swung from his weary steed and dropped down the face of the rocks, landing with a clang of mail on the grass. The four men wheeled at the sound and drew their swords, gaping at the mailed giant who faced them, sword in hand.

Conan laughed harshly. His eyes were bleak as flint.

"Dogs!" he said without passion and without mercy. "Do Nemedian jackals set themselves up as executioners and hang my subjects at will? First you must take the head of their king. Here I stand, awaiting your lordly pleasure!"

The soldiers stared at him uncertainly as he strode toward them.

"Who is this madman?" growled a bearded ruffian. "He wears Nemedian mail, but speaks with an Aquilonian accent."

"No matter," quoth another. "Cut him down, and then we'll hang the old hag."

And so saying he ran at Conan, lifting his sword. But before he could strike, the king's great blade lashed down, splitting helmet and skull. The man fell before him, but the others were hardy rogues. They gave tongue like wolves and surged about the lone figure in the gray mail, and the clamor and din of steel drowned the cries of the circling raven.

Conan did not shout. His eyes coals of blue fire and his lips smiling bleakly, he lashed right and left with his two-handed sword. For all his size he was quick as a cat on his feet, and he was constantly in motion, presenting a moving target so that thrusts and swings cut empty air oftener than not. Yet when he struck he was perfectly balanced, and his blows fell with devastating power. Three of the four were down, dying in their own blood, and the fourth was bleeding from half a dozen wounds, stumbling in headlong retreat as he parried frantically, when Conan's spur caught in the surcoat of one of the fallen men.

The king stumbled, and before he could catch himself the Nemedian, with the frenzy of desperation, rushed him so savagely that Conan staggered and fell sprawling over the corpse. The Nemedian croaked in triumph and sprang forward, lifting his great sword with both hands over his right shoulder, as he braced his legs wide for the stroke-and then, over the prostrate king, something huge and hairy shot like a thunderbolt full on the soldier's breast, and his yelp of triumph changed to a shriek of death.

Conan, scrambling up, saw the man lying dead with his throat torn out, and a great gray wolf stood over him, head sunk as it smelt the blood that formed a pool on the grass.

The king turned as the old woman spoke to him. She stood straight and tall before him, and in spite of her ragged garb, her features, clear- cut and aquiline, and her keen black eyes, were not those of a common peasant woman. She called to the wolf and it trotted to her side like a great dog and rubbed its giant shoulder against her knee, while it gazed at Conan with great green lambent eyes. Absently she laid her hand upon its mighty neck, and so the two stood regarding the king of Aquilonia. He found their steady gaze disquieting, though there was no hostility in it.

"Men say King Conan died beneath the stones and dirt when the cliffs crumbled by Valkia," she said in a deep, strong, resonant voice.

"So they say," he growled. He was in no mood for controversy, and he thought of those armored riders who were pushing nearer every moment. The raven above him cawed stridently, and he cast an involuntary glare upward, grinding his teeth in a spasm of nervous irritation.

Up on the ledge the white horse stood with drooping head. The old woman looked at it, and then at the raven; and then she lifted a strange weird cry as she had before. As if recognizing the call, the raven wheeled, suddenly mute, and raced eastward. But before it had got out of sight, the shadow of mighty wings fell across it. An eagle soared up from the tangle of trees, and rising above it, swooped and struck the black messenger to the earth. The strident voice of betrayal was stilled for ever.

"Crom!" muttered Conan, staring at the old woman. "Are you a magician, too?"

"I am Zeiata," she said. "The people of the valleys call me a witch. Was that child of the night guiding armed men on your trail?"

"Aye." She did not seem to think the answer fantastic. "They cannot be far behind me."

"Lead your horse and follow me. King Conan," she said briefly.

Without comment he mounted the rocks and brought his horse down to the glade by a circuitous path. As he came he saw the eagle reappear, dropping lazily down from the sky, and rest an instant on Zeiata's shoulder, spreading its great wings lightly so as not to crush her with its weight.

Without a word she led the way, the great wolf trotting at her side, the eagle soaring above her. Through deep thickets and along tortuous ledges poised over deep ravines she led him, and finally along a narrow precipice-edged path to a curious dwelling of stone, half hut, half cavern, beneath a cliff hidden among the gorges and crags. The eagle flew to the pinnacle of this cliff, and perched there like a motionless sentinel.

Still silent, Zeiata stabled the horse in a near-by cave, with leaves and grass piled high for provender, and a tiny spring bubbling in the dim recesses.

In the hut she seated the king on a rude, hide-covered bench, and she herself sat upon a low stool before the tiny fireplace, while she made a fire of tamarisk chunks and prepared a frugal meal. The great wolf drowsed beside her, facing the fire, his huge head sunk on his paws, his ears twitching in his dreams.

"You do not fear to sit in the hut of a witch?" she asked, breaking her silence at last.

An impatient shrug of his gray-mailed shoulders was her guest's only reply. She gave into his hands a wooden dish heaped with dried fruits, cheese and barley bread, and a great pot of the heady upland beer, brewed from barley grown in the high valleys.

"I have found the brooding silence of the glens more pleasing than the babble of city streets," she said. "The children of the wild are kinder than the children of men." Her hand briefly stroked the ruff of the sleeping wolf. "My children were afar from me today, or I had not needed your sword, my king. They were coming at my call."

"What grudge had those Nemedian dogs against you?" Conan demanded.

"Skulkers from the invading army straggle all over the countryside, from the frontier to Tarantia," she answered. "The foolish villagers in the valleys told them that I had a store of gold hidden away, so as to divert their attentions from their villages. They demanded treasure from me, and my answers angered them. But neither skulkers nor the men who pursue you, nor any raven will find you here."

He shook his head, eating ravenously.

"I'm for Tarantia."

She shook her head.

"You thrust your head into the dragon's jaws. Best seek refuge abroad. The heart is gone from your kingdom."

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "Battles have been lost before, yet wars won. A kingdom is not lost by a single defeat."

"And you will go to Tarantia?"

"Aye. Prospero will be holding it against Amalric."

"Are you sure?"

"Hell's devils, woman!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "What else?"

She shook her head. "I feel that it is otherwise. Let us see. Not lightly is the veil rent; yet I will rend it a little, and show you your capital city."

Conan did not see what she cast upon the fire, but the wolf whimpered in his dreams, and a green smoke gathered and billowed up into the hut. And as he watched, the walls and ceiling of the hut seemed to widen, to grow remote and vanish, merging with infinite immensities; the smoke rolled about him, blotting out everything. And in it forms moved and faded, and stood out in startling clarity.

He stared at the familiar towers and streets of Tarantia, where a mob seethed and screamed, and at the same time he was somehow able to see the banners of Nemedia moving inexorably westward through the smoke and flame of a pillaged land. In the great square of Tarantia the frantic throng milled and yammered, screaming that the king was dead, that the barons were girding themselves to divide the land between them, and that the rule of a king, even of Valerius, was better than anarchy. Prospero, shining in his armor, rode among them, trying to pacify them, bidding them trust Count Trocero, urging them to man the wall and aid his knights in defending the city. They turned on him, shrieking with fear and unreasoning rage, howling that he was Trocero's butcher, a more evil foe than Amalric himself. Offal and stones were hurled at his knights.

A slight blurring of the picture, that might have denoted a passing of tune, and then Conan saw Prospero and his knights filing out of the gates and spurring southward. Behind him the city was in an uproar.

"Fools!" muttered Conan thickly. "Fools! Why could they not trust Prospero? Zelita, if you are making game of me, with some trickery--"

"This has passed," answered Zelata imperturbably, though somberly. "It was the evening of the day that has passed When Prospero rode out of Tarantia, with the hosts of Amalric almost within sight. From the walls men saw the flame of their pillaging. So I read it in the smoke. At sunset the Nemedians rode into Tarantia, unopposed. Look! Even now, in the royal hall of Tarantia--"

Abruptly Conan was looking into the great coronation hall. Valerius stood on the regal dais, clad in ermine robes, and Amalric, still in his dusty, blood-stained armor, placed a rich and gleaming circlet on his yellow locks-the crown of Aquilonia! The people cheered; long lines of steel-clad Nemedian warriors looked grimly on, and nobles long in disfavor at Conan's court strutted and swaggered with the emblem of Valerius on their sleeves.

"Crom!" It was an explosive imprecation from Conan's lips as he started up, his great fists clenched into hammers, his veins on his temples knotting, his features convulsed. "A Nemedian placing the crown of Aquilonia on that renegade-in the royal hall of Tarantia!"

As if dispelled by his violence, the smoke faded, and he saw Zeiata's black eyes gleaming at him through the mist.

"You have seen-the people of your capital have forfeited the freedom you won for them by sweat and blood; they have sold themselves to the slavers and the butchers. They have shown that they do not trust their destiny. Can you rely upon them for the Winning back of your kingdom?"

"They thought I was dead," he grunted, recovering some of his poise. "I have no son. Men can't be governed by a memory. What if the Nemedians have taken Tarantia? There still remain the provinces, the barons, and the people of the countrysides. Valerius has won an empty glory."

"You are stubborn, as befits a fighter. I cannot show you the future, I cannot show you all the past. Nay, I show you nothing. I merely make you see windows opened in the veil by powers un-guessed. Would you look into the past for a clue of the present?"

"Aye." He seated himself abruptly.

Again the green smoke rose and billowed. Again images unfolded before him, this time alien and seemingly irrelevant. He saw great towering black walls, pedestals half hidden in the shadows upholding images of hideous, half-bestial gods. Men moved in the shadows, dark, wiry men, clad in red, silken loincloths. They were bearing a green jade sarcophagus along a gigantic black corridor. But before he could tell much about what he saw, the scene shifted. He saw a cavern, dim, shadowy and haunted with a strange intangible horror. On an altar of black stone stood a curious golden vessel, shaped like the shell of a scallop. Into this cavern came some of the same dark, wiry men who had borne the mummy-case. They seized the golden vessel, and then the shadows swirled around them and what happened he could not say. But he saw a glimmer in a whorl of darkness, like a ball of living fire. Then the smoke was only smoke, drifting up from the fire of tamarisk chunks, thinning and fading.

"But what does this portend?" he demanded, bewildered. "What I saw in Tarantia I can understand. But what means this glimpse of Zamorian thieves sneaking through a subterranean temple of Set, in Stygia? And that cavern-I've never seen or heard of anything like it, in all my wanderings. If you can show me that much, these shreds of vision which mean nothing, disjointed, why can you not show me all that is to occur?"

Zeiata stirred the fire without replying.

"These things are governed by immutable laws," she said at last. "I can not make you understand; I do not altogether understand myself, though I have sought wisdom in the silences of the high places for more years than I can remember. I cannot save you, though I would if I might. Man must, at last, work out his own salvation. Yet perhaps wisdom may come to me in dreams, and in the morn I may be able to give you the clue to the enigma."

"What enigma?" he demanded.

"The mystery that confronts you, whereby you have lost a kingdom," she answered. And then she spread a sheepskin upon the floor before the hearth. "Sleep," she said briefly. Without a word he stretched himself upon it, and sank into restless but deep sleep through which phantoms moved silently and monstrous shapeless shadows crept. Once, limned against a purple sunless horizon, he saw the mighty walls and towers of a great city of such as rose nowhere on the waking earth he knew. Its colossal pylons and purple minarets lifted toward the stars, and over it, floating like a giant mirage, hovered the bearded countenance of the man Xaltotun.

Conan woke in the chill whiteness of early dawn, to see Zelata crouched beside the tiny fire. He had not awakened once in the night, and the sound of the great wolf leaving or entering should have roused him. Yet the wolf was there, beside the hearth, with its shaggy coat wet with dew, and with more than dew. Blood glistened wetly amid the thick fell, and there was a cut upon his shoulder.

Zeiata nodded, without looking around, as if reading the thoughts of her royal guest.

"He has hunted before dawn, and red was the hunting. I think the man who hunted a king will hunt no more, neither man nor beast."

Conan stared at the great beast with strange fascination as he moved to take the food Zelata offered him.

"When I come to my throne again I won't forget," he said briefly. "You've befriended me-by Crom, I can't remember when I've lain down and slept at the mercy of man or woman as I did last night. But what of the riddle you would read me this morn?"

A long silence ensued, in which the crackle of the tamarisks was loud on the hearth.

"Find the heart of your kingdom," she said at last. "There lies your defeat and your power. You fight more than mortal man. You will not press the throne again unless you find the heart of your kingdom."

"Do you mean the city of Tarantia?"

She shook her head. "I am but an oracle, through whose lips the gods speak. My lips are sealed by them lest I speak too much. You must find the heart of your kingdom. I can say no more. My lips are opened and sealed by the gods."

Dawn was still white on the peaks when Conan rode westward. A glance back showed him Zelata standing in the door of her hut, inscrutable as ever, the great wolf beside her.

A gray sky arched overhead, and a moaning wind was chill with a promise of winter. Brown leaves fluttered slowly down from the bare branches, sifting upon his mailed shoulders.

All day he pushed through the hills, avoiding roads and villages. Toward nightfall he began to drop down from the heights, tier by tier, and saw the broad plains of Aquilonia spread out beneath him.

Villages and farms lay close to the foot of the hills on the western side of the mountains for, for half a century, most of the raiding across the frontier had been done by the Aquilonians. But now only embers and ashes showed where farm huts and villas had stood.

In the gathering darkness Conan rode slowly on. There was little fear of discovery, which he dreaded from friend as well as from foe. The Nemedians had remembered old scores on their westward drive, and Valerius had made no attempt to restrain his allies. He did not count on winning the love of the common people. A vast swath of desolation had been cut through the country from the foothills westward. Conan cursed as he rode over blackened expanses that had been rich fields, and saw the gaunt gable-ends of burned houses jutting against the sky. He moved through an empty and deserted land, like a ghost out of a forgotten and outworn past.

The speed with which the army had traversed the land showed what little resistance it had encountered. Yet had Conan been leading his Aquilonians the invading army would have been forced to buy every foot they gained with their blood. The bitter realization permeated his soul; he was not the representative of a dynasty. He was only a lone adventurer. Even the drop of dynastic blood Valerius boasted had more hold on the minds of men than the memory of Conan and the freedom and power he had given the kingdom.

No pursuers followed him down out of the hills. He watched for wandering or returning Nemedian troops, but met none. Skulkers gave him a wide path, supposing him to be one of the conquerors, what of his harness. Groves and rivers were far more plentiful on the western side of the mountains, and coverts for concealment were not lacking.

So he moved across the pillaged land, halting only to rest his horse, eating frugally of the food Zeiata had given him, until, on a dawn when he lay hidden on a river bank where willows and oaks grew thickly, he glimpsed, afar, across the rolling plains dotted with rich groves, the blue and golden towers of Tarantia.

He was no longer in a deserted land, but one teeming with varied life. His progress thenceforth was slow and cautious, through thick woods and unfrequented byways. It was dusk when he reached the plantation of Servius Galannus.

Chapter 8

: Dying Embers

THE COUNTRYSIDE ABOUT Tarantia had escaped the fearful ravaging of the more easterly provinces. There were evidences of the march of a conquering army in broken hedges, plundered fields and looted granaries, but torch and steel had not been loosed wholesale.

There was but one grim splotch on the landscape-a charred expanse of ashes and blackened stone, where, Conan knew, had once stood the stately villa of one of his staunchest supporters.

The king dared not openly approach the Galannus farm, which lay only a few miles from the city. In the twilight he rode through an extensive woodland, until he sighted a keeper's lodge through the trees. Dismounting and tying his horse, he approached the thick, arched door with the intention of sending the keeper after Servius. He did not know what enemies the manor house might be sheltering. He had seen no troops, but they might be quartered all over the countryside. But as he drew near, he saw the door open and a compact figure in silk hose and richly embroidered doublet stride forth and turn up a path that wound away through the woods.

"Servius!"

At the low call the master of the plantation wheeled with a startled exclamation. His hand flew to the short hunting-sword at his hip, and he recoiled from the tall gray steel figure standing in the dusk before him.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What is your--Mitra!"

His breath hissed inward and his ruddy face paled. "Avaunt!" he ejaculated. "Why have you come back from the gray lands of death to terrify me? I was always your true liegeman in your lifetime--"

"As I still expect you to be," answered Conan. "Stop trembling, man; I'm flesh and blood."

Sweating with uncertainty Servius approached and stared into the face of the mail-clad giant, and then, convinced of the reality of what he saw, he dropped to one knee and doffed his plumed cap.

"Your Majesty! Truly, this is a miracle passing belief! The great bell in the citadel has tolled your dirge, days agone. Men said you died at Valkia, crushed under a million tons of earth and broken granite."

"It was another in my harness," grunted Conan. "But let us talk later. If there is such a thing as a joint of beef on your board--"

"Forgive me, my lord!" cried Servius, springing to his feet. "The dust of travel is gray on your mail, and I keep you standing here without rest or sup! Mitra! I see well enough now that you are alive, but I swear, when I turned and saw you standing all gray and dim in the twilight, the marrow of my knees turned to water. It is an ill thing to meet a man you thought dead in the woodland at dusk."

"Bid the keeper see to my steed which is tied behind yonder oak," requested Conan, and Servius nodded, drawing the king up the path. The patrician, recovering from his supernatural fright, had become extremely nervous.

"I will send a servant from the manor," he said. "The keeper is in his lodge-but I dare not trust even my servants in these days. It is better that only I know of your presence."

Approaching the great house that glimmered dimly through the trees, he turned aside into a little-used path that ran between close-set oaks whose intertwining branches formed a vault overhead, shutting out the dim light of the gathering dusk. Servius hurried on through the darkness without speaking, and with something resembling panic in his manner, and presently led Conan through a small side-door into a narrow, dimly illuminated corridor. They traversed this in haste and silence, and Servius brought the king into a spacious chamber with a high, oak-beamed ceiling and richly paneled walls. Logs flamed in the wide fireplace, for there was a frosty edge to the air, and a great meat pasty in a stone platter stood smoking on a broad mahogany board. Servius locked the massive door and extinguished the candles that stood in a silver candlestick on the table, leaving the chamber illuminated only by the fire on the hearth.

"Your pardon, your Majesty," he apologized. "These are perilous times; spies lurk everywhere. It were better that none be able to peer through the windows and recognize you. This pasty, however, is just from the oven, as I intended supping on my return from talk with my keeper. If your Majesty would deign--"

"The light is sufficient," grunted Conan, seating himself with scant ceremony, and drawing his poniard.

He dug ravenously into the luscious dish, and washed it down with great gulps of wine from grapes grown in Servius's vineyards. He seemed oblivious to any sense of peril, but Servius shifted uneasily on his settle by the fire, nervously fingering the heavy gold chain about his neck. He glanced continually at the diamond-panes of the casement, gleaming dimly in the firelight, and cocked his ear toward the door, as if half expecting to hear the pad of furtive feet in the corridor without.

Finishing his meal, Conan rose and seated himself on another settle before the fire.

"I won't jeopardize you long by my presence, Servius," he said abruptly. "Dawn will find me far from your plantation."

"My lord--" Servius lifted his hands in expostulation, but Conan waved his protests aside.

"I know your loyalty and your courage. Both are above reproach. But if Valerius has usurped my throne, it would be death for you to shelter me, if you were discovered."

"I am not strong enough to defy him openly," admitted Servius. "The fifty men-at-arms I could lead to battle would be but a handful of straws. You saw the ruins of Emilius Scavonus's plantation?"

Conan nodded, frowning darkly.

"He was the strongest patrician in this province, as you know. He refused to give his allegiance to Valerius. The Nemedians burned him in the ruins of his own villa. After that the rest of us saw the futility of resistance, especially as the people of Tarantia refused to fight. We submitted and Valerius spared our lives, though he levied a tax upon us that will ruin many. But what could we do? We thought you were dead. Many of the barons had been slain, others taken prisoner. The army was shattered and scattered. You have no heir to take the crown. There was no one to lead us--"

"Was there not Count Trocero of Poitain?" demanded Conan harshly.

Servius spread his hands helplessly.

"It is true that his general Prospero was in the field with a small army. Retreating before Amalric, he urged men to rally to his banner. But with your Majesty dead, men remembered old wars and civil brawls, and how Trocero and his Poitanians once rode through these provinces even as Amalric was riding now, with torch and sword. The barons were jealous of Trocero. Some men--spies of Valerius perhaps-shouted that the Count of Poitain intended seizing the crown for himself. Old sectional hates flared up again. If we had had one man with dynastic blood in his veins we would have crowned and followed him against Nemedia. But we had none.

"The barons who followed you loyally would not follow one of their own number, each holding himself as good as his neighbor, each fearing the ambitions of the others. You were the cord that held the fagots together. When the cord was cut, the fagots fell apart. If you had had a son, the barons would have rallied loyally to him. But there was no point for their patriotism to focus upon.

"The merchants and commoners, dreading anarchy and a return of feudal days when each baron was his own law, cried out that any king was better than none, even Valerius, who was at least of the blood of the old dynasty. There was no one to oppose him when he rode up at the head of his steel-clad hosts, with the scarlet dragon of Nemedia floating over him, and rang his lance against the gates of Tarantia.

"Nay, the people threw open the gates and knelt in the dust before him. They had refused to aid Prospero in holding the city. They said they had rather be ruled by Valerius than by Trocero. They said- truthfully-that the barons would not rally to Trocero, but that many would accept Valerius. They said that by yielding to Valerius they would escape the devastation of civil war, and the fury of the Nemedians. Prospero rode southward with his ten thousand knights, and the horsemen of the Nemedians entered the city a few hours later. They did not follow him. They remained to see that Valerius was crowned in Tarantia."

"Then the old witch's smoke showed the truth," muttered Conan, feeling a queer chill along his spine. "Amalric crowned Valerius?"

"Aye, in the coronation hall, with the blood of slaughter scarcely dried on his hands."

"And do the people thrive under his benevolent rule?" asked Conan with angry irony.

"He lives like a foreign prince in the midst of a conquered land," answered Servius bitterly. "His court is filled with Nemedians, the palace troops are of the same breed, and a large garrison of them occupy the citadel. Aye, the hour of the Dragon has come at last.

"Nemedians swagger like lords through the streets. Women are outraged and merchants plundered daily, and Valerius either can, or will, make no attempt to curb them. Nay, he is but their puppet, their figurehead. Men of sense knew he would be, and the people are beginning to find it out.

"Amalric has ridden forth with a strong army to reduce the outlying provinces where some of the barons have defied him. But there is no unity among them. Their jealousy of each other is stronger than their fear of Amalric. He will crush them one by one. Many castles and cities, realizing that, have sent in their submission. Those who resist fare miserably. The Nemedians are glutting their long hatred. And their ranks are swelled by Aquilonians whom fear, gold, or necessity of occupation are forcing into their armies. It is a natural consequence."

Conan nodded somberly, staring at the red reflections of the firelight on the richly carved oaken panels.

"Aquilonia has a king instead of the anarchy they feared," said Servius at last. "Valerius does not protect his subjects against his allies. Hundreds who could not pay the ransom imposed upon them have been sold to the Kothic slave-traders."

Conan's head jerked up and a lethal flame lit his blue eyes. He swore gustily, his mighty hands knotting into iron hammers.

"Aye, white men sell white men and white women, as it was in the feudal days. In the palaces of Shem and of Turan they will live out the lives of slaves. Valerius is king, but the unity for which the people looked, even though of the sword, is not complete.

"Gunderland in the north and Poitain in the south are yet un- conquered, and there are unsubdued provinces in the west, where the border barons have the backing of Bossonian bowmen. Yet these outlying provinces are no real menace to Valerius. They must remain on the defensive, and will be lucky if they are able to keep their independence. Here Valerius and his foreign knights are supreme."

"Let him make the best of it then," said Conan grimly. "His time is short. The people will rise when they learn that I'm alive. We'll take Tarantia back before Amalric can return with his army. Then we'll sweep these dogs from the kingdom."

Servius was silent. The crackle of the fire was loud in the stillness.

"Well," exclaimed Conan impatiently, "why do you sit with your head bent, staring at the hearth? Do you doubt what I have said?"

Servius avoided the king's eye.

"What mortal man can do, you will do, your Majesty," he answered. "I have ridden behind you in battle, and I know that no mortal being can stand before your sword."

"What, then?"

Servius drew his fur-trimmed jupon closer about him, and shivered in spite of the flame.

"Men say your fall was occasioned by sorcery," he said presently.

"What then?"

"What mortal can fight against sorcery? Who is this veiled man who communes at midnight with Valerius and his allies, as men say, who appears and disappears so mysteriously? Men say in whispers that he is a great magician who died thousands of years ago, but has returned from death's gray lands to overthrow the king of Aquilonia and restore the dynasty of which Valerius is heir."

"What matter?" exclaimed Conan angrily. "I escaped from the devil- haunted pits of Belverus, and from diabolism in the mountains. If the people rise--"

Servius shook his head.

"Your staunchest supporters in the eastern and central provinces are dead, fled or imprisoned. Gunderland is far to the north, Poitain far to the south. The Bossonians have retired to their marches far to the west. It would take weeks to gather and concentrate these forces, and before that could be done, each levy would be attacked separately by Amalric and destroyed."

"But an uprising in the central provinces would tip the scales for us!" exclaimed Conan. "We could seize Tarantia and hold it against Amalric until the Gundermen and Poitanians could get here."

Servius hesitated, and his voice sank to a whisper.

"Men say you died accursed. Men say this veiled stranger cast a spell upon you to slay you and break your army. The great bell has tolled your dirge. Men believe you to be dead. And the central provinces would not rise, even if they knew you lived. They would not dare. Sorcery defeated you at Valkia. Sorcery brought the news to Tarantia, for that very night men were shouting of it in the streets.

"A Nemedian priest loosed black magic again in the streets of Tarantia to slay men who still were loyal to your memory. I myself saw it. Armed men dropped like flies and died in the streets in a manner no man could understand. And the lean priest laughed and said: 'I am only Altaro, only an acolyte of Orastes, who is but an acolyte of him who wears the veil; not mine is the power; the power but works through me.'"

"Well," said Conan harshly, "is it not better to die honorably than to live in infamy? Is death worse than oppression, slavery and ultimate destruction?"

"When the fear of sorcery is in, reason is out," replied Servius. "The fear of the central provinces is too great to allow them to rise for you. The outlying provinces would fight for you-but the same sorcery that smote your army at Valkia would smite you again. The Nemedians hold the broadest, richest and most thickly populated sections of Aquilonia, and they cannot be defeated by the forces which might still be at your command. You would be sacrificing your loyal subjects uselessly. In sorrow I say it, but it is true: King Conan, you are a king without a kingdom."

Conan stared into the fire without replying. A smoldering log crashed down among the flames without a bursting shower of sparks. It might have been the crashing ruin of his kingdom.

Again Conan felt the presence of a grim reality behind the veil of material illusion. He sensed again the inexorable drive of a ruthless fate. A feeling of furious panic tugged at his soul, a sense of being trapped, and a red rage that burned to destroy and kill.

"Where are the officials of my court?" he demanded at last.

"Pallantides was sorely wounded at Valkia, was ransomed by his family, and now lies in his castle in Attains. He will be fortunate if he ever rides again. Publius, the chancellor, has fled the kingdom in disguise, no man knows whither. The council has been disbanded. Some were imprisoned, some banished. Many of your loyal subjects have been put to death. Tonight, for instance, the Countess Albiona dies under the headsman's ax."

Conan started and stared at Servius with such anger smoldering in his blue eyes that the patrician shrank back.

"Why?"

"Because she would not become the mistress of Valerius. Her lands are forfeit, her henchmen sold into slavery, and at midnight, in the Iron Tower, her head must fall. Be advised, my king--to me you will ever be my king-and flee before you are discovered. In these days none is safe. Spies and informers creep among us, betraying the slightest deed or word of discontent as treason and rebellion. If you make yourself known to your subjects it will only end in your capture and death.

"My horses and all the men that I can trust are at your disposal. Before dawn we can be far from Tarantia, and well on our way toward the border. If I cannot aid you to recover your kingdom, I can at least follow you into exile."

Conan shook his head. Servius glanced uneasily at him as he sat staring into the fire, his chin propped on his mighty fist. The firelight gleamed redly on his steel mail, on his baleful eyes. They burned in the firelight like the eyes of a wolf. Servius was again aware, as in the past, and now more strongly than ever, of something alien about the king. That great frame under the mail mesh was too hard and supple for a civilized man; the elemental fire of the primitive burned in those smoldering eyes. Now the barbaric suggestion about the king was more pronounced, as if in his extremity the outward aspects of civilization were stripped away, to reveal the primordial core. Conan was reverting to his pristine type. He did not act as a civilized man would act under the same conditions, nor did his thoughts run in the same channels. He was unpredictable. It was only a stride from the king of Aquilonia to the skin-clad slayer of the Cimmerian hills.

"I'll ride to Poitain, if it may be," Conan said at last. "But I'll ride alone. And I have one last duty to perform as king of Aquilonia."

"What do you mean, your Majesty?" asked Servius, shaken by a premonition.

"I'm going into Tarantia after Albiona tonight," answered the king. "I've failed all my other loyal subjects, it seems-if they take her head, they can have mine too."

"This is madness!" cried Servius, staggering up and clutching his throat, as if he already felt the noose closing about it.

"There are secrets to the Tower which few know," said Conan. "Anyway, I'd be a dog to leave Albiona to die because of her loyalty to me. I may be a king without a kingdom, but I'm not a man without honor." "It will ruin us all!" whispered Servius.

"It will ruin no one but me if I fail. You've risked enough. I ride alone tonight. This is all I want you to do: procure me a patch for my eye, a staff for my hand, and garments such as travelers wear."

Chapter 9

: "It Is the King or His Ghost!"

MANY MEN PASSED through the great arched gates of Tarantia between sunset and midnight-belated travelers, merchants from afar with heavily laden mules, free workmen from the surrounding farms and vineyards. Now that Valerius was supreme in the central provinces, there was no rigid scrutiny of the folk who flowed in a steady stream through the wide gates. Discipline had been relaxed. The Nemedian soldiers who stood on guard were half drunk, and much too busy watching for handsome peasant girls and rich merchants who could be bullied to notice workmen or dusty travelers, even one tall wayfarer whose worn cloak could not conceal the hard lines of his powerful frame.

This man carried himself with an erect, aggressive bearing that was too natural for him to realise it himself, much less dissemble it. A great patch covered one eye, and his leather coif, drawn low over his brows, shadowed his features. With a long thick staff in his muscular brown hand, he strode leisurely through the arch where the torches flared and guttered, and, ignored by the tipsy guardsmen, emerged upon the wide streets of Tarantia.

Upon these well-lighted thoroughfares the usual throngs went about their business, and shops and stalls stood open, with their wares displayed. One thread ran a constant theme through the pattern. Nemedian soldiers, singly or in clumps, swaggered through the throngs, shouldering their way with studied arrogance. Women scurried from their path, and men stepped aside with darkened brows and clenched fists. The Aquilonians were a proud race, and these were their hereditary enemies.

The knuckles of the tall traveler knotted on his staff, but, like the others, he stepped aside to let the men in armor have the way. Among the motley and varied crowd he did not attract much attention in his drab, dusty garments. But once, as he passed a sword-seller's stall and the light that streamed from its wide door fell full upon him, he thought he felt an intense stare upon him, and turning quickly, saw a man in the brown jerkin of a free workman regarding him fixedly. This man turned away with undue haste, and vanished in the shifting throng. But Conan turned into a narrow bystreet and quickened his pace. It might have been mere idle curiosity; but he could take no chances.

The grim Iron Tower stood apart from the citadel, amid a maze of narrow streets and crowding houses where the meaner structures, appropriating a space from which the more fastidious shrank, had invaded a portion of the city ordinarily alien to them. The Tower was in reality a castle, an ancient, formidable pile of heavy stone and black iron, which had itself served as the citadel in an earlier, ruder century.

Not a long distance from it, lost in a tangle of partly deserted tenements and warehouses, stood an ancient watchtower, so old and forgotten that it did not appear on the maps of the city for a hundred years back. Its original purpose had been forgotten, and nobody, of such as saw it at all, noticed that the apparently ancient lock which kept it from being appropriated as sleeping-quarters by beggars and thieves, was in reality comparatively new and extremely powerful, cunningly disguised into an appearance of rusty antiquity. Not half a dozen men in the kingdom had ever known the secret of that tower.

No keyhole showed in the massive, green-crusted lock. But Conan's practised fingers, stealing over it, pressed here and there knobs invisible to the casual eye. The door silently opened inward and he entered solid blackness, pushing the door shut behind him, A light would have showed the tower empty, a bare, cylindrical shaft of massive stone.

Groping in a comer with the sureness of familiarity, he found the projections for which he was feeling on a slab of the stone that composed the floor. Quickly he lifted it, and without hesitation lowered himself into the aperture beneath. His feet felt stone steps leading downward into what he knew was a narrow tunnel that ran straight toward the foundations of the Iron Tower, three streets away.

The Bell on the citadel, which tolled only at the midnight hour or for the death of a king, boomed suddenly. In a dimly lighted chamber in the Iron Tower a door opened and a form emerged into a corridor. The interior of the Tower was as forbidding as its external appearance. Its massive stone walls were rough, unadorned. The flags of the floor were worn deep by

generations of faltering feet, and the vault of the ceiling was gloomy in the dim light of torches set in niches.

The man who trudged down that grim corridor was in appearance in keeping with his surroundings. He was a tall, powerfully-built man, clad in close-fitting black silk. Over his head was drawn a black hood which fell about his shoulders, having two holes for his eyes. From his shoulders hung a loose black cloak, and over one shoulder he bore a heavy ax, the shape of which was that of neither tool nor weapon.

As he went down the corridor, a figure came hobbling up it, a bent, surly old man, stooping under the weight of his pike and a lantern he bore in one hand.

"You are not as prompt as your predecessor, master headsman," he grumbled. "Midnight has just struck, and masked men have gone to milady's cell. They await you."

"The tones of the bell still echo among the towers," answered the executioner. "If I am not so quick to leap and run at the beck of Aquilonians as was the dog who held this office before me, they shall find my arm no less ready. Get you to your duties, old watchman, and leave me to mine. I think mine is the sweeter trade, by Mitra, for you tramp cold corridors and peer at rusty dungeon doors, while I lop off the fairest head in Tarantia this night."

The watchman limped on down the corridor, still grumbling, and the headsman resumed his leisurely way. A few strides carried him around a turn in the corridor, and he absently noted that at his left a door stood partly open. If he had thought, he would have known that that door had been opened since the watchman passed; but thinking was not his trade. He was passing the unlocked door before he realized that aught was amiss, and then it was too late.

A soft tigerish step and the rustle of a cloak warned him, but before he could turn, a heavy arm hooked about his throat from behind, crushing the cry before it could reach his lips. In the brief instant that was allowed him he realized with a surge of panic the strength of his attacker, against which his own brawny thews were helpless. He sensed without seeing the poised dagger.

"Nemedian dog!" muttered a voice thick with passion in his ear. "You've cut off your last Aquilonian head!"

And that was the last thing he ever heard.

In a dank dungeon, lighted only by a guttering torch, three men stood about a young woman who knelt on the rush-strewn flags staring wildly up at them. She was clad only in a scanty shift; her golden hair fell in lustrous ripples about her white shoulders, and her wrists were bound behind her. Even in the uncertain torchlight, and in spite of her disheveled condition and pallor of fear, her beauty was striking. She knelt mutely, staring with wide eyes up at her tormentors. The men were closely masked and cloaked. Such a deed as this needed masks, even in a conquered land. She knew them all nevertheless; but what she knew would harm no one-after that night.

"Our merciful sovereign offers you one more chance, Countess," said the tallest of the three, and he spoke Aquilonian without an accent. "He bids me say that if you soften your proud, rebellious spirit, he will still open his arms to you. If not--" he gestured toward a grim wooden block in the center of the cell. It was blackly stained, and showed many deep nicks as if a keen edge, cutting through some yielding substance, had sunk into the wood.

Albiona shuddered and turned pale, shrinking back. Every fiber in her vigorous young body quivered with the urge of life. Valerius was young, too, and handsome. Many women loved him, she told herself, fighting with herself for life. But she could not speak the word that would ransom her soft young body from the block and the dripping ax. She could not reason the matter. She only knew that when she thought of the clasp of Valerius's arms, her flesh crawled with an abhorrence greater than the fear of death. She shook her head helplessly, compelled by an impulsion more irresistible than the instinct to live.

"Then there is no more to be said!" exclaimed one of the others Impatiently, and he spoke with a Nemedian accent. "Where is the headsman?"

As if summoned by the word, the dungeon door opened silently, and a great figure stood framed in it, like a black shadow from the underworld.

Albiona voiced a low, involuntary cry at the sight of that grim shape, and the others stared silently for a moment, perhaps themselves daunted with superstitious awe at the silent, hooded figure. Through the coif the eyes blazed like coals of blue fire, and as these eyes rested on each man in turn, he felt a curious chill travel down his spine.

Then the tall Aquilonian roughly seized the girl and dragged her to the block. She screamed uncontrollably and fought hopelessly against him, frantic with terror, but he ruthlessly forced her to her knees, and bent her yellow head down to the bloody block.

"Why do you delay, headsman?" he exclaimed angrily. "Perform your task!"

He was answered by a short, gusty boom of laughter that was indescribably menacing. All in the dungeon froze in their places, staring at the hooded shape-the two cloaked figures, the masked man bending over the girl, the girl herself on her knees, twisting her imprisoned head to look upward.

"What means this unseemly mirth, dog?" demanded the Aquilonian uneasily.

The man in the black garb tore his hood from his head and flung it to the ground; he set his back to the closed door and lifted the headsman's ax.

"Do you know me, dogs?" he rumbled. "Do you know me?"

The breathless silence was broken by a scream.

"The king!" shrieked Albiona, wrenching herself free from the slackened grasp of her captor. "Oh, Mitra, the king!"

The three men stood like statues, and then the Aquilonian started and spoke, like a man Who doubts his own senses.

"Conan!" he ejaculated. "It is the king, or his ghost! What devil's work is this?"

"Devil's work to match devils!" mocked Conan, his lips laughing but hell flaming in his eyes. "Come, fall to, my gentlemen. You have your swords, and I this cleaver. Nay, I think this butcher's tool fits the work at hand, my fair lords!"

"At him!" muttered the Aquilonian, drawing his sword. "It is Conan and we must kill or be killed!"

And like men waking from a trance, the Nemedians drew their blades and rushed on the king.

The headsman's ax was not made for such work, but the king wielded the heavy, clumsy weapon as lightly as a hatchet, and his quickness of foot, as he constantly shifted his position, defeated their purpose of engaging him all three at once.

He caught the sword of the first man on his ax-head and crushed in the wielder's breast with a murderous counterstroke before he could step back or parry. The remaining Nemedian, missing a savage swipe, had his brains dashed out before he could recover his balance, and an instant later the Aquilonian was backed into a comer, desperately parrying the crashing strokes that rained about him, lacking opportunity even to scream for help.

Suddenly Conan's long left arm shot out and ripped the mask from the man's head, disclosing the pallid features.

"Dog!" grated the king. "I thought I knew you. Traitor! Damned renegade! Even this base steel is too honorable for your foul head. Nay, die as thieves die!"

The ax fell in a devastating arc, and the Aquilonian cried out and went to his knees, grasping the severed stump of his right arm from Which blood spouted. It had been shorn away at the elbow, and the ax, unchecked in its descent, had gashed deeply into his side, so that his entrails bulged out.

"Lie there and bleed to death," grunted Conan, casting the ax away disgustedly. "Come, Countess!"

Stooping, he slashed the cords that bound her wrists and lifting her as if she had been a child, strode from the dungeon. She was sobbing hysterically, with her arms thrown about his corded neck in a frenzied embrace.

"Easy all," he muttered. "We're not out of this yet. If we can reach the dungeon where the secret door opens on stairs that lead to the tunnel-devil take it, they've heard that noise, even through these walls."

Down the corridor arms clanged and the tramp and shouting of men echoed under the vaulted roof. A bent figure came hobbling swiftly along, lantern held high, and its light shone full on Conan and the girl. With a curse the Cimmerian sprang toward him, but the old watchman, abandoning both lantern and pike, scuttled away down the corridor, screeching for help at the top of his cracked voice. Deeper shouts answered him.

Conan turned swiftly and ran the other way. He was cut off from the dungeon with the secret lock and the hidden door through which he had entered the Tower, and by which he had hoped to leave, but he knew this grim building well. Before he was king he had been imprisoned in it.

He turned off into a side passage and quickly emerged into another, broader corridor, which ran parallel to the one down which he had come, and which was at the moment deserted. He followed this only a few yards, when he again turned back, down another side passage. This brought him back into the corridor he had left, but at a strategic point. A few feet farther up the corridor there was a heavy bolted door, and before it stood a bearded Nemedian in corselet and helmet his back to Conan as he peered up the corridor in the direction of the growing tumult and wildly waving lanterns.

Conan did not hesitate. Slipping the girl to the ground, he ran at the guard swiftly and silently, sword in hand. The man turned just as the king reached him, bawled in surprize and fright and lifted bis pike; but before he could bring the clumsy weapon into play, Conan brought down his sword on the fellow's helmet with a force that would have felled an ox. Helmet and skull gave way together and the guard crumpled to the floor.

In an instant Conan had drawn the massive bolt that barred the door- too heavy for one ordinary man to have manipulated-and called hastily to Albiona, who ran staggering to him. Catching her up unceremoniously with one arm, he bore her through the door and into the outer darkness.

They had come into a narrow alley, black as pitch, walled by the side of the Tower on one hand, and the sheer stone back of a row of buildings on the other. Conan, hurrying through the darkness as swiftly as he dared, felt the latter Wall for doors or windows, but found none.

The great door clanged open behind them, and men poured out, with torches gleaming on breastplates and naked swords. They glared about, bellowing, unable to penetrate the darkness which their torches served to illuminate for only a few feet in any direction, and then rushed down the alley at random-heading in the direction opposite to that taken by Conan and Albiona.

"They'll learn their mistake quick enough," he muttered, increasing his pace. "If we ever find a crack in this infernal wall--damn! The street watch!"

Ahead of them a faint glow became apparent, where the alley opened into a narrow street, and he saw dim figures looming against it with a glimmer of steel. It was indeed the street watch, investigating the noise they had heard echoing down the alley.

"Who goes here?" they shouted, and Conan grit his teeth at the hated Nemedian accent.

"Keep behind me," he ordered the girl. "We've got to cut our way through before the prison guards come back and pin us between them."

And grasping his sword, he ran straight at the oncoming figures.

The advantage of surprize was his. He could see them, limned against the distant glow, and they could not see him coming at them out of the black depths of the alley. He was among them before they knew it, smiting with the silent fury of a wounded lion.

His one chance lay in hacking through before they could gather their wits. But there were half a score of them, in full mail, hardbitten veterans of the border wars, in whom the instinct for battle could take the place of bemused wits. Three of them were down before they realized that it was only one man who was attacking them, but even so their reaction was instantaneous. The clangor of steel rose deafeningly, and sparks flew as Conan's sword crashed on basinet and hauberk. He could see better than they, and in the dim light his swiftly moving figure was an uncertain mark. Flailing swords cut empty air or glanced from his blade, and when he struck, it was with the fury and certainty of a hurricane.

But behind him sounded the shouts of the prison guards, returning up the alley at a run, and still the mailed figures before him barred his way with a bristling wall of steel. In an instant the guards would be on his back-in desperation he redoubled his strokes, flailing like a smith on an anvil, and then was suddenly aware of a diversion. Out of nowhere behind the watchmen rose a score of black figures and there was a sound of blows, murderously driven. Steel glinted in the gloom, and men cried out, struck mortally from behind. In an instant the

alley was littered with writhing forms. A dark, cloaked shape sprang toward Conan, who heaved up his sword, catching a gleam of steel in the right hand. But the other was extended to him empty and a voice hissed urgently: "This way, your Majesty! Quickly!"

With a muttered oath of surprize, Conan caught up Albiona in one massive arm, and followed his unknown befriender. He was not inclined to hesitate, with thirty prison guardsmen closing in behind him.

Surrounded by mysterious figures he hurried down the alley, carrying the countess as if she had been a child. He could tell nothing of his rescuers except that they wore dark cloaks and hoods. Doubt and suspicion crossed his mind, but at least they had struck down his enemies, and he saw no better course than to follow them.

As if sensing his doubt, the leader touched his arm lightly and said: "Fear not, King Conan; we are your loyal subjects." The voice was not familiar, but the accent was Aquilonian of the central provinces.

Behind them the guards were yelling as they stumbled over the shambles in the mud, and they came pelting vengefully down the alley, seeing the vague dark mass moving between them and the light of the distant street. But the hooded men turned suddenly toward the seemingly blank wall, and Conan saw a door gape there. He muttered a curse. He had traversed that alley by day, in times past, and had never noticed a door there. But through it they went, and the door closed behind them with the click of a lock. The sound was not reassuring, but his guides were hurrying him on, moving with the precision of familiarity, guiding Conan with a hand at either elbow. It was like traversing a tunnel, and Conan felt Albiona's lithe limbs trembling in his arms. Then somewhere ahead of them an opening was faintly visible, merely a somewhat less black arch in the blackness, and through this they filed.

After that there was a bewildering succession of dim courts and shadowy alleys and winding corridors, all traversed in utter silence, until at last they emerged into a broad lighted chamber, the location of which Conan could not even guess, for their devious route had confused even his primitive sense of direction.

Chapter 10
: A Coin from Acheron

NOT ALL HIS guides entered the chamber. When the door closed, Conan saw only one man standing before him-a slim figure, masked in a black cloak with a hood. This the man threw back, disclosing a pale oval of a face, with calm, delicately chiseled features.

The king set Albiona on her feet, but she still clung to him and stared apprehensively about her. The chamber was a large one, with marble walls partly covered with black velvet hangings and thick rich carpets on the mosaic floor, laved in the soft golden glow of bronze lamps.

Conan instinctively laid a hand on his hilt. There was blood on his hand, blood clotted about the mouth of his scabbard, for he had sheathed his blade without cleansing it.

"Where are we?" he demanded.

The stranger answered with a low, profound bow in which the suspicious king could detect no trace of irony.

"In the temple of Asura, your Majesty."

Albiona cried out faintly and clung closer to Conan, staring fearfully at the black, arched doors, as if expecting the entry of some grisly shape of darkness.

"Fear not, my lady," said their guide. "There is nothing here to harm you, vulgar superstition to the contrary. If your monarch was sufficiently convinced of the innocence of our religion to protect us from the persecution of the ignorant, then certainly one of his subjects need have no apprehensions."

"Who are you?" demanded Conan.

"I am Hadrathus, priest of Asura. One of my followers recognized you when you entered the city, and brought the word to me."

Conan grunted profanely.

"Do not fear that others discovered your identity," Hadrathus assured him. "Your disguise would have deceived any but a follower of Asura, whose cult it is to seek below the aspect of illusion. You were followed to the watch tower, and some of my people went into the tunnel to aid you if you returned by that route. Others, myself among them, surrounded the tower. And now, King Conan, it is yours to command. Here in the temple of Asura you are still king."

"Why should you risk your lives for me?" asked the king.

"You were our friend when you sat upon your throne," answered Hadrathus. "You protected us when the priests of Mitra sought to scourge us out of the land."

Conan looked about him curiously. He had never before visited the temple of Asura, had not certainly known that there was such a temple in Tarantia. The priests of the religion had a habit of hiding their temples in a remarkable fashion. The worship of Mitra was overwhelmingly predominant in the Hyborian nations, but the cult of Asura persisted, in spite of official ban and popular antagonism. Conan had been told dark tales of hidden temples where intense smoke drifted up incessantly from black altars where kidnaped humans were sacrificed before a great coiled serpent, whose fearsome head swayed for ever in the haunted shadows.

Persecution caused the followers of Asura to hide their temples with cunning art, and to veil they rituals in obscurity; and this secrecy, in turn, evoked more monstrous suspicions and tales of evil.

But Conan's was the broad tolerance of the barbarian, and he had refused to persecute the followers of Asura or to allow the people to do so on no better evidence than was presented against them, rumors and accusations that could not be proven. "If they are black magicians," he had said, "how will they suffer you to harry them? If they are not, there is no evil in them. Crom's devils! Let men worship what gods they will."

At a respectful invitation from Hadrathus he seated himself on an ivory chair, and motioned Albiona to another, but she preferred to sit on a golden stool at his feet, pressing close against his thigh, as if seeking security in the contact. Like most orthodox followers of Mitra, she had an intuitive horror of the followers and cult of Asura, instilled in her infancy and childhood by wild tales of human sacrifice and anthropomorphic gods shambling through shadowy temples.

Hadrathus stood before them, his uncovered head bowed.

"What is your wish, your Majesty?"

"Food first," he grunted, and the priest smote a golden gong with a silver wand.

Scarcely had the mellow notes ceased echoing when four hooded figures came through a curtained doorway bearing a great four-legged silver platter of smoking dishes and crystal vessels.

This they set before Conan, bowing low, and the king wiped his hands on the damask, and smacked his lips with unconcealed relish.

"Beware, your Majesty!" whispered Albiona. "These folk eat human flesh!"

"I'll stake my kingdom that this is nothing but honest roast beef," answered Conan. "Come, lass, fall to! You must be hungry after the prison fare."

Thus advised, and with the example before her of one whose word was the ultimate law to her, the countess complied, and ate ravenously though daintily, while her liege lord tore into the meat joints and guzzled the wine with as much gusto as if he had not already eaten once that night.

"You priests are shrewd, Hadrathus," he said, with a great beef-bone in his hands and his mouth full of meat. "I'd welcome your service in my campaign to regain my kingdom."

Slowly Hadrathus shook his head, and Conan slammed the beef-bone down on the table in a gust of impatient wrath.

"Crom's devils! What ails the men of Aquilonia? First Servius--now you! Can you do nothing but wag your idiotic heads when I speak of ousting these dogs?"

Hadrathus sighed and answered slowly: "My lord, it is ill to say, and I fain would say otherwise. But the freedom of Aquilonia is at an end! Nay, the freedom of the whole world may be at an end! Age follows age in the history of the world, and now we enter an age of horror and slavery, as it was long ago."

"What do you mean?" demanded the king uneasily.

Hadrathus dropped into a chair and rested his elbows on his thighs, staring at the floor.

"It is not alone the rebellious lords of Aquilonia and the armies of Nemedia which are arrayed against you," answered Hadrathus. "It is sorcery-grisly black magic from the grim youth of the world. An awful shape has risen out of the shades of the Past, and none can stand before it."

"What do you mean?" Conan repeated.

"I speak of Xaltotun of Acheron, who died three thousand years ago, yet walks the earth today."

Conan was silent, while in his mind floated an image-the image of a bearded face of calm inhuman beauty. Again he was haunted by a sense of uneasy familiarity. Acheron-the sound of the word roused instinctive vibrations of memory and associations in his mind.

"Acheron," he repeated. "Xaltotun of Acheron-man, are you mad? Acheron has been a myth for more centuries than I can remember. I've often wondered if it ever existed at all."

"It was a black reality," answered Hadrathus, "an empire of black magicians, steeped in evil now long forgotten. It was finally overthrown by the Hyborian tribes of the west. The wizards of Acheron practised foul necromancy, thaumaturgy of the most evil kind, grisly magic taught them by devils. And of all the sorcerers of that accursed kingdom, none was so great as Xaltotun of Python."

"Then how was he ever overthrown?" asked Conan skeptically.

"By some means a source of cosmic power which he jealously guarded was stolen and turned against him. That source has been returned to him, and he is invincible."

Albiona, hugging the headsman's black cloak about her, stared from the priest to the king, not understanding the conversation. Conan shook his head angrily.

"You are making game of me," he growled. "If Xaltotun has been dead three thousand years, how can this man be he? It's some rogue who's taken the old one's name."

Hadrathus leaned to an ivory table and opened a small gold chest which stood there. From it he took something which glinted dully in the mellow light-a broad gold coin of antique minting.

"You have seen Xaltotun unveiled? Then look upon this. It is a coin which was stamped in ancient Acheron, before its fall. So pervaded with sorcery was that black empire, that even this corn has its uses in making magic."

Conan took it and scowled down at it. There was no mistaking its great antiquity. Conan had handled many coins in the years of his plunderings, and had a good practical knowledge of them. The edges were worn and the inscription almost obliterated. But the countenance stamped on one side was still clear-cut and distinct. And Conan's breath sucked in between his clenched teeth. It was not cool in the chamber, but he felt a prickling of his scalp, an icy contraction of his flesh. The countenance was that of a bearded man, inscrutable, with a calm inhuman beauty.

"By Crom! It's he!" muttered Conan. He understood, now, the sense of familiarity that the sight of the bearded man had roused in him from the first. He had seen a coin like this once before, long ago in a far land.

With a shake of his shoulders he growled: "The likeness is only a coincidence-or if he's shrewd enough to assume a forgotten wizard's name, he's shrewd enough to assume his likeness." But he spoke without conviction. The sight of that coin had shaken the foundations of his universe. He felt that reality and stability were crumbling into an abyss of illusion and sorcery. A wizard was understandable; but this was diabolism beyond sanity.

"We cannot doubt that it is indeed Xaltotun of Python," said Hadrathus. "He it was who shook down the cliffs at Valkia, by his spells that enthrall the elementals of the earth-he it was who sent the creature of darkness into your tent before dawn."

Conan scowled at him. "How did you know that?"

"The followers of Asura have secret channels of knowledge. That does not matter. But do you realize the futility of sacrificing your subjects in a vain attempt to regain your crown?"

Conan rested his chin on his fist, and stared grimly into nothing. Albiona watched him anxiously, her mind groping bewildered in the mazes of the problem that confronted him.

"Is there no wizard in the world who could make magic to fight Xaltotun's magic?" he asked at last.

Hadrathus shook his head. "If there were, we of Asura would know of him. Men say our cult is a survival of the ancient Stygian serpent- worship. That is a lie. Our ancestors came from Vendhya, beyond the Sea of Vilayet and the blue Himelian mountains. We are sons of the East, not the South, and we have knowledge of all the wizards of the East, who are greater than the wizards of the West. And not one of them but would be a straw in the wind before the black might of Xaltotun."

"But he was conquered once," persisted Conan.

"Aye; a cosmic source was turned against him. But now that source is again in his hands, and he will see that it is not stolen again."

"And what is this damnable source?" demanded Conan irritably.

"It is called the Heart of Ahriman. When Acheron was overthrown, the primitive priest who had stolen it and turned it against Xaltotun hid it in a haunted cavern and built a small temple over the cavern. Thrice thereafter the temple was rebuilt, each time greater and more elaborately than before, but always on the site of the original shrine, though men forgot the reason therefor. Memory of the hidden symbol faded from the minds of common men, and was preserved only in priestly books and esoteric volumes. Whence it came no one knows. Some say it is the veritable heart of a god, others that it is a star that fell from the skies long ago. Until it was stolen, none had looked upon it for three thousand years.

"When the magic of the Mitran priests failed against the magic of Xaltotun's acolyte, Altaro, they remembered the ancient legend of the Heart, and the high priest and an acolyte went down into the dark and terrible crypt below the temple into which no priest had descended for three thousand years. In the ancient iron-bound volumes which speak of the Heart in their cryptic symbolism, it is also told of a creature of darkness left by the ancient priest to guard it."

"Far down in a square chamber with arched doorways leading off into immeasurable blackness, the priest and his acolytes found a black stone altar that glowed dimly with inexplicable radiance.

"On that altar lay a curious gold vessel like a double-valved sea- shell which clung to the stone like a barnacle. But it gaped open and empty. The Heart of Ahriman was gone. While they stared in horror, the keeper of the crypt, the creature of darkness, came upon them and mangled the high priest so that he died. But the acolyte fought off the being-a mindless, soulless waif of the pits brought long ago to guard the Heart-and escaped up the long black narrow stairs carrying the dying priest, who before he died, gasped out the news to his followers, bade them submit to a power they could not overcome, and commanded secrecy. But the word has been whispered about among the priests, and we of Asura learned of it."

"And Xaltotun draws his power from this symbol?" asked Conan, still skeptical.

"No. His power is drawn from the black gulf. But the Heart of Ahriman came from some far universe of flaming light, and against it the powers of darkness cannot stand, when it is in the hands of an adept. It is like a sword that might smite at him, not a sword with which he can smite. It restores life, and can destroy life. He has stolen it, not to use it against his enemies, but to keep them from using it against him."

"A shell-shaped bowl of gold on a black altar in a deep cavern," Conan muttered, frowning as he sought to capture the illusive image. "That reminds me of something I have heard or seen. But what, in Crom's name, is this notable Heart?"

"It is in the form of a great jewel, like a ruby, but pulsing with blinding fire with which no ruby ever burned. It glows like living flame--"

But Conan sprang suddenly up and smote his right fist into his left palm like a thunderclap.

"Crom!" he roared. "What a fool I've been! The Heart of Ahriman! The heart of my kingdom! Find the heart of my kingdom, Zeiata said. By Ymir, it was the jewel I saw in the green Smoke, the jewel which Tarascus stole from Xaltotun while he lay in the sleep of the black lotus!"

Hadrathus was also on his feet, his calm dropped from him like a garment.

"What are you saying? The Heart stolen from Xaltotun?"

"Aye!" Conan boomed. "Tarascus feared Xaltotun and wanted to cripple his power, which he thought resided in the Heart. Maybe he thought the wizard would die if the Heart was lost. By Crom-ahhh!" With a savage grimace of disappointment and disgust he dropped his clenched hand to his side.

"I forgot. Tarascus gave it to a thief to throw into the sea. By this time the fellow must be almost to Kordava. Before I can follow him he'll take ship and consign the Heart to the bottom of the ocean."

"The sea will not hold it!" exclaimed Hadrathus, quivering with excitement. "Xaltotun would himself have cast it into the ocean long ago, had he not known that the first storm would carry it ashore. But on what unknown beach might it not land!"

"Well," Conan was recovering some of his resilient confidence, "there's no assurance that the thief will throw it away. If I know thieves-and I should, for I was a thief in Zamora in my early youth-he won't throw it away. He'll sell it to some rich trader. By Crom!" He strode back and forth in his growing excitement. "It's worth looking for! Zelata bade me find the heart of my kingdom, and all else she showed me proved to be truth. Can it be that the power to conquer Xaltotun lurks in that crimson bauble?"

"Aye! My head upon it!" cried Hadrathus, his face lightened with fervor, his eyes blazing, his fists clenched. "With it in our hands we can dare the powers of Xaltotun! I swear it! If we can recover it, we have an even chance of recovering your crown and; driving the invaders from our portals. It is not the swords of Nemedia that Aquilonia fears, but the black arts of Xaltotun."

Conan looked at him for a space, impressed by the priest's fire.

"It's like a quest in a nightmare," he said at last. "Yet your words echo the thought of Zeiata, and all else she said was truth. I'll seek for this jewel."

"It holds the destiny of Aquilonia," said Hadrathus with conviction. "I will send men with you--"

"Nay!" exclaimed the king impatiently, not caring to be hampered by priests on his quest, however skilled in esoteric arts. "This is a task for a fighting-man. I go alone. First to Poitain, where I'll leave Albiona with Trocero. Then to Kordava, and to the sea beyond, if necessary. It may be that, even if the thief intends carrying out Tarascus's order, he'll have some difficulty finding an outbound ship at this time of the year."

"And if you find the Heart," cried Hadrathus, "I will prepare the way for your conquest. Before you return to Aquilonia I will spread the word through secret channels that you live and are returning with a magic stronger than Xaltotun's. I will have men ready to rise on your return. They will rise, if they have assurance that they will be protected from the black arts of Xaltotun.

"And I will aid you on your journey."

He rose and struck the gong.

"A secret tunnel leads from beneath this temple to a place outside the city wall. You shall go to Poitain on a pilgrim's boat. None will dare molest you."

"As you will." With a definite purpose in mind Conan was afire with impatience and dynamic energy. "Only let it be done swiftly."

In the meantime events were moving not slowly elsewhere in the city. A breathless messenger had burst into the palace where Valerius was amusing himself with his dancing-girls, and throwing himself on his knee, gasped out a garbled story of a bloody prison break and the escape of a lovely captive. He bore also the news that Count Thespius, to whom the execution of Albiona's sentence had been entrusted, was dying and begging for a word with Valerius before he passed. Hurriedly cloaking himself, Valerius accompanied the man through various winding ways, and came to a chamber where Thespius lay. There was no doubt that the count was dying; bloody froth bubbled from his lips at each shuddering gasp. His severed arm had been bound to stop the flow of blood, but even without that, the gash in his side was mortal.

Alone in the chamber with the dying man, Valerius swore softly.

"By Mitra, I had believed that only one man ever lived who could strike such a blow."

"Valerius!" gasped the dying man. "He lives! Conan lives!"

"What are you saying?" ejaculated the other.

"I swear by Mitra!" gurgled Thespius, gagging on the blood that gushed to his lips. "It was he who carried off Albiona! He is not dead-no phantom come back from hell to haunt us. He is flesh and blood, and more terrible than ever. The alley behind the tower is full of dead men. Beware, Valerius--he has come back--to slay us all--"

A strong shudder shook the blood-smeared figure, and Count Thespius went limp.

Valerius frowned down at the dead man, cast a swift glance about the empty chamber, and stepping swiftly to the door, cast it open suddenly. The messenger and a group of Nemedian guardsmen stood several paces down the corridor. Valerius muttered something that might have indicated satisfaction.

"Have all the gates been closed?" he demanded.

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Triple the guards at each. Let no one enter or leave the city without strictest investigation. Set men scouring the streets and searching the quarters. A very valuable prisoner has escaped, with the aid of an Aquilonian rebel. Did any of you recognize the man?"

"No, your Majesty. The old watchman had a glimpse of him, but could only say that he was a giant, clad in the black garb of the executioner, whose naked body we found in an empty cell."

"He is a dangerous man," said Valerius. "Take no chances with him. You all know the Countess Albiona. Search for her, and if you find her, kill her and her companion instantly. Do not try to take them alive."

Returning to his palace chamber, Valerius summoned before him four men of curious and alien aspect. They were tall, gaunt, of yellowish skin, and immobile countenances. They were very similar in appearance, clad alike in long black robes beneath which their sandaled feet were just visible. Their features were shadowed by their hoods. They stood before Valerius with their hands in their wide sleeves; their arms folded. Valerius looked at them without pleasure. In his far joumeyings he had encountered many strange races.

"When I found you starving in the Khitan jungles," he said abruptly, "exiles from your kingdom, you swore to serve me. You have served me well enough, in your abominable way. One more service I require, and then I set you free of your oath."

"Conan the Cimmerian, king of Aquilonia, still lives, in spite of Xaltotun's sorcery-or perhaps because of it. I know not. The dark mind of that resurrected devil is too devious and subtle for a mortal man to fathom. But while Conan lives I am not safe. The people accepted me as the lesser of two evils, when they thought he was dead. Let him reappear and the throne will be rocking under my feet in revolution before I can lift my hand.

"Perhaps my allies mean to use him to replace me, if they decide I have served my purpose. I do not know. I do know that this planet is too small for two kings of Aquilonia. Seek the Cimmerian. Use your uncanny talents to ferret him out wherever he hides or runs. He has many friends in Tarantia. He had aid when he carried off Albiona. It took more than one man, even such a man as Conan, to wreak all that slaughter in the alley outside the tower. But no more. Take your staffs and strike his trail. Where that trail will lead you, I know not. But find him! And when you find him, slay him!"

The four Khitans bowed together, and still unspeaking, turned and padded noiselessly from the chamber.

Chapter 11

: Swords of the South

DAWN THAT ROSE over the distant hills shone on the sails of a small craft that dropped down the river which curves to within a mile of the walls of Tarantia, and loops southward like a great shining serpent. This boat differed from the ordinary craft plying the broad Khorotas- fishermen and merchant barges loaded with rich goods. It was long and slender, with a high, curving prow, and was black as ebony, with white skulls painted along the gunwales. Amidships rose a small cabin, the windows closely masked. Other craft gave the ominously painted boat a wide berth; for it was obviously one of those "pilgrim boats" that carried a lifeless follower of Asura on his last mysterious pilgrimage southward to where, far beyond the Poitanian mountains, a river flowed at last into the blue ocean. In that cabin undoubtedly lay the corpse of the departed worshipper. All men were familiar with the sight of those gloomy craft; and the most fanatical votary of Mitra would not dare touch or interfere with their somber voyages.

Where the ultimate destination lay, men did not know. Some said Stygia; some a nameless island lying beyond the horizon; others said it was in the glamorous and mysterious land of Vendhya where the dead came home at last. But none knew certainly. They only knew that when a follower of Asura died, the corpse went southward down the great river, in a black boat rowed by a giant slave, and neither boat nor corpse nor slave was ever seen again; unless, indeed, certain dark tales were true, and it was always the same slave who rowed the boats southward.

The man who propelled this particular boat was as huge and brown as the others, though closer scrutiny might have revealed the fact that the hue was the result of carefully applied pigments. He was clad in leather loin-clout and sandals, and he handled the long sweep and oars with unusual skill and power. But none approached the grim boat closely, for it was well known that the followers of Asura were accursed, and that these pilgrim boats were loaded with dark magic. So men swung their boats wide and muttered an incantation as the dark craft slid past, and they never dreamed that they were thus assisting in the flight of their king and the Countess Albiona.

It was a strange journey, in that black, slim craft down the great river for nearly two hundred miles to where the Khorotas swings eastward, skirting the Poitanian mountains. Like a dream the ever- changing panorama glided past. During the day Albiona lay patiently in the little cabin, as quietly as the corpse she pretended to be. Only late at night, after the pleasure boats with their fair occupants lounging on silken cushions in the flare of torches held by slaves had left the river, before dawn brought the hurrying fisher-boats, did the girl venture out. Then she held the long sweep, cunningly bound in place by ropes to aid her, while Conan snatched a few hours of sleep. But the king needed little rest. The ardor of his desire drove him relentlessly; and his powerful frame was equal to the grinding test. Without halt or pause they drove southward.

So down the river they fled, through nights when the flowing current mirrored the million stars, and through days of golden Sunlight, leaving winter behind them as they sped southward. They passed cities in the night, above which throbbed and pulsed; the reflection of the myriad lights, lordly river villas and fertile fruit groves. So at last the blue mountains of Poitain rose above them, tier above tier, like ramparts of the gods, and the great river, swerving from those turreted cliffs, swept thunderously through the marching hills with many a rapid and foaming cataract.

Conan scanned the shore-line closely, and finally swung the long sweep and headed inshore at a point where a neck of land jutted into the water, and fir trees grew in a curiously symmetrical ring about a gray, strangely shaped rock.

"How these boats ride those falls we hear roaring ahead of us is more than I can see," he grunted. "Hadrathus said they did-but there's where we halt. He said a man would be waiting for us with horses, but I don't see anyone. How word of our coming could have preceded us I don't know anyway."

He drove inshore and bound the prow to an arching root in the low bank, and then, plunging into the water, washed the brown paint from his skin and emerged dripping, and in his natural color. From the cabin he brought forth a suit of Aquilonian ring-mail which Hadrathus had procured for him, and his sword. These he donned while Albiona put on garments suitable for mountain travel. And when Conan was fully armed, and turned to look toward the shore, he started and his hand went to his sword. For on the shore, under the trees, stood a black- cloaked figure holding the reins of a white palfrey and a bay war- horse.

"Who are you?" demanded the king.

The other bowed low.

"A follower of Asura. A command came. I obeyed."

"How, 'came'?" inquired Conan, but the other merely bowed again.

"I have come to guide you through the mountains to the first Poitanian stronghold."

"I don't need a guide," answered Conan. "I know these hills well. I thank you for the horses, but the countess and I will attract less attention alone than if we were accompanied by an acolyte of Asura."

The man bowed profoundly, and giving the reins into Conan's hands, stepped into the boat. Casting off, he floated down the swift current, toward the distant roar of the unseen rapids. With a baffled shake of his head, Conan lifted the countess into the palfrey's saddle, and then mounted the war-horse and reined toward the summits that castellated the sky.

The rolling country at the foot of the towering mountains were now a borderland, in a state of turmoil, where the barons reverted to feudal practises, and bands of outlaws roamed unhindered. Poitain had not formally declared her separation from Aquilonia, but she was now, to all intents, a self-contained kingdom, ruled by her hereditary count, Trocero. The rolling south country had submitted nominally to Valerius, but he had not attempted to force the passes guarded by strongholds where the crimson leopard banner of Poitain waved defiantly.

The king and his fair companion rode up the long blue slopes in the soft evening. As they mounted higher, the rolling country spread out like a vast purple mantle far beneath them, shot with the shine of rivers and lakes, the yellow glint of broad fields, and the white gleam of distant towers. Ahead of them and far above, they glimpsed the first of the Poitanian holds-a strong fortress dominating a narrow pass, the crimson banner streaming against the clear blue sky.

Before they reached it, a band of knights in burnished armor rode from among the trees, and their leader sternly ordered the travelers to halt. They were tall men, with the dark eyes and raven locks of the south.

"Halt, sir, and state your business, and why you ride toward Poitain."

"Is Poitain in revolt then," asked Conan, watching the other closely, "that a man in Aquilonian harness is halted and questioned like a foreigner?"

"Many rogues ride out of Aquilonia these days," answered the other coldly. "As for revolt, if you mean the repudiation of a usurper, then Poitain is in revolt. We had rather serve the memory of a dead man than the scepter of a living dog."

Conan swept off his helmet, and shaking back his black mane stared full at the speaker. The Poitanian stared violently and went livid.

"Saints of heaven!" he gasped. "It is the king-alive!"

The others stared wildly, then a roar of wonder and joy burst from them. They swarmed about Conan, shouting their war-cries and brandishing their swords in their extreme emotion. The acclaim of Poitanian warriors was a thing to terrify a timid man.

"Oh, but Trocero will weep tears of joy to see you, sire!" cried one.

"Aye, and Prospero!" shouted another. "The general has been like one wrapped in a mantle of melancholy, and curses himself night and day that he did not reach the Valkia in time to die beside his king!"

"Now we will strike for empery!" yelled another, whirling his great sword about his head. "Hail, Conan king of Poitain!"

The clangor of bright steel about him and the thunder of their acclaim frightened the birds that rose in gay-hued clouds from the surrounding trees. The hot southern blood was afire, and they desired nothing but for their new-found sovereign to lead them to battle and pillage.

"What is your command, sire?" they cried. "Let one of us ride ahead and bear the news of your coming into Poitain! Banners will wave from every tower, roses will carpet the road before your horse's feet, and all the beauty and chivalry of the south will give you the honor due you--"

Conan shook his head.

"Who could doubt your loyalty? But winds blow over these mountains into the countries of my enemies, and I would rather these didn't know that I lived-yet. Take me to Trocero, and keep my identity a secret."

So what the knights would have made a triumphal procession was more in the nature of a secret flight. They traveled in haste, speaking to no one, except for a whisper to the captain on duty at each pass; and Conan rode among them with his vizor lowered.

The mountains were uninhabited save by outlaws and garrisons of soldiers who guarded the passes. The pleasure-loving Poi-tanians had no need nor desire to wrest a hard and scanty living from their stem breasts. South of the ranges the rich and beautiful plains of Poitain stretched to the river Alimane; but beyond the river lay the land of Zingara.

Even now, when winter was crisping the leaves beyond the mountains, the tall rich grass waved upon the plains where grazed the horses and cattle for which Poitain was famed. Palm trees and orange groves smiled in the sun, and the gorgeous purple and gold and crimson towers of castles and cities reflected the golden light. It was a land of warmth and plenty, of beautiful men and ferocious warriors. It is not only the hard lands that breed hard men. Poitain was surrounded by covetous neighbors and her sons learned hardihood in incessant wars. To the north the land was guarded by the mountains, but to the south only the Alimane separated the plains of Poitain from the plains of Zingara, and not once but a thousand times had that river run red. To the east lay Argos and beyond that Ophir, proud kingdoms and avaricious. The knights of Poitain held their lands by the weight and edge of their swords, and little of ease and idleness they knew.

So Conan came presently to the castle of Count Trocero.

Conan sat on a silken divan in a rich chamber whose filmy curtains the warm breeze billowed. Trocero paced the floor like a panther, a lithe, restless man with the waist of a woman and the shoulders of a swordsman, who carried his years lightly.

"Let us proclaim you king of Poitain!" urged the count. "Let those northern pigs wear the yoke to which they have bent they necks. The south is still yours. Dwell here and rule us, amid the flowers and the palms."

But Conan shook his head. "There is no nobler land on earth than Poitain. But it cannot stand alone, bold as are its sons."

"It did stand alone for generations," retorted Trocero, with the quick jealous pride of his breed. "We were not always a part of Aquilonia."

"I know. But conditions are not as they were then, when all kingdoms were broken into principalities which warred with each other. The days of dukedoms and free cities are past, the days of empires are upon us. Rulers are dreaming imperial dreams, and only in unity is there strength."

"Then let us unite Zingara with Poitain," argued Trocero. "Half a dozen princes strive against each other, and the country is torn asunder by civil wars. We will conquer it, province by province, and add it to your dominions. Then with the aid of the Zingarans we will conquer Argos and Ophir. We will build an empire--"

Again Conan shook his head. "Let others dream imperial dreams. I but wish to hold what is mine. I have no desire to rule an empire welded together by blood and fire. It's one thing to seize a throne with the aid of its subjects and rule them with their consent. It's another to subjugate a foreign realm and rule it by fear. I don't wish to be another Valerius. No, Trocero, I'll rule all Aquilonia and no more, or I'll rule nothing."

"Then lead us over the mountains and we will smite the Nemedians."

Conan's fierce eyes glowed with appreciation. "No, Trocero. It would be a vain sacrifice. I've told you what I must do to regain my kingdom. I must find the Heart of Ahriman."

"But this is madness!" protested Trocero. "The maunderings of a heretical priest, the mumblings of a mad witch-woman."

"You were not in my tent before Valkia," answered Conan grimly, involuntarily glancing at his right wrist, on which blue marks still showed faintly. "You didn't see the cliffs thunder down to crush the flower of my army. No, Trocero, I've been convinced. Xaltotun's no mortal man, and only with the Heart of Ahriman can I stand against him. So I'm riding to Kordava, alone."

"But that is dangerous," protested Trocero.

"Life is dangerous," rumbled the king. "I won't go as king of Aquilonia, or even as a knight of Poitain, but as a wandering mercenary, as I rode in Zingara in the old days. Oh, I have enemies enough south of the Alimane, in the lands and the waters of the south. Many who won't know me as king of Aquilonia will remember me as Conan of the Barachan pirates, or Amra of the black corsairs. But I have friends, too, and men who'll aid me for their own private reasons." A faint reminiscent grin touched his lips.

Trocero dropped his hands helplessly and glanced at Albiona, who sat on a near-by divan.

"I understand your doubts, my lord," said she. "But I too saw the coin in the temple of Asura, and look you, Hadrathus said it was dated five hundred years before the fall of Acheron. If Xaltotun, then, is the man pictured on the coin, as his Majesty swears he is, that means he was no common wizard, even in his other life, for the years of his life were numbered by centuries, not as the lives of other men are numbered."

Before Trocero could reply, a respectful rap was heard on the door and a voice called: "My lord, we have caught a man skulking about the castle, who says he wishes to speak with your guest. I await your orders."

"A spy from Aquilonia!" hissed Trocero, catching at his dagger, but Conan lifted his voice and called: "Open the door and let me see him."

The door was opened and a man was framed in it, grasped on either hand by stem-looking men-at-arms. He was a slender man, clad in a dark hooded robe.

"Are you a follower of Asura?" asked Conan.

The man nodded, and the stalwart men-at-arms looked shocked and glanced hesitantly at Trocero.

"The word came southward," said the man. "Beyond the Alimane we can not aid you, for our sect goes no farther southward, but stretches eastward with the Khorotas. But this I have learned: the thief who took the Heart of Ahriman from Tarascus never reached Kordava. In the mountains of Poitain he was slain by robbers. The jewel fell into the hands of their chief, who, not knowing its true nature, and being harried after the destruction of his band by Poitanian knights, sold it to the Kothic merchant Zorathus."

"Ha!" Conan was on his feet, galvanized. "And what of Zorathus?"

"Four days ago he crossed the Alimane, headed for Argos, with a small band of armed servants.

"He's a fool to cross Zingara in such times," said Trocero.

"Aye, times are troublous across the river. But Zorathus is a bold man, and reckless in his way. He is in great haste to reach Messantia, where he hopes to find a buyer for the jewel. Perhaps he hopes to sell it finally in Stygia. Perhaps he guesses at its true nature. At any rate, instead of following the long road that winds along the borders of Poitain and so at last comes into Argos far from Messantia, he has struck straight across eastern Zingara, following the shorter and more direct route."

Conan smote the table with his clenched fist so that the great board quivered.

"Then, by Crom, fortune has at last thrown the dice for me! A horse, Trocero, and the harness of a Free Companion! Zorathus has a long start, but not too long for me to overtake him, if I follow him to the end of the world!"

Chapter 12

: The Fang of the Dragon

AT DAWN CONAN waded his horse across the shallows of the Alimane and struck the wide caravan trail which ran southeastward, and behind him, on the farther bank, Trocero sat his horse silently at the head of his steel-clad knights, with the crimson leopard of Poitain floating its long folds over him in the morning breeze. Silently they sat, those dark-haired men in shining steel, until the figure of their king had vanished in the blue of distance that whitened toward sunrise.

Conan rode a great black stallion, the gift of Trocero. He no longer wore the armor of Aquilonia. His harness proclaimed him a veteran of the Free Companies, who were of all races. His headpiece was a plain morion, dented and battered. The leather and mail-mesh of his hauberk were worn and shiny as if by many campaigns, and the scarlet cloak flowing carelessly from his mailed shoulders was tattered and stained. He looked the part of the hired fighting-man, who had known all vicissitudes of fortune, plunder and wealth one day, an empty purse and a close-drawn belt the next.

And more than looking the part, he felt the part; the awakening of old memories, the resurge of the wild, mad, glorious days of old before his feet were set on the imperial path when he was a wandering mercenary, roistering, brawling, guzzling, adventuring, with no thought for the morrow, and no desire save sparkling ale, red lips, and a keen sword to swing on all the battlefields of the world.

Unconsciously he reverted to the old ways; a new swagger became evident in his bearing, in the way he sat his horse; half-forgotten oaths rose naturally to his lips, and as he rode he hummed old songs that he had roared in chorus with his reckless companions in many a tavern and on many a dusty road or bloody field.

It was an unquiet land through which he rode. The companies of cavalry which usually patrolled the river, alert for raids out of Poitain, were nowhere in evidence. Internal strife had left the borders unguarded: The long white road stretched bare from horizon to horizon. No laden camel trains or rumbling wagons or lowing herds moved along it now; only occasional groups of horsemen in leather and steel, hawk- faced, hard-eyed men, who kept together and rode warily. These swept Conan with their searching gaze but rode on, for the solitary rider's harness promised no plunder, but only hard strokes.

Villages lay in ashes and deserted, the fields and meadows idle. Only the boldest would ride the roads these days, and the native population had been decimated in the civil wars, and by raids from across the river. In more peaceful times the road was thronged with merchants riding Poitain to Messantia in Argos, or back. But now these found it wiser to follow the road that led east through Poitain, and then turned south down across Argos. It was longer, but safer. Only an extremely reckless man would risk his life and goods on this road through Zingara.

The southern horizon was fringed with flame by night, and in the day straggling pillars of smoke drifted upward; in the cities and plains to the south men were dying, thrones were toppling and castles going up in flames. Conan felt the old tug of the professional fighting-man, to turn his horse and plunge into the fighting, the pillaging and the looting as in the days of old. Why should he toil to regain the rule of a people which had already forgotten him?-why chase a will-o'-the- wisp, why pursue a crown that was lost for ever? Why should he not seek forgetfulness, lose himself in the red tides of war and rapine that had engulfed him so often before? Could he not, indeed, carve out another kingdom for himself? The world was entering an age of iron, an age of war and imperialistic ambition; some strong man might well rise above the ruins of nations as a supreme conqueror. Why should it not be himself? So his familiar devil whispered in his ear, and the phantoms of his lawless and bloody past crowded upon him. But he did not turn aside; he rode onward, following a quest that grew dimmer and dimmer as he advanced, until sometimes it seemed that he pursued a dream that never was.

He pushed the black stallion as hard as he dared, but the long white road lay before him, from horizon to horizon. It was a long start Zorathus had, but Conan rode steadily on, knowing that he was traveling faster than the burdened merchants could travel. And so he came to the castle of Count Valbroso, perched like a vulture's eyrie on a bare hill overlooking the road.

Valbroso rode down with his men-at-arms, a lean, dark man with glittering eyes and a predatory beak of a nose. He wore black plate- armor and was followed by thirty spearmen, black-mustached hawks of the border wars, as avaricious and ruthless as himself. Of late the toll of the caravans had been slim, and Valbroso cursed the civil wars that stripped the roads of their fat traffic, even while he blessed them for the free hand they allowed him with his neighbors.

He had not hoped much from the solitary rider he had glimpsed from his tower, but all was grist that came to his mill. With a practised eye he took in Oman's worn mail and dark, scarred face, and his conclusions were the same as those of the riders who had passed the Cimmerian on the road-an empty purse and a ready blade.

"Who are you, knave?" he demanded.

"A mercenary, riding for Argos," answered Conan. "What matter names?"

"You are riding in the wrong direction for a Free Companion," grunted Valbroso. "Southward the fighting is good and also the plundering. Join my company. You won't go hungry. The road remains bare of fat merchants to strip, but I mean to take my rogues and fare southward to sell our swords to whichever side seems strongest."

Conan did not at once reply, knowing that if he refused outright, he might be instantly attacked by Valbroso's men-at-arms. Before he could make up his mind, the Zingaran spoke again:

"You rogues of the Free Companies always know tricks to make men talk. I have a prisoner-the last merchant I caught, by Mitra, and the only one I've seen for a week-and the knave is stubborn. He has an iron box, the secret of which defies us, and I've been unable to persuade him to open it. By Ishtar, I thought I knew all the modes of persuasion there are, but perhaps you, as a veteran Free Companion, know some that I do not. At any rate come with me and see what you may do."

Valbroso's words instantly decided Conan. That sounded a great deal like Zorathus. Conan did not know the merchant, but any man who was stubborn enough to try to traverse the Zingaran road in times like these would very probably be stubborn enough to defy torture.

He fell in beside Valbroso and rode up the straggling road to the top of the hill where the gaunt castle stood. As a man-at-arms he should have ridden behind the count, but force of habit made him careless and Valbroso paid no heed. Years of life on the border had taught the count that the frontier is not the royal court. He was aware of the independence of the mercenaries, behind whose swords many a king had trodden the throne-path.

There was a dry moat, half filled with debris in some places. They clattered across the drawbridge and through the arch of the gate. Behind them the portcullis fell with a sullen clang. They came into a bare courtyard, grown with straggling grass, and with a well in the middle. Shacks for the men-at-arms straggled about the bailey wall, and women, slatternly or decked in gaudy finery, looked from the doors. Fighting-men in rusty mail tossed dice on the flags under the arches. It was more like a bandit's hold than the castle of a nobleman.

Valbroso dismounted and motioned Conan to follow him. They went through a doorway and along a vaulted corridor, where they were met by a scarred, hard-looking man in mail descending a stone staircase- evidently the captain of the guard.

"How, Beloso," quoth Valbroso; "has he spoken?"

"He is stubborn," muttered Beloso, shooting a glance of suspicion at Conan.

Valbroso ripped out an oath and stamped furiously up the winding stair, followed by Conan and the captain. As they mounted, the groans of a man in mortal agony became audible. Valbroso's torture-room was high above the court, instead of in a dungeon below. In that chamber, where a gaunt, hairy beast of a man in leather breeks squatted gnawing a beef-bone voraciously, stood the machines of torture-racks, boots, hooks and all the implements that the human mind devises to tear flesh, break bones and rend and rupture veins and ligaments.

On a rack a man was stretched naked, and a glance told Conan that he was dying. The unnatural elongation of his limbs and body told of unhinged joints and unnamable ruptures. He was a dark man, with an intelligent, aquiline face and quick dark eyes. They were glazed and bloodshot now with pain, and the dew of agony glistened on his face. His lips were drawn back from blackened gums.

"There is the box." Viciously Valbroso kicked a small but heavy iron chest that stood on the floor near by. It was intricately carved, with tiny skulls and writhing dragons curiously intertwined, but Conan saw no catch or hasp that might serve to unlock the lid. The marks of fire, of ax and sledge and chisel showed on it but as scratches.

"This is the dog's treasure box," said Valbroso angrily. "All men of the south know of Zorathus and his iron chest. Mitra knows what is in it. But he will not give up its secret."

Zorathus! It was true, then; the man he sought lay before him. Conan's heart beat suffocatingly as he leaned over the writhing form, though he exhibited no evidence of his painful eagerness.

"Ease those ropes, knave!" he ordered the torturer harshly, and Valbroso and his captain stared. In the forgetfulness of the moment Conan had used his imperial tone, and the brute in leather instinctively obeyed the knife-edge of command in that voice. He eased away gradually, for else the slackening of the ropes had been as great a torment to the torn joints as further stretching.

Catching up a vessel of wine that stood near by, Conan placed the rim to the wretch's lips. Zorathus gulped spasmodically, the liquid slopping over on his heaving breast.

Into the bloodshot eyes came a gleam of recognition, and the froth- smeared lips parted. From them issued a racking whimper in the Kothic tongue.

"Is this death, then? Is the long agony ended? For this is King Conan who died at Valkia, and I am among the dead."

"You're not dead," said Conan. "But you're dying. You'll be tortured no more. I'll see to that. But I can't help you further. Yet before you die, tell me how to open your iron box!"

"My iron box," mumbled Zorathus in delirious disjointed phrases. "The chest forged in unholy fires among the flaming mountains of Khrosha; the metal no chisel can cut. How many treasures has it borne, across the width and the breadth of the world! But no such treasure as it now holds."

"Tell me how to open it," urged Conan. "It can do you no good, and it may aid me."

"Aye, you are Conan," muttered the Kothian. "I have seen you sitting on your throne in the great public hall of Tarantia, with your crown on your head and the scepter in your hand. But you are dead; you died at Valkia. And so I know my own end is at hand."

"What does the dog say?" demanded Valbroso impatiently, not understanding Kothic. "Will he tell us how to open the box?"

As if the voice roused a spark of life in the twisted breast Zorathus rolled his bloodshot eyes toward the speaker.

"Only Valbroso will I tell," he gasped in Zingaran. "Death is upon me. Lean close to me, Valbroso!"

The count did so, his dark face lit with avarice; behind him his saturnine captain, Beloso, crowded closer.

"Press the seven skulls on the rim, one after another," gasped Zorathus. "Press then the head of the dragon that writhes across the lid. Then press the sphere in the dragon's claws. That will release the secret catch."

"Quick, the box!" cried Valbroso with an oath.

Conan lifted it and set it on a dais, and Valbroso shouldered him aside.

"Let me open it!" cried Beloso, starting forward.

Valbroso cursed him back, his greed blazing in his black eyes.

"None but me shall open it!" he cried.

Conan, whose hand had instinctively gone to his hilt, glanced at Zorathus. The man's eyes were glazed and bloodshot, but they were fixed on Valbroso with burning intensity; and was there the shadow of a grim twisted smile on the dying man's lips? Not until the merchant knew he was dying had he given up the secret. Conan turned to watch Valbroso, even as the dying man watched him.

Along the rim of the lid seven skulls were carved among intertwining branches of strange trees. An inlaid dragon writhed its way across the top of the lid, amid ornate arabesques. Valbroso pressed the skulls in rumbling haste, and as he jammed his thumb down on the carved head of the dragon he swore sharply and snatched his hand away, shaking it in irritation.

"A sharp point on the carvings," he snarled. "I've pricked my thumb."

He pressed the gold ball clutched in the dragon's talons, and the lid flew abruptly open. Their eyes were dazzled by a golden flame. It seemed to their dazed minds that the carven box was full of glowing fire that spilled over the rim and dripped through the air in quivering flakes. Beloso cried out and Valbroso sucked in his breath. Conan stood speechless, his brain snared by the blaze.

"Mitra, what a jewel!" Valbroso's hand dived into the chest, came out with a great pulsing crimson sphere that filled the room with a lambent glow. In its glare Valbroso looked like a corpse. And the dying man on the loosened rack laughed wildly and suddenly.

"Fool!" he screamed. "The jewel is yours! I give you death with it! The scratch on your thumb-look at the dragon's head, Valbroso!"

They all wheeled, stared. Something tiny and dully gleaming stood up from the gaping, carved mouth.

"The dragon's fang!" shrieked Zorathus. "Steeped in the venom of the black Stygian scorpion! Fool, fool to open the box of Zorathus with your naked hand! Death! You are a dead man now!"

And with bloody foam on his lips he died.

Valbroso staggered, crying out. "Ah, Mitra, I burn!" he shrieked. "My veins race with liquid fire! My joints are bursting asunder! Death! Death!" And he reeled and crashed headlong. There was an instant of awful convulsions, in which the limbs were twisted into hideous and unnatural positions, and then inthat posture the man froze, his glassy eyes staring sightlessly upward, his lips drawn back from blackened gums.

"Dead!" muttered Conan, stooping to pick up the jewel where it rolled on the floor from Valbroso's rigid hand. It lay on the floor like a quivering pool of sunset fire.

"Dead!" muttered Beloso, with madness in his eyes. And then he moved.

Conan was caught off guard, his eyes dazzled, his brain dazed by the blaze of the great gem. He did not realize Beloso's intention until something crashed with terrible force upon his helmet. The glow of the jewel was splashed with redder flame, and he went to his knees under the blow.

He heard a rush of feet, a bellow of ox-like agony. He was stunned but not wholly senseless, and realized that Beloso had caught up the iron box and crashed it down on his head as he stooped. Only his basinet had saved his skull. He staggered up, drawing his sword, trying to shake the dimness out of his eyes. The room swam to his dizzy gaze. But the door was open and fleet footsteps were dwindling down the winding stair. On the floor the brutish torturer was gasping out his life with a great gash under his breast. And the Heart of Ahriman was gone.

Conan reeled out of the chamber, sword in hand, blood streaming down his face from under his burganet. He ran drunkenly down the steps, hearing a clang of steel in the courtyard below, shouts, then the frantic drum of hoofs. Rushing into the bailey he saw the men-at-arms milling about confusedly, while women screeched. The postern gate stood open and a soldier lay across his pike with his head split. Horses, still bridled and saddled, ran neighing about the court, Conan's black stallion among them.

"He's mad!" howled a woman, wringing her hands as she rushed brainlessly about. "He came out of the castle like a mad dog, hewing right and left! Beloso's mad! Where's Lord Valbroso?"

"Which way did he go?" roared Conan. All turned and stared at the stranger's blood-stained face and naked sword. "Through the postern!" shrilled a woman, pointing eastward, and another bawled: "Who is this rogue?"

"Beloso has killed Valbroso!" yelled Conan, leaping and seizing the stallion's mane, as the men-at-arms advanced uncertainly on him. A wild outcry burst forth at his news, but their reaction was exactly as he had anticipated. Instead of closing the gates to take him prisoner, or pursuing the fleeing slayer to avenge their lord, they were thrown into even greater confusion by his words. Wolves bound together only by fear of Valbroso, they owed no allegiance to the castle or to each other.

Swords began to clash in the courtyard, and women screamed. And in the midst of it all, none noticed Conan as he shot through the postem gate and thundered down the hill. The wide plain spread before him, and beyond the hill the caravan road divided: one branch ran south, the other east. And on the eastern road he saw another rider, bending low and spurring hard. The plain swam to Conan's gaze, the sunlight was a thick red haze and he reeled in his saddle, grasping the flowing mane with his hand. Blood rained on his mail, but grimly he urged the stallion on.

Behind him smoke began to pour out of the castle on the hill where the count's body lay forgotten and unheeded beside that of his prisoner. The sun was setting; against a lurid red sky the two black figures fled. The stallion was not fresh, but neither was the horse ridden by Beloso. But the great beast responded mightily, calling on deep reservoirs of reserve vitality.

Why the Zingaran fled from one pursuer Conan did not tax his bruised brain to guess. Perhaps unreasoning panic rode Beloso, born of the madness that lurked in that blazing jewel. The sun was gone; the white road was a dim glimmer through a ghostly twilight fading into purple gloom far ahead of him. The stallion panted, laboring hard. The country was changing, in the gathering dusk. Bare pains gave way to clumps of oaks and alders. Low hills mounted up in the distance. Stars began to blink out. The stallion gasped and reeled in his course. But ahead rose a dense wood that stretched to the hills on the horizon, and between it and himself Conan glimpsed the dim form of the fugitive. He urged on the distressed stallion, for he saw that he was overtaking his prey, yard by yard. Above the pound of the hoofs a strange cry rose from the shadows, but neither pursuer nor pursued gave heed.

As they swept in under the branches that overhung the road, they were almost side by side. A fierce cry rose from Conan's lips as his sword went up; a pale oval of a face was turned toward him, a sword gleamed in a half-seen hand, and Beloso echoed the cry-and then the weary stallion, with a lurch and a groan, missed his footing in the shadows and went heels over head, hurling his dazed rider from the saddle. Conan's throbbing head crashed against a stone, and the stars were blotted out in a thicker night.

How long Conan lay senseless he never knew. His first sensation of returning consciousness was that of being dragged by one arm over rough and stony ground, and through dense underbrush. Then he was thrown carelessly down, and perhaps the jolt brought back his senses.

His helmet was gone, his head ached abominably, he felt a qualm of nausea, and blood was clotted thickly among his black locks. But with the vitality of a wild thing life and consciousness surged back into him, and he became aware of his surroundings.

A broad red moon was shining through the trees, by which he knew that it was long after midnight. He had lain senseless for hours, long enough to have recovered from that terrible blow Beloso had dealt him, as well as the fall which had rendered him senseless. His brain felt clearer than it had felt during that mad ride after the fugitive.

He was not lying beside the white road, he noticed with a start of surprize, as his surroundings began to record themselves on his perceptions. The road was nowhere in sight. He lay on the grassy earth, in a small glade hemmed in by a black wall of tree stems and tangled branches. His face and hands were scratched and lacerated as if he had been dragged through brambles. Shifting his body he looked about him. And then he started violently-something was squatting over him.

At first Conan doubted his consciousness, thought it was but a figment of delirium. Surely it could not be real, that strange, motionless gray being that squatted on its haunches and stared down at him with unblinking soulless eyes.

Conan lay and stared, half expecting it to vanish like a figure of a dream, and then a chill of recollection crept along his spine. Half- forgotten memories surged back, of grisly tales whispered of the shapes that haunted these uninhabited forests at the foot of the hills that mark the Zingaran-Argossean border. Ghouls, man called them, eaters of human flesh, spawn of darkness, children of unholy matings of a lost and forgotten race with the demons of the underworld. Somewhere in these primitive forests were the ruins of an ancient, accursed city, men whispered, and among its tombs slunk gray, anthropomorphic shadows-Conan shuddered strongly.

He lay staring at the malformed head that rose dimly above him, and cautiously he extended a hand toward the sword at his hip. With a horrible cry that the man involuntarily echoed, the monster was at his throat.

Conan threw up his right arm, and the dog-like jaws closed on it, driving the mail links into the hard flesh. The misshapen yet man-like hands clutched for his throat, but he evaded them with a heave and roll of his whole body, at the same time drawing his dagger with his left hand.

They tumbled over and over on the grass, smiting and tearing. The muscles coiling under that gray corpse-like skin were stringy and hard as steel wires, exceeding the strength of a man. But Conan's thews were iron too, and his mail saved him from the gnashing fangs and ripping claws long enough for him to drive home his dagger, again and again and again. The horrible vitality of the semi-human monstrosity seemed inexhaustible, and the king's skin crawled at the feel of that slick, clammy flesh. He put all his loathing and savage revulsion behind the plunging blade, and suddenly the monster heaved up convulsively beneath him as the point found its grisly heart, and then lay still.

Conan rose, shaken with nausea. He stood in the center of the glade uncertainly, sword in one hand and dagger in the other. He had not lost his instinctive sense of direction, as far as the points of the compass were concerned, but he did not know in which direction the road lay. He had no way of knowing in which direction the ghoul had dragged him. Conan glared at the silent, black, moon-dappled woods which ringed him, and felt cold moisture bead his flesh. He was without a horse and lost in these haunted woods, and that staring, deformed thing at his feet was a mute evidence of the horrors that lurked in the forest. He stood almost holding his breath in his painful intensity, straining his ears for some crack of twig or rustle of grass.

When a sound did come he started violently. Suddenly out on the night air broke the scream of a terrified horse. His stallion! There were panthers in the wood-or-ghouls ate beasts as well as men.

He broke savagely through the brush in the direction of the sound, whistling shrilly as he ran, his fear drowned in berserk rage. If his horse was killed, their went his last chance of following Beloso and recovering the jewel. Again the stallion screamed with fear and fury, somewhere nearer. There was a sound of lashing heels, and something that was struck heavily and gave way.

Conan burst out into the wide white road without warning, and saw the stallion plunging and rearing in the moonlight, his ears laid back, his eyes and teeth flashing wickedly. He lashed out with his heels at a slinking shadow that ducked and bobbed about him--and then about Conan other shadows moved: gray, furtive shadows that closed in on all sides. A hideous charnel-house scent reeked up in the night air.

With a curse the king hewed right and left with his broadsword, thrust and ripped with his dagger. Dripping fangs flashed in the moonlight, foul paws caught at him, but he hacked his way through to the stallion, caught the rein, leaped into the saddle. His sword rose and fell, a frosty arc in the moon, showering blood as it split misshapen heads, clove shambling bodies. The stallion reared, biting and kicking. They burst through and thundered down the road. On either hand, for a short space, flitted gray abhorrent shadows. Then these fell behind, and Conan, topping a wooded crest, saw a vast expanse of bare slopes sweeping up and away before him.

Chapter 13

: "A Ghost Out of the Past"

SOON AFTER SUNRISE Conan crossed the Argossean border. Of Beloso he had seen no trace. Either the captain had made good his escape while the king lay senseless, or had fallen prey to the grim man-eaters of the Zingaran forest. But Conan had seen no signs to indicate the latter possibility. The fact that he had lain unmolested for so long seemed to indicate that the monsters had been engrossed in futile pursuit of the captain. And if the man lived, Conan felt certain that he was riding along the road somewhere ahead of him. Unless he had intended going into Argos he would never have taken the eastward road in the first place.

The helmeted guards at the frontier did not question the Cimmerian. A single wandering mercenary required no passport nor safe-conduct, especially when his unadorned mail showed him to be in the service of no lord. Through the low, grassy hills where streams murmured and oak groves dappled the sward with lights and shadows he rode, following the long road that rose and fell away ahead of him over dales and rises in the blue distance. It was an old, old road, this highway from Poitain to the sea.

Argos was at peace; laden ox-wains rumbled along the road, and men with bare, brown, brawny arms toiled in orchards and fields that smiled away under the branches of the roadside trees. Old men on settles before inns under spreading oak branches called greetings to the wayfarer.

From the men that worked the fields, from the garrulous old men in the inns where he slaked his thirst with great leathern jacks of foaming ale, from the sharp-eyed silk-clad merchants he met upon the road, Conan sought for news of Beloso.

Stories were conflicting, but this much Conan learned: that a lean, wiry Zingaran with the dangerous black eyes and mustaches of the western folk was somewhere on the road ahead of him, and apparently making for Messantia. It was a logical destination; all the sea-ports of Argos were cosmopolitan, in strong contrast with the inland provinces, and Messantia was the most polyglot of all. Craft of all the maritime nations rode in its harbor, and refugees and fugitives from many lands gathered there. Laws were lax; for Messantia thrived on the trade of the sea, and her citizens found it profitable to be somewhat blind in their dealings with seamen. It was not only legitimate trade that flowed into Messantia; smugglers and buccaneers played their part. All this Conan knew well, for had he not, in the days of old when he was a Barachan pirate, sailed by night into the harbor of Messantia to discharge strange cargoes? Most of the pirates of the Barachan Isles-small islands on the southwestern coast of Zingara-were Argossean sailors, and as long as they confined their attentions to the shipping of other nations, the authorities of Argos were not too strict in their interpretation of sea-laws.

But Conan had not limited his activities to those of the Barachans. He had also sailed with the Zingaran buccaneers, and even with those wild black corsairs that swept up from the far south to harry the northern coasts, and this put him beyond the pale of any law. If he were recognized in any of the ports of Argos it would cost him his head. But without hesitation he rode on to Messantia, halting day or night only to rest the stallion and to snatch a few winks of sleep for himself.

He entered the city unquestioned, merging himself with the throngs that poured continually in and out of this great commercial center. No walls surrounded Messantia. The sea and the ships of the sea guarded the great southern trading city.

It was evening when Conan rode leisurely through the streets that marched down to the waterfront. At the ends of these streets he saw the wharves and the masts and sails of ships. He smelled salt water for the first time in years, heard the thrum of cordage and the creak of spars in the breeze that was kicking up whitecaps out beyond the headlands. Again the urge of far wandering tugged at his heart.

But he did not go on to the wharves. He reined aside and rode up a steep flight of wide, worn stone steps, to a broad street where ornate white mansions overlooked the waterfront and the harbor below. Here dwelt the men who had grown rich from the hard-won fat of the seas-a few old sea-captains who had found treasure afar, many traders and merchants who never trod the naked decks nor knew the roar of tempest of sea-fight.

Conan turned in his horse at a certain gold-worked gate, and rode into a court where a fountain tinkled and pigeons fluttered from marble coping to marble flagging. A page in jagged silken jupon and hose came forward inquiringly. The merchants of Mes-santia dealt with many strange and rough characters but most of these smacked of the sea. It was strange that a mercenary trooper should so freely ride into the court of a lord of commerce.

"The merchant Publio dwells here?" It was more statement than question, and something in the timbre of the voice caused the page to doff his feathered chaperon as he bowed and replied:

"Aye, so he does, my captain."

Conan dismounted and the page called a servitor, who came running to receive the stallion's rein.

"Your master is within?" Conan drew off his gauntlets and slapped the dust of the road from cloak and mail.

"Aye, my captain. Whom shall I announce?"

"I'll announce myself," grunted Conan. "I know the way well enough. Bide you here."

And obeying that peremptory command the page stood still, staring after Conan as the latter climbed a short flight of marble steps, and wondering what connection his master might have with this giant fighting-man who had the aspect of a northern barbarian.

Menials at their tasks halted and gaped open-mouthed as Conan crossed a wide, cool balcony overlooking the court and entered a broad corridor through which the sea-breeze swept. Half-way down this he heard a quill scratching, and turned into a broad room whose many wide casements overlooked the harbor.

Public sat at a carved teakwood desk writing on rich parchment with a golden quill. He was a short man, with a massive head and quick dark eyes. His blue robe was of the finest watered silk, trimmed with cloth-of-gold, and from his thick white throat hung a heavy gold chain.

As the Cimmerian entered, the merchant looked up with a gesture of annoyance. He froze in the midst of his gesture. His mouth opened; he stared as at a ghost out of the past. Unbelief and fear glimmered in his wide eyes. "Well," said Conan, "have you no word of greeting, Publio?"

Publio moistened his lips.

"Conan!" he whispered incredulously. "Mitra! Conan! Amra!" "Who else?" The Cimmerian unclasped his cloak and threw it with his gauntlets down upon the desk. "How, man?" he exclaimed irritably. "Can't you at least offer me a beaker of wine? My throat's caked with the dust of the highway."

"Aye, wine!" echoed Publio mechanically. Instinctively his hand reached for a gong, then recoiled as from a hot coal, and he shuddered.

While Conan watched him with a flicker of grim amusement in his eyes, the merchant rose and hurriedly shut the door, first craning his neck up and down the corridor to be sure that no slave was loitering about. Then, returning, he took a gold vessel of wine from a near-by table and was about to fill a slender goblet when Conan impatiently took the vessel from him and lifting it with both hands, drank deep and with gusto.

"Aye, it's Conan, right enough," muttered Publio. "Man, are you mad?"

"By Crom, Publio," said Conan, lowering the vessel but retaining it in his hands, "you dwell in different quarters than of old. It takes an Argossean merchant to wring wealth out of a little waterfront shop that stank of rotten fish and cheap wine."

"The old days are past," muttered Publio, drawing his robe about him with a slight involuntary shudder. "I have put off the past like a worn-out cloak."

"Well," retorted Conan, "you can't put me off like an old cloak. It isn't much I want of you, but that much I do want. And you can't refuse me. We had too many dealings in the old days. Am I such a fool that I'm not aware that this fine mansion was built on my sweat and blood? How many cargoes from my galleys passed through your shop?"

"All merchants of Messantia have dealt with the sea-rovers at one time or another," mumbled Publio nervously.

"But not with the black corsairs," answered Conan grimly.

"For Mitra's sake, be silent!" ejaculated Public, sweat starting out on his brow. His fingers jerked at the gilt-worked edge of his robe.

"Well, I only wished to recall it to your mind," answered Conan. "Don't be so fearful. You took plenty of risks in the past, when you were struggling for life and wealth in that lousy little shop down by the wharves, and were hand-and-glove with every buccaneer and smuggler and pirate from here to the Barachan Isles. Prosperity must have softened you."

"I am respectable," began Publio.

"Meaning you're rich as hell," snorted Conan. "Why? Why did you grow wealthy so much quicker than your competitors? Was it because you did a big business in ivory and ostrich feathers, copper and skins and pearls and hammered gold ornaments, and other things from the coast of Kush? And where did you get them so cheaply, while other merchants were paying their weight in silver to the Stygians for them? I'll tell you, in case you've forgotten: you bought them from me, at considerably less than their value, and I took them from the tribes of the Black Coast, and from the ships of the Stygians--I, and the black corsairs."

"In Mitra's name, cease!" begged Public. "I have not forgotten. But what are you doing here? I am the only man in Argos who knew that the king of Aquilonia was once Conan the buccaneer, in the old days. But word has come southward of the overthrow of Aquilonia and the death of the king."

"My enemies have killed me a hundred times by rumors," grunted Conan. "Yet here I sit and guzzle wine of Kyros." And he suited the action to the word.

Lowering the vessel, which was now nearly empty, he said: "It's but a small thing I ask of you, Publio. I know that you're aware of everything that goes on in Messantia. I want to know if a Zingaran named Beloso, or he might call himself anything, is in this city. He's tall and lean and dark like all his race, and it's likely he'll seek to sell a very rare jewel." Public shook his head.

"I have not heard of such a man. But thousands come and go in Messantia. If he is here my agents will discover him." "Good. Send them to look for him. And in the meantime have my horse cared for, and food served me here in this room."

Publio assented volubly, and Conan emptied the wine vessel, tossed it carelessly into a comer, and strode to a near-by casement, involuntarily expanding his chest as he breathed deep of the salt air. He was looking down upon the meandering waterfront streets. He swept the ships in the harbor with an appreciative glance, then lifted his head and stared beyond the bay, far into the blue haze of the distance where sea met sky. And his memory sped beyond that horizon, to the golden seas of the south, under flaming suns, where laws were not and life ran hotly. Some vagrant scent of spice or palm woke clear-etched images of strange coasts where mangroves grew and drums thundered, of ships locked in battle and decks running blood, of smoke and flame and the crying of slaughter. Lost in his thoughts he scarcely noticed when Publio stole from the chamber.

Gathering up his robe, the merchant hurried along the corridors until he came to a certain chamber where a tall, gaunt man with a scar upon his temple wrote continually upon parchment. There was something about this man which made his clerkly occupation seem incongruous. To him Public spoke abruptly:

"Conan has returned!"

"Conan?" The gaunt man started up and the quill fell from his fingers. "The corsair?"

"Aye!"

The gaunt man went livid. "Is he mad? If he is discovered here we are ruined! They will hang a man who shelters or trades with a corsair as quickly as they'll hang the corsair himself! What if the governor should learn of our past connections with him?"

"He will not learn," answered Public grimly. "Send your men into the markets and wharfside dives and learn if one Beloso, a Zingaran, is in Messantia. Conan said he had a gem, which he will probably seek to dispose of. The jewel merchants should know of him, if any do. And here is another task for you: pick up a dozen or so desperate villains who can be trusted to do away with a man and hold their tongues afterward. You understand me?"

"I understand." The other nodded slowly and somberly.

"I have not stolen, cheated, lied and fought my way up from the gutter to be undone now by a ghost out of my past," muttered Public, and the sinister darkness of his countenance at that moment would have surprized the wealthy nobles and ladies, who bought their silks and pearls from his many stalls. But when he returned to Conan a short time later, bearing in his own hands a platter of fruit and meats, he presented a placid face to his unwelcome guest.

Conan still stood at the casement, staring down into the harbor at the purple and crimson and vermilion and scarlet sails of galleons and carracks and galleys and dromonds.

"There's a Stygian galley, if I'm not blind," he remarked, pointing to a long, low, slim black ship lying apart from the others, anchored off the low broad sandy beach that curved round to the distant headland. "Is there peace, then, between Stygia and Argos?"

"The same sort that has existed before," answered Public, setting the platter on the table with a sigh of relief, for it was heavily laden; he knew his guest of old. "Stygian ports are temporarily open to our ships, as ours to theirs. But may no craft of mine meet their cursed galleys out of sight of land! That galley crept into the bay last night. What its masters wish I do not know. So far they have neither bought nor sold. I distrust those dark-skinned devils. Treachery had its birth in that dusky land."

"I've made them howl," said Conan carelessly, turning from the window. "In my galley manned by black corsairs I crept to the very bastions of the sea-washed castles of black-walled Khemi by night, and burned the galleons anchored there. And speaking of treachery, mine host, suppose you taste these viands and sip a bit of this wine, just to show me that your heart is on the right side."

Public complied so readily that Conan's suspicions were lulled, and without further hesitation he sat down and devoured enough for three men.

And while he ate, men moved through the markets and along the waterfront, searching for a Zmgaran who had a jewel to sell or--who sought for a ship to carry him to foreign ports. And a tall gaunt man with a scar on his temple sat with his elbows on a wine-stained table in a squalid cellar with a brass lantern hanging from a smoke- blackened beam overhead, and held converse with the desperate rogues whose sinister countenances and ragged garments proclaimed their profession.

And as the first stars blinked out, they shone on a strange band spurring their mounts along the white road that led to Messantia from the west. They were four men, tall, gaunt, dad in black, hooded robes, and they did not speak. They forced their steeds mercilessly onward, and those steeds were gaunt as themselves, and sweat-stained and weary as if from long travel and far wandering.

Chapter 14
: The Black Hand of Set

CONAN WOKE FROM a sound sleep as quickly and instantly as a cat. And like a cat he was on his feet with his sword out before the man who had touched him could so much as draw back.

"What word. Publio?" demanded Conan, recognizing his host. The gold lamp burned low, casting a mellow glow over the thick tapestries and the rich coverings of the couch whereon he had been reposing.

Publio, recovering from the start given him by the sudden action of his awakening guest, replied: "The Zingaran has been located. He arrived yesterday, at dawn. Only a few hours ago he sought to sell a huge, strange jewel to a Shemitish merchant, but the Shemite would have naught to do with it. Men say he turned pale beneath his black beard at the sight of it, and closing his stall, fled as from a thing accursed."

"It must be Beloso," muttered Conan, feeling the pulse in his temples pounding with impatient eagerness. "Where is he now?"

"He sleeps in the house of Servio."

"I know that dive of old," grunted Conan. "I'd better hasten before some of these waterfront thieves cut his throat for the jewel."

He took up his cloak and flung it over his shoulders, then donned a helmet Public had procured for him.

"Have my steed saddled and ready in the court," said he. "I may return in haste. I shall not forget this night's work. Publio."

A few moments later Publio, standing at a small outer door, watched the king's tall figure receding down the shadowy street.

"Farewell to you, corsair," muttered the merchant. "This must be a notable jewel, to be sought by a man who has just lost a kingdom. I wish I had told my knaves to let him secure it before they did their work. But then, something might have gone awry. Let Argos forget Amra, and let my dealings with him be lost in the dust of the past. In the alley behind the house of Servio-that is where Conan will cease to be a peril to me."

Servio's house, a dingy, ill-famed den, was located close to the wharves, facing the waterfront. It was a shambling building of stone and heavy ship-beams, and a long narrow alley wandered up alongside it. Conan made his way along the alley, and as he reached the house he had an uneasy feeling that he was being spied upon. He stared hard into the shadows of the squalid buildings, but saw nothing, though once he caught the faint rasp of cloth or leather against flesh. But that was nothing unusual. Thieves and beggars prowled these alleys all night, and they were not likely to attack him, after one look at his size and harness.

But suddenly a door opened in the wall ahead of him, and he slipped into the shadow of an arch. A figure emerged from the open door and moved along the alley, not furtively, but with a natural noiselessness, like that of a jungle beast. Enough starlight filtered into the alley to silhouette the man's profile dimly as he passed the doorway where Conan lurked. The stranger was a Stygian. There was no mistaking that hawk-faced, shaven head, even in the starlight, nor the mantle over the broad shoulders. He passed on down the alley in the direction of the beach, and once Conan thought he must be carrying a lantern among his garments, for he caught a flash of lambent light, just as the man vanished.

But the Cimmerian forgot the stranger as he noticed that the door through which he had emerged still stood open. Conan had intended entering by the main entrance and forcing Servio to show him the room where the Zingaran slept. But if he could get into the house without attracting anyone's attention, so much the better.

A few long strides brought him to the door, and as his hands fell on the lock he stifled an involuntary grunt. His practised fingers, skilled among the thieves of Zamora long ago, told him that the lock had been forced, apparently by some terrific pressure from the outside that had twisted and bent the heavy iron bolts, tearing the very sockets loose from the jambs. How such damage could have been wrought so violently without awakening everyone in the neighborhood Conan could not imagine, but he felt sure that it had been done that night. A broken lock, if discovered, would not go unmended in the house of Servio, in this neighborhood of thieves and cutthroats.

Conan entered stealthily, poniard in hand, wondering how he was to find the chamber of the Zingaran. Groping in total darkness he halted suddenly. He sensed death in that room, as a wild beast senses it-not as peril threatening him, but a dead thing, something freshly slain. In the darkness his foot hit and recoiled from something heavy and yielding. With a sudden premonition he groped along the wall until he found the shelf that supported the brass lamp, with its flint, steel and tinder beside it. A few seconds later a flickering, uncertain light sprang up, and he stared narrowly about him.

A bunk built against the rough stone wall, a bare table and a bench completed the furnishings of the squalid chamber. An inner door stood closed and bolted. And on the hard-beaten dirt floor lay Beloso. On his back he lay, with his head drawn back between his shoulders so that he seemed to stare with his wide glassy eyes at the sooty beams of the cobwebbed ceiling. His lips were drawn back from his teeth in a frozen grin of agony. His sword lay near him, still in its scabbard. His shirt was torn open, and on his brown, muscular breast was the print of a black hand, thumb and four fingers plainly distinct.

Conan glared in silence, feeling the short hairs bristle at the back of his neck.

"Crom!" he muttered. "The black hand of Set!"

He had seen that mark of old, the death-mark of the black priests of Set, the grim cult that ruled in dark Stygia. And suddenly he remembered that curious flash he had seen emanating from the mysterious Stygian who had emerged from this chamber.

"The Heart, by Crom!" he muttered. "He was carrying it under his mantle. He stole it. He burst that door by his magic, and slew Beloso. He was a priest of Set."

A quick investigation confirmed at least part of his suspicions. The jewel was not on the Zingaran's body. An uneasy feeling rose in Conan that this had not happened by chance, or without design; a conviction that the mysterious Stygian galley had come into the harbor of Messantia on a definite mission. How could the priests of Set know that the Heart had come southward? Yet the thought was no more fantastic than the necromancy that could slay an armed man by the touch of an open, empty hand.

A stealthy footfall outside the door brought him round like a great cat. With one motion he extinguished the lamp and drew his sword. His ears told him that men were out there in the darkness, were closing in on the doorway. As his eyes became accustomed to the sudden darkness, he could make out dim figures ringing the entrance. He could not guess their identity, but as always he took the initiative-leaping suddenly forth from the doorway without awaiting the attack.

His unexpected movement took the skulkers by surprise. He sensed and heard men close about him, saw a dim masked figure in the starlight before him; then his sword crunched home, and he was fleeting away down the alley before the slower-thinking and slower-acting attackers could intercept him.

As he ran he heard, somewhere ahead of him, a faint creak of oar- locks, and he forgot the men behind him. A boat was moving out into the bay! Gritting his teeth he increased his speed, but before he reached the beach he heard the rasp and creak of ropes, and the grind of the great sweep in its socket.

Thick clouds, rolling up from the sea, obscured the stars. In thick darkness Conan came upon the strand, straining his eyes out across the black restless water. Something was moving out there--a long, low, black shape that receded in the darkness, gathering momentum as it went. To his ears came the rhythmical clack of long oars. He ground his teeth in helpless fury. It was the Stygian galley and she was racing out to sea, bearing with her the jewel that meant to him the throne of Aquilonia.

With a savage curse he took a step toward the waves that lapped against the sands, catching at his hauberk and intending to rip it off and swim after the vanishing ship. Then the crunch of a heel in the sand brought him about. He had forgotten his pursuers.

Dark figures closed in on him with a rush of feet through the sands. The first went down beneath the Cunmerian's flailing sword, but the others did not falter. Blades whickered dimly about him in the darkness or rasped on his mail. Blood and entrails spilled over his hand and someone screamed as he ripped murderously upward. A muttered voice spurred on the attack, and that voice sounded vaguely familiar. Conan plowed through the clinging, hacking shapes toward the voice. A faint light gleaming momentarily through the drifting clouds showed him a tall gaunt man with a great livid scar on his temple. Conan's sword sheared through his skull as through a ripe melon.

Then an ax, swung blindly in the dark, crashed on the king's basinet, filling his eyes with sparks of fire. He lurched and lunged, felt his sword sink deep and heard a shriek of agony. Then he stumbled over a corpse, and a bludgeon knocked the dented helmet from his head; the next instant the club fell full on his unprotected skull.

The king of Aquilonia crumpled into the wet sands. Over him wolfish figures panted in the gloom.

"Strike off his head," muttered one.

"Let him be," grunted another. "Help me tie up my wounds before I bleed to death. The tide will wash him into the bay. See, he fell at the water's edge. His skull's split; no man could live after such blows."

"Help me strip him," urged another. "His harness will fetch a few pieces of silver. And haste. Tiberio is dead, and I hear seamen singing as they reel along the strand. Let us be gone."

There followed hurried activity in the darkness, and then the sound of quickly receding footsteps. The tipsy singing of the seamen grew louder.

In his chamber Publio, nervously pacing back and forth before a window that overlooked the shadowed bay, whirled suddenly, his nerves tingling. To the best of his knowledge the door had been bolted from within; but now it stood open and four men filed into the chamber. At the sight of them his flesh crawled. Many strange beings Publio had seen in his lifetime, but none before like these. They were tall and gaunt, black-robed, and their faces were dim yellow ovals in the shadows of their coifs. He could not tell much about then: features and was unreasoningly glad that he could not. Each bore a long, curiously molded staff.

"Who are you?" he demanded, and his voice sounded brittle and hollow. "What do you wish here?"

"Where is Conan, he who was king of Aquilonia?" demanded the tallest of the four in a passionless monotone that made Public shudder. It was like the hollow tone of a Khitan temple bell.

"I do not know what you mean," stammered the merchant, his customary poise shaken by the uncanny aspect of his visitors. "I know no such man."

"He has been here," returned the other with no change of inflection. "His horse is in the courtyard. Tell us where he is before we do you an injury."

"Gebal!" shouted Publio frantically, recoiling until he crouched against the wall. "Gebal!"

The four Khitans watched him without emotion or change of expression.

"If you summon your slave he will die," warned one of them, which only served to terrify Publio more than ever.

"Gebal!" he screamed. "Where are you, curse you? Thieves are murdering your master!"

Swift footsteps in the corridor outside, and Gebal burst into the chamber-a Shemite, of medium height and mightily muscled build, his curled blue-black beard bristling, and a short leaf-shaped sword in his hand.

He stared in stupid amazement at the four invaders, unable to understand their presence; dimly remembering that he had drowsed unexplainably on the stair he was guarding and up which they must have come. He had never slept on duty before. But his master was shrieking with a note of hysteria in his voice, and the Shemite drove like a bull at the strangers, his thickly muscled arm drawing back for the disemboweling thrust. But the stroke was never dealt.

A black-sleeved arm shot out, extending the long staff. Its end but touched the Shemite's brawny breast and was instantly withdrawn. The stroke was horribly like the dart and recovery of a serpent's head.

Gebal halted short in his headlong plunge, as if he had encountered a solid barrier. His bull head toppled forward on his breast, the sword slipped from his fingers, and then he melted slowly to the floor. It was as if all the bones of his frame had suddenly become flabby. Publio turned sick.

"Do not shout again," advised the tallest Khitan. "Your servants sleep soundly, but if you awaken them they will die, and you with them. Where is Conan?"

"He is gone to the house of Servio, near the waterfront, to search for the Zingaran Beloso," gasped Publio, all his power of resistance gone out of him. The merchant did not lack courage; but these uncanny visitants turned his marrow to water. He started convulsively at a sudden noise of footsteps hurrying up the stair outside, loud in the ominous stillness.

"Your servant?" asked the Khitan.

Publio shook his head mutely, his tongue frozen to his palate.

He could not speak.

One of the Khitans caught up a silken cover from a couch and threw it over the corpse. Then they melted behind the tapestry, but before the tallest man disappeared, he murmured: "Talk to this man who comes, and send him away quickly. If you betray us, neither he nor you will live to reach that door. Make no sign to show him that you are not alone." And lifting his staff suggestively, the yellow man faded behind the hangings.

Public shuddered and choked down a desire to retch. It might have been a trick of the light, but it seemed to him that occasionally those staffs moved slightly of their own accord, as if possessed of an unspeakable life of their own.

He pulled himself together with a mighty effort, and presented a composed aspect to the ragged ruffian who burst into the chamber.

"We have done as you wished, my lord," this man exclaimed. "The barbarian lies dead on the sands at the water's edge."

Public felt a movement in the arras behind him, and almost burst from fright. The man swept heedlessly on.

"Your secretary, Tiberio, is dead. The barbarian slew him, and four of my companions. We bore their bodies to the rendezvous. There was nothing of value on the barbarian except a few silver coins. Are there any further orders?"

"None!" gasped Publio, white about the lips. "Go!"

The desperado bowed and hurried out, with a vague feeling that Publio was both a man of weak stomach and few words.

The four Khitans came from behind the arras.

"Of whom did this man speak?" the taller demanded.

"Of a wandering stranger who did me an injury," panted Public.

"You lie," said the Khitan calmly. "He spoke of the king of Aquilonia. I read it in your expression. Sit upon that divan and do not move or speak. I will remain with you while my three companions go search for the body."

So Publio sat and shook with terror of the silent, inscrutable figure which watched him, until the three Khitans filed back into the room, with the news that Conan's body did not lie upon the sands. Publio did not know whether to be glad or sorry.

"We found the spot where the fight was fought," they said. "Blood was on the sand. But the king was gone."

The fourth Khitan drew imaginary symbols upon the carpet with his staff, which glistened scalily in the lamplight.

"Did you read naught from the sands?" he asked.

"Aye," they answered. "The king lives, and he has gone southward in a ship."

The tall Khitan lifted his head and gazed at Publio, so that the merchant broke into a profuse sweat.

"What do you wish of me?" he stuttered.

"A ship," answered the Khitan. "A ship well manned for a very long voyage."

"For how long a voyage?" stammered Publio, never thinking of refusing.

"To the ends of the world, perhaps," answered the Khitan, "or to the molten seas of hell that lie beyond the sunrise."

Chapter 15
: The Return of the Corsair

CONAN'S FIRST SENSATION of returning consciousness was that of motion; under him was no solidity, but a ceaseless heaving and plunging. Then he heard wind humming through cords and spars, and knew he was aboard a ship even before his blurred sight cleared. He heard a mutter of voices and then a dash of water deluged him, jerking him sharply into full animation. He heaved up with a sulfurous curse, braced his legs and glared about him, with a burst of coarse guffaws in his ears and the reek of unwashed bodies in his nostrils.

He was standing on the poopdeck of a long galley which was running before the wind that whipped down from the north, her striped sail bellying against the taut sheets. The sun was just rising, in a dazzling blaze of gold and blue and green. To the left of the shoreline was a dim purple shadow. To the right stretched the open ocean. This much Conan saw at a glance that likewise included the ship itself.

It was long and narrow, a typical trading-ship of the southern coasts, high of poop and stern, with cabins at either extremity. Conan looked down into the open waist, whence wafted that sickening abominable odor. He knew it of old. It was the body-scent of the oarsmen, chained to their benches. They were all negroes, forty men to each side, each confined by a chain locked about his waist, with the other end welded to a heavy ring set deep in the solid runway beam that ran between the benches from stem to stem. The life of a slave aboard an Argossean galley was a hell unfathomable. Most of these were Kushites, but some thirty of the blacks who now rested on their idle oars and stared up at the stranger with dull curiosity were from the far southern isles, the homelands of the corsairs. Conan recognized them by their straighter features and hah-, their rangier, cleaner-limbed build. And he saw among them men who had followed him of old.

But all this he saw and recognized in one swift, all-embracing glance as he rose, before he turned his attention to the figures about him. Reeling momentarily on braced legs, his fists clenched wrathfully, he glared at the figures clustered about him. The sailor who had drenched him stood grinning, the empty bucket still poised in his hand, and Conan cursed nun with venom, instinctively reaching for his hilt. Then he discovered that he was weaponless and naked except for his short leather breeks.

"What lousy tub is this?" he roared. "How did I come aboard here?"

The sailors laughed jeeringly-stocky, bearded Argosseans to a man-and one, whose richer dress and air of command proclaimed him captain, folded his arms and said domineeringly:

"We found you lying on the sands. Somebody had rapped you on the pate and taken your clothes. Needing an extra man, we brought you aboard."

"What ship is this?" Conan demanded.

"The Venturer, out of Messantia, with a cargo of mirrors, scarlet silk cloaks, shields, gilded helmets and swords to trade to the Shemites for copper and gold ore. I am Demetrio, captain of this vessel and your master henceforward."

"Then I'm headed in the direction I wanted to go, after all," muttered Conan, heedless of that last remark. They were racing southeastward, following the long curve of the Argossean coast. These trading-ships never ventured far from the shoreline. Somewhere ahead of him he knew that low dark Stygian galley was speeding southward.

"Have you sighted a Stygian galley--" began Conan, but the beard of the burly, brutal-faced captain bristled. He was not in the least interested in any question his prisoner might wish to ask, and felt it high time he reduced this independent wastrel to his proper place.

"Get for'ard!" he roared. 'Tve wasted time enough with you! I've done you the honor of having you brought to the poop to be revived, and answered enough of your infernal questions. Get off this poop! You'll work your way aboard this galley--"

"I'll buy your ship--" began Conan, before he remembered that he was a penniless wanderer.

A roar of rough mirth greeted these words, and the captain turned purple, thinking he sensed ridicule.

"You mutinous swine!" he bellowed, taking a threatening step forward, while he closed on his knife at his belt. "Get for'ard before I have you flogged! You'll keep a civil tongue in your jaws, or by Mitra, I'll have you chained among the blacks to tug an oar!"

Conan's volcanic temper, never long at best, burst into explosion. Not in years, even before he was king, had a man spoken to him thus and lived.

"Don't lift your voice to me, you tar-breeched dog!" he roared in a voice as gusty as the sea-wind, while the sailors gaped dum-founded. "Draw that toy and I'll feed you to the fishes!"

"Who do you think you are?" gasped the captain.

"Ill show you!" roared the maddened Cimmerian, and he wheeled and bounded toward the rail, where weapons hung in their brackets.

The captain drew his knife and ran at him bellowing, but before he could strike, Conan gripped his wrist with a wrench that tore the arm clean out of the socket. The captain bellowed like an ox in agony, and then rolled clear across the deck as he was hurled contemptuously from his attacker. Conan ripped a heavy ax from the rail and wheeled cat- like to meet the rush of the sailors. They ran in, giving tongue like hounds, clumsy-footed and awkward in comparison to the pantherish Cimmerian. Before they could reach him with their knives he sprang among them, striking right and left too quickly for the eye to follow, and blood and brains spattered as two corpses struck the deck.

Knives flailed the air wildly as Conan broke through the stumbling, gasping mob and bounded to the narrow bridge that spanned the waist from poop to forecastle, just out of reach of the slaves below. Behind him the handful of sailors on the poop were floundering after him, daunted by the destruction of their fellows, and the rest of the crew- some thirty in all-came running across the bridge toward him, with weapons in their hands.

Conan bounded out on the bridge and stood poised above the upturned black faces, ax lifted, black mane blown in the wind.

"Who am I?" he yelled. "Look, you dogs! Look, Ajonga, Yasunga, Laranga! Who am I?"

And from the waist rose a shout that swelled to a mighty roar:

"Amra! It is Amra! The Lion has returned!"

The sailors who caught and understood the burden of that awesome shout paled and shrank back, staring in sudden fear at the wild figure on the bridge. Was this in truth that bloodthirsty ogre of the southern seas who had so mysteriously vanished years ago, but who still lived in gory legends? The blacks were frothing crazy now, shaking and tearing at their chains and shrieking the name of Amra like an invocation. Kushites who had never seen Conan before took up the yell. The slaves in the pen under the after-cabin began to batter at the walls, shrieking like the damned.

Demetrio, hitching himself along the deck on one hand and his knees, livid with the agony of his dislocated arm, screamed: "In and kill him, dogs, before the slaves break loose!"

Fired to desperation by that word, the most dread to all galleymen, the sailors charged on to the bridge from both ends. But with a lion- like bound Conan left the bridge and hit like a cat on his feet on the runway between the benches.

"Death to the masters!" he thundered, and his ax rose and fell crashingly full on a shackle-chain, severing it like matchwood. In an instant a shrieking slave was free, splintering his oar for a bludgeon. Men were racing frantically along the bridge above, and all hell and bedlam broke loose on the Venturer. Conan's ax rose and fell without pause, and with every stroke a frothing, screaming black giant broke free, mad with hate and the fury of freedom and vengeance.

Sailors leaping down into the waist to grapple or smite at the naked white giant hewing like one possessed at the shackles, found themselves dragged down by hands of slaves yet unfreed, while others, their broken chains whipping and snapping about their limbs, came up out of the waist like a blind, black torrent, screaming like fiends, smiting with broken oars and pieces of iron, tearing and rending with talons and teeth. In the midst of the melee the slaves in the pen broke down the walls and came surging up on the decks, and with fifty blacks freed of their benches Conan abandoned his iron-hewing and bounded up on the bridge to add his notched ax to the bludgeons of his partizans.

Then it was massacre. The Argosseans were strong, sturdy, fearless like all their race, trained in the brutal school of the sea. But they could not stand against these maddened giants, led by the tigerish barbarian. Blows and abuse and hellish suffering were avenged in one red gust of fury that raged like a typhoon from one end of the ship to the other, and when it had blown itself out, but one white man lived aboard the Venturer, and that was the blood-stained giant about whom the chanting blacks thronged to cast themselves prostrate on the bloody deck and beat their heads against the boards in an ecstasy of hero-worship.

Conan, his mighty chest heaving and glistening with sweat, the red ax gripped in his blood-smeared hand, glared about him as the first of men might have glared in some primordial dawn, and shook back his black mane. In that moment he was not king of Aquilonia; he was again lord of the black corsairs, who had hacked his way to lordship through flame and blood.

"Amra! Amra!" chanted the delirious blacks, those who were left to chant. "The Lion has returned! Now will the Stygians howl like dogs in the night, and the black dogs of Kush will howl! Now will villages burst in flames and ships founder! Aie, there will be wailing of women and the thunder of the spears!"

"Cease this yammering, dogs!" Conan roared in a voice that drowned the clap of the sail in the wind. "Ten of you go below and free the oarsmen who are yet chained. The rest of you man the sweeps and bend to oars and halyards. Crom's devils, don't you see we've drifted inshore during the fight? Do you want to run aground and be retaken by the Argosseans? Throw these carcasses overboard. Jump to it, you rogues, or I'll notch your hides for you!"

With shouts and laughter and wild singing they leaped to do his commands. The corpses, white and black, were hurled overboard, where triangular fins were already cutting the water.

Conan stood on the poop, frowning down at the black men who watched him expectantly. His heavy brown arms were folded, his black hair, grown long in his wanderings, blew in the wind. A wilder and more barbaric figure never trod the bridge of a ship, and in this ferocious corsair few of the courtiers of Aquilonia would have recognized their king.

"There's food in the hold!" he roared. "Weapons in plenty for you, for this ship carried blades and harness to the Shemites who dwell along the coast. There are enough of us to work ship, aye, and to fight! You rowed in chains for the Argossean dogs: will you row as free men for Amra?"

"Aye!" they roared. "We are thy children! Lead us where you will!"

"Then fall to and clean out that waist," he commanded. "Free men don't labor in such fifth. Three of you come with me and break out food from the after-cabin. By Crom, I'll pad out your ribs before this cruise is done!"

Another yell of approbation answered him, as the half-starved blacks scurried to do his bidding. The sail bellied as the wind swept over the waves with renewed force, and the white crests danced along the sweep of the wind. Conan planted his feet to the heave of the deck, breathed deep and spread his mighty arms.

King of Aquilonia he might no longer be; king of the blue ocean he was still.

Chapter 16

: Black-Walled Khemi

THE Venturer SWEPT southward like a living thing, her oars pulled now by free and willing hands. She had been transformed from a peaceful trader into a war-galley, insofar as the transformation was possible. Men sat at the benches now with swords at their sides and gilded helmets on their kinky heads. Shields were hung along the rails, and sheafs of spears, bows and arrows adorned the mast. Even the elements seemed to work for Conan now; the broad purple sail bellied to a stiff breeze that held day by day, needing little aid from the oars.

But though Conan kept a man on the masthead day and night, they did not sight a long, low, black galley fleeing southward ahead of them. Day by day the blue waters rolled empty to their view, broken only by fishing-craft which fled like frightened birds before them, at sight of the shields hung along the rail. The season for trading was practically over for the year, and they sighted no other ships.

When the lookout did sight a sail, it was to the north, not the south. Far on the skyline behind them appeared a racing-galley, with full spread of purple sail. The blacks urged Conan to turn and plunder it, but he shook his head. Somewhere south of him a slim black galley was racing toward the ports of Stygia. That night, before darkness shut down, the lookout's last glimpse showed him the racing-galley on the horizon, and at dawn it was still hanging on their tail, afar off, tiny in the distance. Conan wondered if it was following him, though he could think of no logical reason for such a supposition. But he paid little heed. Each day that carried him farther southward filled him with fiercer impatience. Doubts never assailed him. As he believed in the rise and set of the sun he believed that a priest of Set had stolen the Heart of Ahriman. And where would a priest of Set carry it but to Stygia? The blacks sensed his eagerness, and toiled as they had never toiled under the lash, though ignorant of his goal. They anticipated a red career of pillage and plunder and were content. The men of the southern isles knew no other trade; and the Kushites of the crew joined whole-heartedly in the prospect of looting their own people, with the callousness of their race. Blood-ties meant little; a victorious chieftain and personal gain everything.

Soon the character of the coastline changed. No longer they sailed past steep cliffs with blue hills marching behind them. Now the shore was the edge of broad meadowlands which barely rose above the water's edge and swept away and away into the hazy distance. Here were few harbors and fewer ports, but the green plain was dotted with the cities of the Shemites; green sea, lapping the rim of the green plains, and the zikkurats of the cities gleaming whitely in the sun, some small in the distance.

Through the grazing-lands moved the herds of cattle, and squat, broad riders with cylindrical helmets and curled blue-black beards, with bows in their hands. This was the shore of the lands of Shem, where there was no law save as each city-state could enforce its own. Far to the eastward, Conan knew, the meadowlands gave way to desert, where there were no cities and the nomadic tribes roamed unhindered.

Still as they plied southward, past the changeless panorama of city- dotted meadowland, at last the scenery again began to alter. Clumps of tamarind appeared, the palm groves grew denser. The shoreline became more broken, a marching rampart of green fronds and trees, and behind them rose bare, sandy hills. Streams poured into the sea, and along their moist banks vegetation grew thick and of vast variety.

So at last they passed the mouth of a broad river that mingled its flow with the ocean, and saw the great black walls and towers of Khemi rise against the southern horizon.

The river was the Styx, the real border of Stygia. Khemi was Stygia's greatest port, and at the time her most important city. The king dwelt at more ancient Luxur, but in Khemi reigned the priestcraft; though men said the center of their dark religion lay far inland, in a mysterious, deserted city near the bank of the Styx. This river, springing from some nameless source far in the unknown lands south of Stygia, ran northward for a thousand miles before it turned and flowed westward for some hundreds of miles, to empty at last into the ocean.

The Venturer, showing no lights, stole past the port in the night, and before dawn discovered her, anchored in a small bay a few miles south of the city. It was surrounded by marsh, a green tangle of mangroves, palms and lianas, swarming with crocodiles and serpents. Discovery was extremely unlikely. Conan knew the place of old; he had hidden there before, in his

corsair days.

As they slid silently past the city whose great black bastions rose on the jutting prongs of land, which locked the harbor, torches gleamed and smoldered luridly, and to their ears came the low thunder of drums. The port was not crowded with ships, as were the harbors of Argos. The Stygians did not base their glory and power upon ships and fleets. Trading-vessels and war-galleys, indeed, they had, but not in proportion to their inland strength. Many of their craft plied up and down the great river, rather than along the sea-coasts.

The Stygians were an ancient race, a dark, inscrutable people, powerful and merciless. Long ago their rule had stretched far north of the Styx, beyond the meadowlands of Shem, and into the fertile uplands now inhabited ^ the peoples of Koth and Ophir and Argos. Their borders had marched with those of ancient Acheron. But Acheron had fallen, and the barbaric ancestors of the Hyborians had swept southward in wolfskins and homed helmets, driving the ancient rulers of the land before them. The Stygians had not forgotten.

All day the Venturer lay at anchor in the tiny bay, walled in with green branches and tangled vines through which flitted gay-plumed, harsh-voiced birds, and among which glided bright-scaled, silent reptiles. Toward sundown a small boat crept out and down along the shore, seeking and finding that which Conan desired-a Stygian fisherman in his shallow, flat-prowed boat.

They brought him to the deck of the Venturer-a tall, dark, rangily built man, ashy with fear of his captors, who were ogres of that coast. He was naked except for his silken breeks, for, like the Hyrkanians, even the commoners and slaves of Stygia wore silk; and in his boat was a wide mantle such as these fishermen flung about their shoulders against the chill of the night.

He fell to his knees before Conan, expecting torture and death. "Stand on your legs, man, and quit trembling," said the Cimmerian impatiently, who found it difficult to understand abject terror, "You won't be harmed. Tell me but this: has a galley, a black racing-galley returning from Argos, put into Khemi within the last few days?" "Aye, my lord," answered the fisherman. "Only yesterday at dawn the priest Thutothmes returned from a voyage far to the north. Men say he has been to Messantia."

"What did he bring from Messantia?"

"Alas, my lord, I know not."

"Why did he go to Messantia?" demanded Conan.

"Nay, my lord, I am but a common man. Who am I to know the minds of the priests of Set? I can only speak what I have seen and what I have heard men whisper along the wharves. Men say that news of great import came southward, though of what none knows; and it is well known that the lord Thutothmes put off in his black galley in great haste. Now he is returned, but what he did in Argos, or what cargo he brought back, none knows, not even the seamen who manned his galley. Men say that he has opposed Thoth-Amon, who is the master of all priests of Set, and dwells in Luxur, and that Thutothmes seeks hidden power to overthrow the Great One. But who am I to say? When priests war with one another a common man can but lie on his belly and hope neither treads upon him."

Conan snarled in nervous exasperation at this servile philosophy, and turned to his men. "I'm going alone into Khemi to find this thief Thutothmes. Keep this man prisoner, but see that you do him no hurt. Crom's devils, stop your yowling! Do you think we can sail into the harbor and take the city by storm? I must go alone."

Silencing the clamor of protests, he doffed his own garments and donned the prisoner's silk breeches and sandals, and the band from the man's hair, but scorned the short fisherman's knife. The common men of Stygia were not allowed to wear swords, and the mantle was not voluminous enough to hide the Cimmerian's long blade, but Conan buckled to his hip a Ghanta knife, a weapon borne by the fierce desert men who dwelt to the south of the Stygians, a broad, heavy, slightly curved blade of fine steel, edged like a razor and long enough to dismember a man.

Then, leaving the Stygian guarded by the corsairs, Conan climbed into the fisherman's boat.

"Wait for me until dawn," he said. "If I haven't come then, I'll never come, so hasten southward to your own homes."

As he clambered over the rail, they set up a doleful wail at his going, until he thrust his head back into sight to curse them into silence. Then, dropping into the boat, he grasped the oars and sent the tiny craft shooting over the waves more swiftly than its owner had ever propelled it.

Chapter 17

: "He Has Slain the Sacred Son of Set!"

THE HARBOR OF Khemi lay between two great jutting points of land that ran into the ocean. He rounded the southern point, where the great black castles rose like a man-made hill, and entered the harbor just at dusk, when there was still enough light for the watchers to recognize the fisherman's boat and mantle, but not enough to permit recognition of betraying details. Unchallenged he threaded his way among the great black war galleys lying silent and unlighted at anchor, and drew up to a flight of wide stone steps which mounted up from the water's edge. There he made his boat fast to an iron ring set in the stone, as numerous similar craft were tied. There was nothing strange in a fisherman leaving his boat there. None but a fisherman could find a use for such a craft, and they did not steal from one another.

No one cast him more than a casual glance as he mounted the long steps, unobtrusively avoiding the torches that flared at intervals above the lapping black water. He seemed but an ordinary, empty-handed fisherman, returning after a fruitless day along the coast. If one had observed him closely, it might have seemed that his step was somewhat too springy and sure, his carriage somewhat too erect and confident for a lowly fisherman. But he passed quickly, keeping in the shadows, and the commoners of Stygia were no more given to analysis than were the commoners of the less exotic races.

In build he was not unlike the warrior castes of the Stygians, who were a tall, muscular race. Bronzed by the sun, he was nearly as dark as many of them. His black hair, square-cut and confined by a copper band, increased the resemblance. The characteristics which set him apart from them were the subtle difference in his walk, and his alien features and blue eyes.

But the mantle was a good disguise, and he kept as much in the shadow as possible, turning away his head when a native passed him too closely.

But it was a desperate game, and he knew he could not long keep up the deception. Khemi was not like the seaports of the Hyborians, where types of every race swarmed. The only aliens here were negro and Shemite slaves; and he resembled neither even as much as he resembled the Stygians themselves. Strangers were not welcome in the cities of Stygia; tolerated only when they came as ambassadors or licensed traders. But even then the latter were not allowed ashore after dark. And now there were no Hyborian ships in the harbor at all. A strange restlessness ran through the city, a stirring of ancient ambitions, a whispering none could define except those who whispered. This Conan felt rather than knew, his whetted primitive instincts sensing unrest about him.

If he were discovered his fate would be ghastly. They would slay him merely for being a stranger; if he were recognized as Amra, the corsair chief who had swept their coasts with steel and flame-an involuntary shudder twitched Conan's broad shoulders. Human foes he did not fear, nor any death by steel or fire. But this was a black land of sorcery and nameless horror. Set the Old Serpent, men said, banished long ago from the Hyborian races, yet lurked in the shadows of the cryptic temples, and awful and mysterious were the deeds done in the nighted shrines.

He had drawn away from the waterfront streets with their broad steps leading down to the water, and was entering the long shadowy streets of the main part of the city. There was no such scene as was offered by any Hyborian city-no blaze of lamps and cressets, with gay-clad people laughing and strolling along the pavements, and shops and stalls wide open and displaying their wares.

Here the stalls were closed at dusk. The only lights along the streets were torches, flaring smokily at wide intervals. People walking the streets were comparatively few; they went hurriedly and unspeaking, and their numbers decreased with the lateness of the hour. Conan found the scene gloomy and unreal; the silence of the people, their furtive haste, the great black stone walls that rose on each side of the streets. There was a grim massiveness about Stygian architecture that was overpowering and oppressive.

Few lights showed anywhere except in the upper parts of the buildings. Conan knew that most of the people lay on the flat roofs, among the palms of artificial gardens under the stars. There was a murmur of weird music from somewhere. Occasionally a bronze chariot rumbled along the flags, and there was a brief glimpse of a tall, hawk-faced noble, with a silk cloak wrapped about him, and a gold band with a rearing serpent-head emblem confining his black mane; of the ebon, naked charioteer bracing his knotty legs against the straining of the fierce Stygian horses.

But the people who yet traversed the streets on foot were commoners, slaves, tradesmen, harlots, toilers, and they became fewer as he progressed. He was making toward the temple of Set, where he knew he would be likely to find the priest he sought. He believed he would know Thutothmes if he saw him, though his one glance had been in the semi-darkness of the Messantian alley. That the man he had seen there had been the priest he was certain. Only occultists high in the mazes of the hideous Black Ring possessed the power of the black hand that dealt death by its touch; and only such a man would dare defy Thoth- Amon, whom the western world knew only as a figure of terror and myth.

The street broadened, and Conan was aware that he was getting into the part of the city dedicated to the temples. The great structures reared their black bulks against the dim stars, grim, in-describably menacing in the flare of the few torches. And suddenly he heard a low scream from--a woman on the other side of the street and somewhat ahead of him-a naked courtezan wearing the tall plumed head-dress of her class. She was shrinking back against the wall, staring across at something he could not yet see. At her cry the few people on the street halted suddenly as if frozen. At the same instant Conan was aware of a sinister slithering ahead of him. Then about the dark comer of the building he was approaching poked a hideous, wedge-shaped head, and after it flowed coil after coil of rippling, darkly glistening trunk.

The Cimmerian recoiled, remembering tales he had heard-serpents were sacred to Set, god of Stygia, who men said was himself a serpent. Monsters such as this were kept in the temples of Set, and when they hungered, were allowed to crawl forth into the streets to take what prey they wished. Their ghastly feasts were considered a sacrifice to the scaly god.

The Stygians within Conan's sight fell to their knees, men and women, and passively awaited their fate. One the great serpent would select, would lap in scaly coils, crush to a red pulp and swallow as a rat- snake swallows a mouse. The others would live. That was the will of the gods.

But it was not Conan's will. The python glided toward him, its attention probably attracted by the fact that he was the only human in sight still standing erect. Gripping his great knife under his mantle, Conan hoped the slimy brute would pass him by. But it halted before him and reared up horrifically in the flickering torchlight, its forked tongue flickering in and out, its cold eyes glittering with the ancient cruelty of the serpent-folk. Its neck arched, but before it could dart, Conan whipped his knife from under his mantle and struck like a flicker of lightning. The broad blade split that wedge-shaped head and sheared deep into the thick neck.

Conan wrenched his knife free and sprang clear as the great body knotted and looped and Whipped terrifically in its death throes. In the moment that he stood staring in morbid fascination, the only sound was the thud and swish of the snake's tail against the stones.

Then from the shocked votaries burst a terrible cry: "Blasphemer! He has slain the sacred son of Set! Slay him! Slay! Slay!"

Stones whizzed about him and the crazed Stygians rushed at him, shrieking hysterically, while from all sides others emerged from their houses and took up the cry. With a curse Conan wheeled and darted into the black mouth of an alley. He heard the patter of bare feet on the flags behind him as he ran more by feel than by sight, and the walls resounded to the vengeful yells of the pursuers. Then his left hand found a break in the wall, and he turned sharply into another, narrower alley. On both sides rose sheer black stone walls. High above him he could see a thin line of stars. These giant walls, he knew, were the walls of temples. He heard, behind him, the pack sweep past the dark mouth in full cry. Their shouts grew distant, faded away. They had missed the smaller alley and run straight on in the blackness. He too kept straight ahead, though the thought of encountering another of Set's "sons" in the darkness brought a shudder from him.

Then somewhere ahead of him he caught a moving glow, like that of a crawling glow-worm. He halted, flattened himself against the wall and gripped his knife. He knew what it was: a man approaching with a torch. Now it was so close he could make out the dark hand that gripped it, and the dim oval of a dark face. A few more steps and the man would certainly

see him. He sank into a tigerish crouch-the torch halted. A door was briefly etched in the glow, while the torch-bearer fumbled with it. Then it opened, the tall figure vanished through it, and darkness closed again on the alley. There was a sinister suggestion of furtiveness about that slinking figure, entering the alley-door in darkness; a priest, perhaps returning from some dark errand.

But Conan groped toward the door. If one man came up that alley with a torch, others might come at any time. To retreat the way he had come might mean to run full into the mob from which he was fleeing. At any moment they might return, find the narrower alley and come howling down it. He felt hemmed in by those sheer, unscalable walls, desirous of escape, even if escape meant invading some unknown building.

The heavy bronze door was not locked. It opened under his fingers and he peered through the crack. He was looking into a great square chamber of massive black stone. A torch smoldered in a niche in the wall. The chamber was empty. He glided through the lacquered door and closed it behind him.

His sandaled feet made no sound as he crossed the black marble floor. A teak door stood partly open, and gliding through this, knife in hand, he came out into a great, dim, shadowy place whose lofty ceiling was only a hint of darkness high above him, toward which the black walls swept upward. On all sides black-arched doorways opened into the great still hall. It was lit by curious bronze lamps that gave a dim weird light. On the other side of the great hall a broad black marble stairway, without a railing, marched upward to lose itself in gloom, and above him on all sides dun galleries hung like black stone ledges.

Conan shivered; he was in a temple of some Stygian god, if not Set himself, then someone only less grim. And the shrine did not lack an occupant. In the midst of the great hall stood a black stone altar, massive, somber, without carvings or ornament, and upon it coiled one of the great sacred serpents, its iridescent scales shimmering in the lamplight. It did not move, and Conan remembered stories that the priests kept these creatures drugged part of the time. The Cimmerian took an uncertain step out from the door, then shrank back suddenly, not into the room he had just quitted, but into a velvet-curtained recess. He had heard a soft step somewhere near by.

From one of the black arches emerged a tall, powerful figure in sandals and silken loin-cloth, with a wide mantle trailing from his shoulders. But face and head were hidden by a monstrous mask, a half- bestial, half-human countenance, from the crest of which floated a mass of ostrich plumes.

In certain ceremonies the Stygian priests went masked. Conan hoped the man would not discover him, but some instinct warned the Stygian. He turned abruptly from his destination, which apparently was the stair, and stepped straight to the recess. As he jerked aside the velvet hanging, a hand darted from the shadows, crushed the cry in his throat and jerked him headlong into the alcove, and the knife impaled him.

Conan's next move was the obvious one suggested by logic. He lifted off the grinning mask and drew it over his own head. The fisherman's mantle he flung over the body of the priest, which he concealed behind the hangings, and drew the priestly mantle about his own brawny shoulders. Fate had given him a disguise. All Khemi might well be searching now for the blasphemer who dared defend himself against a sacred snake; but who would dream of looking for him under the mask of a priest?

He strode boldly from the alcove and headed for one of the arched doorways at random; but he had not taken a dozen strides When he wheeled again, all his senses edged for peril.

A band of masked figures filed down the stair, appareled exactly as he was. He hesitated, caught in the open, and stood still, trusting to his disguise, though cold sweat gathered on his forehead and the backs of his hands. No word was spoken. Like phantoms they descended into the great hall and moved past him toward a black arch. The leader carried an ebon staff Which supported a grinning white skull, and Conan knew it was one of the ritualistic processions so inexplicable to a foreigner, but which played a strong-and often sinister-part in the Stygian religion. The last figure turned his head slightly toward the motionless Cimmerian, as if expecting him to follow. Not to do what was obviously expected of him would rouse instant suspicion. Conan fell in behind the last man and suited his gait to their measured pace.

They traversed a long, dark, vaulted corridor in which, Conan noticed uneasily, the skull on the staff glowed phosphorescently. He felt a surge of unreasoning, wild animal panic that urged him to rip out his knife and slash right and left at these uncanny figures, to flee madly from this grim, dark temple. But he held himself in check, fighting down the dim monstrous intuitions that rose in the back of his mind and peopled the gloom with shadowy shapes of horror; and presently he barely stifled a sigh of relief as they filed through a great double- valved door which was three times higher than a man, and emerged into the starlight.

Conan wondered if he dared fade into some dark alley; but hesitated, uncertain, and down the long dark street they padded silently, while such folk as they met turned their heads away and fled from them. The procession kept far out from the walls; to turn and bolt into any of the alleys they passed would be too conspicuous. While he mentally fumed and cursed, they came to a low-arched gateway in the southern wall, and through this they filed. Ahead of them and about them lay clusters of low, flat-topped mud houses, and palm-groves, shadowy in the starlight. Now if ever, thought Conan, was his time to escape his silent companions.

But the moment the gate was left behind them those companions were no longer silent. They began to mutter excitedly among themselves. The measured, ritualistic gait was abandoned, the staff with its skull was tucked unceremoniously under the leader's arm, and the whole group broke ranks and hurried onward. And Conan hurried with them. For in the low murmur of speech he had caught a word that galvanized him. The word was: "Tuttothmes!"

Chapter 18

: "I Am the Woman Who Never Died"

CONAN STARED WITH burning interest at his masked companions. One of them was Thutothmes, or else the destination of the band was a rendezvous with the man he sought. And he knew what the destination was, when beyond the palms he glimpsed a black triangular bulk looming against the shadowy sky.

They passed through the belt of huts and groves, and if any man saw them he was careful not to show himself. The huts were dark. Behind them the black towers of Khemi rose gloomily against the stars that were mirrored in the waters of the harbor; ahead of them the desert stretched away in dim darkness; somewhere a jackal yapped. The quick- passing sandals of the silent neophytes made no noise in the sand. They might have been ghosts, moving toward that colossal pyramid that rose out of the murk of the desert. There was no sound over all the sleeping land.

Conan's heart beat quicker as he gazed at the grim black wedge that stood etched against the stars, and his impatience to close with Thutothmes in whatever conflict the meeting might mean was not unmixed with a fear of the unknown. No man could approach one of those somber piles of black stone without apprehension. The very name was a symbol of repellent horror among the northern nations, and legends hinted that the Stygians did not build them; that they were in the land at whatever immeasurably ancient date the dark-skinned people came into the land of the great river.

As they approached the pyramid he glimpsed a dim glow near the base which presently resolved itself into a doorway, on either side of which brooded stone lions with the heads of women, cryptic, inscrutable, nightmares crystallized in stone. The leader of the band made straight for the doorway, in the deep well of which Conan saw a shadowy figure.

The leader paused an instant beside this dim figure, and then vanished into the dark interior, and one by one the others followed. As each masked priest passed through the gloomy portal he was halted briefly by the mysterious guardian and something passed between them, some word or gesture Conan could not make out. Seeing this, the Cimmerian purposely lagged behind, and stooping, pretended to be fumbling with the fastening of his sandal. Not until the last of the masked figures had disappeared did he straighten and approach the portal.

He was uneasily wondering if the guardian of the temple were human, remembering some tales he had heard. But his doubts were set at rest. A dim bronze cresset glowing just within the door lighted a long narrow corridor that ran away into blackness, and a man standing silent in the mouth of it, wrapped in a wide black cloak. No one else was in sight. Obviously the masked priests had disappeared down the corridor. Over the cloak that was drawn about his lower features, the Stygian's piercing eyes regarded Conan sharply. With his left hand he made a curious gesture. On a venture Conan imitated it. But evidently another gesture was expected; the Stygian's right hand came from under his cloak with a gleam of steel and his murderous stab would have pierced the heart of an ordinary man. But he was dealing with one whose thews were nerved to the quickness of a jungle cat. Even as the dagger flashed in the dim light, Conan caught the dusky wrist and smashed his clenched right fist against the Stygian's jaw. The man's head went back against the stone wall with a dull crunch that told of a fractured skull. Standing for an instant above him, Conan listened intently. The cresset burned low, casting vague shadows about the door. Nothing stirred in the blackness about the door. Nothing stirred in the blackness beyond, though far away and below him, as it seemed,

He caught the faint, muffled note of a gong.

He stooped and dragged the body behind the great bronze door which stood wide, opened inward, and then the Cimmerian went warily but swiftly down the corridor, toward what doom he did not even try to guess. He had not gone far when he halted, baffled. The corridor split in two branches, and he had no way of knowing which the masked priests had taken. At a venture he chose the left. The floor slanted slightly downward and worn smooth as by many feet. Here and there a dim cresset cast a faint nightmarish twilight. Conan wondered uneasily for what purpose these colossal piles had been reared, in what forgotten age. This was an ancient, ancient land. No man knew how many ages the black temples of Stygia looked.

Against the stars, narrow black arches opened occasionally to right and left, but he kept to the main corridor, although a conviction that he had taken the wrong branch was growing in him. Even with their start on him, he should have overtaken the priests by this time. He was growing nervous. The silence was like a tangible thing, and yet he had a feeling that he was not alone. More than once, passing a nighted arch he seemed to feel the glare of unseen eyes fixed upon him. He paused, half minded to turn back to where the corridor had first branched. He wheeled abruptly, knife lifted, every nerve tingling.

A girl stood at the mouth of a smaller tunnel, staring fixedly at him. Her ivory skin showed her to be Stygian of some ancient noble family, and like all such women she was tall, lithe, voluptuously figured, her hair a great pile of black foam, among which gleamed a sparkling ruby. But for her velvet sandals and broad jewel-crusted girdle about her supple waist she was quite nude.

"What do you here?" she demanded.

To answer would betray his alien origin. He remained motionless, a grim, somber figure in the hideous mask with the plumes floating over him. His alert gaze sought the shadows behind her and found them empty. But there might be hordes of fighting-men within her call.

She advanced toward him, apparently without apprehension though with suspicion.

"You are not a priest," she said. "You are a fighting-man. Even with that mask that is plain. There is as much difference between you and a priest as there is between a man and a woman. By Set!" she exclaimed, halting suddenly, her eyes flaring wide. "I do not believe you are even a Stygian!"

With a movement too quick for the eye to follow, his hand closed about her round throat, lightly as a caress.

"Not a sound out of you!" he muttered.

Her smooth ivory flesh was cold as marble, yet there was no fear in the wide, dark, marvelous eyes which regarded him.

"Do not fear," she answered calmly. "I will not betray you. But you are mad to come, a stranger and a foreigner, to the forbidden temple of Set?"

"I'm looking for the priest Thutothmes," he answered. "Is he in this temple?"

"Why do you seek him?" she parried. "He has something of mine which was stolen." "I will lead you to him, she volunteered, so promptly that his suspicions were instantly aroused.

"Don't play with me, girl," he growled.

"I do not play with you. I have no love for Thutofhmes." He hesitated, then made up his mind; after all, he was in her power as she was in his. "Walk beside me," he commanded, shifting his grasp from her throat to her wrist. "But walk with care. If you make a move--"

She led him down the slanting corridor, down and down, until there were no more cressets, and he groped his way in darkness, aware less by sight than by feel and sense of the woman at his side. Once when he spoke to her, she turned her head toward him and he was startled to see her eyes glowing like golden fire in the dark. Dim doubts and vague monstrous suspicions haunted his mind, but he followed her, through a labyrinthine maze of black corridors that confused even his primitive sense of direction. He mentally cursed himself for a fool, allowing himself to be led into that black abode of mystery; but it was too late to turn back now. Again he felt life and movement in the darkness about him, sensed peril and hunger burning impatiently in the blackness. Unless his ears deceived him he caught a faint sliding noise that ceased and receded at a muttered command from the girl.

She led him at last into a chamber lighted by a curious seven-branched candelabrum in which black candles burned weirdly. He knew they were far below the earth. The chamber was square, with walls and ceilings of polished black marble and furnished after the manner of the ancient Stygians; there was a couch of ebony, covered with black velvet, and on a black stone dais lay a carven mummy-case.

Conan stood waiting expectantly, staring at the various black arches which opened into the chamber. But the girl made no move to go farther. Stretching herself on the couch with feline suppleness, she intertwined her fingers behind her sleek head and I regarded him from under long, drooping lashes.

"Well?" he demanded impatiently. "What are you doing?"

Where's Thutotomes?"

"There is no haste," she answered lazily. "What is an hour-or a day, or a year, or a century, for that matter? Take off your mask. Let me see your features."

With a grunt of annoyance Conan dragged on the bulky headpiece, and the girl nodded as if in approval as she scanned his dark scarred face and blazing eyes.

"There is strength inyou-great strength; you could strangle a bullock."

He moved restlessly, his suspicion growing. With his hand on his hilt he peered into the gloomy arches.

"If you've brought me into a trap," he said, "you won't live to enjoy your handiwork. Are you going to get off that couch and do as you promised, or do I have to--"

His voice trailed away. He was staring at the mummy-case, on which the countenance of the occupant was carved in ivory with the startling vividness of a forgotten art. There was a disquieting familiarity about that carven mask, and with something of a shock he realized what it was; there was a startling resemblance between it and the face of the girl lolling on the ebon couch. She might have been the model from which it was carved, but he knew the portrait was at least centuries old. Archaic hieroglyphics were scrawled across the lacquered lid, and, seeking back into his mind for tag-ends of learning, picked up here and there as incidentals of an adventurous life, he spelled them out, and said aloud: "Akivasha!"

"You have heard of Princess Akivasha?" inquired the girl on the couch.

"Who hasn't?" he grunted. The name of that ancient, evil, beautiful princess still lived the world over in song and legend, though ten thousand years had rolled their cycles since the daughter of Tuthamon had reveled in purple feasts amid the black halls of ancient Luxur.

"Her only sin was that she loved life and all the meanings of life," said the Stygian girl. "To win life she courted death. She could not bear to think of growing old and shriveled and worn, and dying at last as hags die. She wooed Darkness like a lover and his gift was life- life that, not being life as mortals know it, can never grow old and fade. She went into the shadows to cheat age and death--"

Conan glared at her with eyes that were suddenly burning slits. And he wheeled and tore the lid from the sarcophagus. It was empty. Behind him the girl was laughing and the sound froze the blood in his veins. He whirled back to her, the short hairs on his neck bristling.

"You are Akivasha!" he grated.

She laughed and shook back her burnished locks, spread her arms sensuously.

"I am Akivasha! I am the woman who never died, who never grew old! Who fools say was lifted from the earth by the gods, in the full bloom of her youth and beauty, to queen it for ever in some celestial clime! Nay, it is in the shadows that mortals find immortality! Ten thousand years ago I died to live for ever! Give me your lips, strong man!" Rising lithely she came to him, rose on tiptoe and flung her arms about his massive neck. Scowling down into her upturned, beautiful countenance he was aware of a fearful fascination and an icy fear. "Love me!" she whispered, her head thrown back, eyes closed and lips parted. "Give me of your blood to renew my youth and perpetuate my everlasting life! I will make you, too, immortal! I will teach you the wisdom of all the ages, all the secrets that have lasted out the eons in the blackness beneath these dark temples. I will make you king of that shadowy horde which revel among the tombs of the ancients when night veils the desert and bats flit across the moon. I am weary of priests and magicians, and captive girls dragged screaming through the portals of death. I desire a man. Love me, barbarian!"

She pressed her dark head down against his mighty breast, and he felt a sharp pang at the base of his throat. With a curse he tore her away and flung her sprawling across the couch.

"Damned vampire!" Blood was trickling from a tiny wound in his throat. She reared up on the couch like a serpent poised to strike, all the golden fires of hell blazing in her wide eyes. Her lips drew back, revealing white pointed teeth.

"Fool!" she shrieked. "Do you think to escape me? You will live and die in darkness! I have brought you far below the temple. You can never find your way out alone. You can never cut your way through those which guard the tunnels. But for my protection the sons of Set would long ago have taken you into their bellies."

"Fool, I shall yet drink your blood!"

"Keep away from me or I'll slash you asunder," he grunted, his flesh crawling with revulsion. "You may be immortal, but steel will dismember you."

As he backed toward the arch through which he had entered, the light went out suddenly. All the candles were extinguished at once, though he did not know how; for Akivasha had not touched them. But the vampire's laugh rose mockingly behind him, poison-sweet as the viols of hell, and he sweated as he groped in the darkness for the arch in a near-panic. His fingers encountered an opening and he plunged through it. Whether it was the arch through which he had entered he did not know, nor did he very much care. His one thought was to get out of the haunted chamber which had housed that beautiful, hideous, undead fiend for so many centuries.

His wanderings through those black, winding tunnels, were a sweating nightmare. Behind him and about him he heard faint slitherings and glidings, and once the echo of that sweet, hellish laughter he had heard in the chamber of Akivasha. He slashed ferociously at sounds and movements he heard or imagined he heard in the darkness near him, and once his sword cut through some yielding tenuous substance that might have been cobwebs. He had a desperate feeling that he was being played with, lured deeper and deeper into ultimate night, before being set upon by demoniac talon and fang.

And through his fear ran the sickening revulsion of his discovery. The legend of Akivasha was so old, and among the evil tales told of her ran a thread of beauty and idealism, of everlasting youth. To so many dreamers and poets and lovers she was not alone the evil princess of Stygian legend, but the symbol of eternal youth and beauty, shining for ever in some far realm of the gods. And this was the hideous reality. This foul perversion was the truth of that everlasting life. Through his physical revulsion ran the sense of a shattered dream of man's idolatry, its glittering gold proved slime and cosmic filth. A wave of futility swept over him, a dim fear of the falseness of all men's dreams and idolatries.

And now he knew that his ears were not playing him tricks. He was being followed, and his pursuers were closing in on him. In the darkness sounded shufflings and slidings that were never made by human feet; no, nor by the feet of any normal animal. The underworld had its bestial life too, perhaps. They were behind him. He turned to face them, though he could see nothing, and slowly backed away. Then the sounds eased, even before he turned his head and saw, somewhere down the long corridor, a glow of light.

Chapter 19

: In the Hall of the Dead

CONAN MOVED CAUTIOUSLY in the direction of the light he had seen, his ear cocked over his shoulder, but there was no further sound of pursuit, though he felt the darkness pregnant with sentient life.

The glow was not stationary; it moved, bobbing grotesquely along. Then he saw the source. The tunnel he was traversing crossed another, wider corridor some distance ahead of him. And along this latter tunnel filed a bizarre procession-four tall, gaunt men in black, hooded robes, leaning on staffs. The leader held a torch above his head-a torch that burned with a curious steady glow. Like phantoms they passed across his limited range of vision and vanished, with only a fading glow to tell of their passing. Their appearance was indescribably eldritch. They were not Stygians, not anything Conan had ewr seen. He doubted if they were even humans. They were like black ghosts, stalking ghoulishly along the haunted tunnels.

But his position could be no more desperate than it was. Before the inhuman feet behind him could resume their slithering advance at the fading of the distant illumination, Conan was running down the corridor. He plunged into the other tunnel and saw, far down it, small in the distance, the weird procession moving in the glowing sphere. He stole noiselessly after them, then shrank suddenly back against the wall as he saw them halt and cluster together as if conferring on some matter. They turned as if to retrace their steps, and he slipped into the nearest archway. Groping in the darkness to which he had become so accustomed that he could all but see through it, he discovered that the tunnel did not run straight, but meandered, and he fell back beyond the first turn, so that the light of the strangers should not fall on him as they passed.

But as he stood there, he was aware of a low hum of sound from somewhere behind him, like the murmur of human voices. Moving down the corridor in that direction, he confirmed his first suspicion. Abandoning his original intention of following the ghoulish travelers to whatever destination might be theirs, he set out in the direction of the voices.

Presently he saw a glint of light ahead of him, and turning into the corridor from which it issued, saw a broad arch filled with a dim glow at the other end. On his left a narrow stone stair went upward, and instinctive caution prompted him to turn and mount the stair. The voices he heard were coming from beyond that flame-filled arch.

The sounds fell away beneath him as he climbed, and presently be came out through a low arched door into a vast open space glowing with a weird radiance.

He was standing on a shadowy gallery from which he looked down into a broad dim-lit hall of colossal proportions. It was a hall of the dead, which few ever see but the silent priests of Stygia. Along the black walls rose tier above tier of carven, painted sarcophagi. Each stood in a niche in the dusky stone, and the tiers mounted up and up to be lost in the gloom above. Thousands of carven masks stared impassively down upon the group in the midst of the hall, rendered futile and insignificant by that vast array of the dead.

Of this group ten were priests, and though they had discarded their masks Conan knew they were the priests he had accompanied to the pyramid. They stood before a tall, hawk-faced man beside a black altar on which lay a mummy in rotting swathings. And the altar seemed to stand in the heart of a living fire which pulsed and shimmered, dripping flakes of quivering golden flame on the black stone about it. This dazzling glow emanated from a great red jewel which lay upon the altar, and in the reflection of which the faces of the priests looked ashy and corpse-like. As he looked, Conan felt the pressure of all the weary leagues and the weary nights and days of his long quest, and he trembled with the mad urge to rush among those silent priests, clear his way with mighty blows of naked steel, and grasp the red gem with passion-taut fingers. But he gripped himself with yon control, and crouched down in the shadow of the stone balustrade. A glance showed him that a stair led down into the hall from the gallery, hugging the wall and half hidden in the shadows. He glared into the dimness of the vast place, seeking other priests or votaries, but saw only the group about the altar.

In that great emptiness the voice of the man beside the altar sounded hollow and ghostly:

" And so the word came southward. The night wind whispered it, the ravens croaked of it as they flew, and the grim bats told it to the owls and the serpents that lurk in hoary ruins. Were-wolf and vampire knew, and the ebon-bodied demons that prowl by night. The sleeping Night of the World stirred and shook its heavy mane, and there began a throbbing of drums in deep darkness, and the echoes of far weird cries frightened men who walked by dusk. For the Heart of Ahriman had come again into the world to fulfill its cryptic destiny. "Ask me not how I, Thutothmes of Khemi and the Night, heard the word before Thoth-Amon who calls himself prince of all wizards. There are secrets not meet for such ears even as yours, and Thoth-Amon is not the only lord of the Black Ring."

"I knew, and I went to meet the Heart which came southward. It was like a magnet which drew me, unerringly. From death to death it came, riding on a river of human blood. Blood feeds it, blood draws it. Its power is greatest when there is blood on the hands that grasp it, when it is wrested by slaughter from its holder. Wherever it gleams, blood is spilt and kingdoms totter, and the forces of nature are put in turmoil.

"And here I stand, the master of the Heart, and have summoned you to come secretly, who are faithful to me, to share in the black kingdom that shall be. Tonight you shall witness the breaking of Thoth-Amon's chains which enslave us, and the birth of empire. Who am I, even I, Thutothmes, to know what powers lurk and dream in those crimson deeps? It holds secrets forgotten for three thousand years. But I shall learn. These shall tell me!" He waved his hand toward the silent shapes that lined the hall. "See how they sleep, staring through their carven masks! Kings, queens, generals, priests, wizards, the dynasties and the nobility of Stygia for ten thousand years! The touch of the Heart will awaken them from their long slumber. Long, long the Heart throbbed and pulsed in ancient Stygia. Here was its home in the centuries before it journeyed to Acheron. The ancients knew its full power, and they will tell me when by its magic I restore them to life to labor for me. "I will rouse them, will waken them, will learn their forgotten wisdom, the knowledge locked in those withered skulls. By the lore of the dead we shall enslave the living! Aye, kings, and generals and wizards of old shall be our helpers and our slaves. Who shall stand before us? "Look! This dried, shriveled thing on the altar was once Thoth-mekri, a high priest of Set, who died three thousand years ago."

"He was an adept of the Black Ring. He knew of the Heart. He will tell us of its powers."

Lifting the great jewel, the speaker laid it on the withered breast of the mummy, and lifted his hand as he began an incantation. But the incantation was never finished. With his hand lilted and his lips parted he froze, glaring past his acolytes, and they wheeled to stare in the direction in which he was looking.

Through the black arch of a door four gaunt, black-robed shapes had filed into the great hall. Their faces were dim yellow ovals in the shadows of their hoods.

"Who are you?" ejaculated Thutothmes in a voice as pregnant with danger as the hiss of a cobra. "Are you mad, to invade the holy shrine of Set?"

The tallest of the strangers spoke, and his voice was toneless as a Khitan temple bell.

"We follow Conan of Aquilonia."

"He is not here," answered Thutothmes, shaking back his mantle from his right hand with a curious menacing gesture, like a panther unsheathing his talons.

"You lie. He is in this temple. We tracked him from a corpse behind the bronze door of the outer portal through a maze of corridors. We were following his devious trail when we became aware of this conclave. We go now to take it up again. But first give us the Heart of Ahriman."

"Death is the portion of madmen," murmured Thutothmes, moving nearer the speaker. His priests closed in on cat-like feet, but the strangers did not appear to heed.

"Who can look upon it without desire?" said the Khitan. "In Khitai we have heard of it. It will give us power over the people which cast us out. Glory and wonder dream in its crimson deeps. Give it to us, before we slay you."

A fierce cry rang out as a priest leaped with a flicker of steel. Before he could strike, a scaly staff licked out and touched his breast, and he fell as a dead man falls. In an instant the mummies were staring down on a scene of blood and horror. Curved knives flashed and crimsoned, snaky staffs licked in and out, and whenever they touched a man, that man screamed and died.

At the first stroke Conan had bounded up and was racing down the stairs. He caught only glimpses of that brief, fiendish fight--saw men swaying, locked in battle and streaming blood; saw one Khitan, fairly hacked to pieces, yet still on his feet and dealing death, when Thutothmes smote him on the breast with his open empty hand, and he dropped dead, though naked steel had not been enough to destroy his uncanny vitality.

By the time Conan's hurtling feet left the stair, the fight was all but over. Three of the Khitans were down, and slashed and cut to ribbons and disemboweled, but of the Stygians only Thutothmes remained on his feet.

He rushed at the remaining Khitan, his empty hand lifted like a weapon, and that hand was black as that of a negro. But before he could strike, the staff in the tall Khitan's hand licked out, seeming to elongate itself as the yellow man thrust. The point touched the bosom of Thutothmes and he staggered; again and yet again the staff licked out, and Thutothmes reeled and fell dead, his features blotted out in a rush of blackness that made the whole of him the same hue as his enchanted hand.

The Khitan turned toward the jewel that burned on the breast of the mummy, but Conan was before him.

In a tense stillness the two faced each other, amid that shambles, with the carven mummies staring down upon them.

"Far have I followed you, oh king of Aquilonia," said the Khitan calmly. "Down the long river, and over the mountains, across Poitain and Zingara and through the hills of Argos and down the coast. Not easily did we pick up on your trail from Tarantia, for the priests of Asura are crafty. We lost it in Zingara, but we found your helmet in the forest below the border hills, where you had fought with the ghouls of the forests. Almost we lost the trail tonight among these labyrinths."

Conan reflected that he had been fortunate in returning from the vampire's chamber by another route than that by which he had been led to it. Otherwise he would have run full into these yellow fiends instead of sighting them from afar as they smelled out his spoor like human bloodhounds, with whatever uncanny gift was theirs.

The Khitan shook his head slightly, as if reading his mind.

"That is meaningless; the long trail ends here."

"Why have you hounded me?" demanded Conan, poised to move in any direction with the celerity of a hair-trigger.

"It was a debt to pay," answered the Khitan. "To you who are about to die, I will not withhold knowledge. We were vassals of the king of Aquilonia, Valerius. Long we served him, but of that service we are free now-my brothers by death, and I by the fulfilment of obligation. I shall return to Aquilonia with two hearts; for myself the Heart of Ahriman; for Valerius the heart of Conan. A kiss of the staff that was cut from the living Tree of Death--"

The staff licked out like the dart of a viper, but the slash of Conan's knife was quicker. The staff fell in writhing halves, there was another flicker of the keen steel like a jet of lightning, and the head of the Khitan rolled to the floor.

Conan wheeled and extended his hand toward the jewel-then he shrank back, his hair bristling, his blood congealing idly.

For no longer a withered brown thing lay on the altar. The jewel shimmered on the full, arching breast of a naked, living man who lay among the moldering bandages. Living? Conan could not decide. The eyes were like dark murky glass under which shone inhuman somber fires.

Slowly the man rose, taking the jewel in his hand. He towered beside the altar, dusky, naked, with a face like a carven image. Mutely he extended his hand toward Conan, with the jewel throbbing like a living heart within it. Conan took it, with an eery sensation of receiving gifts from the hand of the dead. He somehow realized that the proper incantations had not been made-the conjurement had not been completed- life had not been fully restored to his corpse.

"Who are you?" demanded the Cimmerian.

The answer came in a toneless monotone, like the dripping of water from stalactites in subterranean caverns. "I was Thoth-mekri; I am dead."

"Well, lead me out of this accursed temple, will you?" Conan requested, his flesh crawling.

With measured, mechanical steps the dead man moved toward a black arch. Conan followed him. A glance back showed him once again the vast, shadowy hall with its tiers of sarcophagi, the dead men sprawled about the altar; the head of the Khitan he had slain stared sightless up at the sweeping shadows.

The glow of the jewel illuminated the black tunnels like an en- sorceled lamp, dripping golden fire. Once Conan caught a glimpse of ivory flesh in the shadows, believed he saw the vampire that was Akivasha shrinking back from the glow of the jewel; and with her, other less human shapes scuttled or shambled into the darkness.

The dead man strode straight on, looking neither to right nor left, his pace as changeless as the tramp of doom. Cold sweat gathered thick on Conan's flesh. Icy doubts assailed him. How could he know that this terrible figure out of the past was leading him to freedom? But he knew that, left to himself, he could never untangle this bewitched maze of corridors and tunnels. He followed his awful guide through blackness that loomed before and behind them and was filled with skulking shapes of horror and lunacy that cringed from the blinding glow of the Heart.

Then the bronze doorway was before him, and Conan felt the night wind blowing across the desert, and saw the stars, and the starlit desert across which streamed the great black shadow of the pyramid. Thothmekri pointed silently into the desert, and then turned and stalked soundlessly back in the darkness. Conan stared after that silent figure that receded into the blackness on soundless, inexorable feet as one that moves to a known and inevitable doom, or returns to everlasting sleep.

With a curse the Cimmerian leaped from the doorway and fled into the desert as if pursued by demons. He did not look back toward the pyramid, or toward the black towers of Khemi looming dimly across the sands. He headed southward toward the coast, and he ran as a man runs in ungovernable panic. The violent exertion shook his brain free of black cobwebs; the clean desert wind blew the nightmares from his soul and his revulsion changed to a wild tide of exultation before the desert gave way to a tangle of swampy growth through which he saw the black water lying before him, and the Venturer at anchor.

He plunged through the undergrowth, hip-deep in the marshes; dived headlong into the deep water, heedless of sharks or crocodiles, and swam to the galley and was clambering up the chain on to the deck, dripping and exultant, before the watch saw him.

"Awake, you dogs!" roared Conan, knocking aside the spear the startled lookout thrust at his breast. "Heave up the anchor! Lay to the doors! Give that fisherman a helmet full of gold and put him ashore! Dawn will soon be breaking, and before sunrise we must be racing for the nearest port of Zingara!"

He whirled about his head the great jewel, which threw off splashes of light that spotted the deck with golden fire.

Chapter 20

: Out of the Dust Shall Acheron Arise

WINTER HAD PASSED from Aquilonia. Leaves sprang out on the limbs of trees, and the fresh grass smiled to the touch of the warm southern breezes. But many a field lay idle and empty, many a charred heap of ashes marked the spot where proud villas or prosperous towns had stood. Wolves prowled openly along the grass-grown highways, and bands of gaunt, masterless men slunk through the forests. Only in Tarantia was feasting and wealth and pageantry.

Valerius ruled like one touched with madness. Even many of the barons who had welcomed his return cried out at last against him. His tax- gatherers crushed rich and poor alike; the wealth of a looted kingdom poured into Tarantia, which became less like the capital of a realm than the garrison of conquerors in a conquered land. Its merchants waxed rich, but it was a precarious prosperity; for none knew when he might be accused of treason on a trumped-up charge, and his property confiscated, himself cast into prison or brought to the bloody block.

Valerius made no attempt to conciliate his subjects. He maintained himself by means of the Nemedian soldiery and by desperate mercenaries. He knew himself to be a puppet of Amalric. He knew that he ruled only on the sufferance of the Nemedian. He knew that he could never hope to unite Aquilonia under his rule and cast off the yoke of his masters, for the outland provinces would resist him to the last drop of blood. And for that matter the Nemedians would cast him from his throne if he made attempt to consolidate his kingdom. He was caught in his own vise. The gall of defeated pride corroded his soul, and he threw himself into a reign of debauchery, as one who lives from day to day, without thought or care for tomorrow.

Yet there was subtlety in his madness, so deep that not even Amalric guessed it. Perhaps the wild, chaotic years of wandering as an exile had bred in him a bitterness beyond common conception. Perhaps his loathing of his present position increased this bitterness to a kind of madness. At any event he lived with one desire: to cause the ruin of all who associated with him.

He knew that his rule would be over the instant he had served Amalric's purpose; he knew, too, that so long as he continued to oppress his native kingdom the Nemedian would suffer him to reign, for Amalric wished to crush Aquilonia into ultimate submission, to destroy its last shred of independence, and then at last to seize it himself, rebuild it after his own fashion with his vast wealth, and use its men and natural resources to wrest the crown of Nemedia from Tarascus. For the throne of an emperor was Amalric's ultimate ambition, and Valerius knew it. Valerius did not know whether Tarascus suspected this, but he knew that the king of Nemedia approved of his ruthless course. Tarascus hated Aquilonia, with a hate born of old wars. He desired only the destruction of the western kingdom.

And Valerius intended to ruin the country so utterly that not even Amalric's wealth could ever rebuild it. He hated the baron quite as much as he hated the Aquilonians, and hoped only to live to see the day when Aquilonia lay in utter ruin, and Tarascus and Amalric were locked in hopeless civil war that would as com-petely destroy Nemedia.

He believed that the conquest of the still defiant provinces of Gunderiand and Poitain and the Bossonian marches would mark his end as king. He would then have served Amalric's purpose, and could be discarded. So he delayed the conquest of these provinces, confining his activities to objectless raids and forays, meeting Amalric's urges for action with all sorts of plausible objections and postponements.

His life was a series of feasts and wild debauches. He filled his palace with the fairest girls of the kingdom, willing or unwilling. He blasphemed the gods and sprawled drunken on the floor of the banquet hall wearing the golden crown, and staining his royal purple robes with the wine he spilled. In gusts of blood-lust he festooned the gallows in the market square with dangling corpses, glutted the axes of the headsmen and sent his Nemedian horsemen thundering through the land pillaging and burning. Driven to madness, the land was in a constant upheaval of frantic revolt, savagely suppressed. Valerius plundered and raped and looted and destroyed until even Amalric protested, warning him that he would beggar the kingdom beyond repair, not knowing that such was his fixed determination.

But while in both Aquilonia and Nemedia men talked of the madness of the king, in Nemedia men talked much of Xaltotun, the masked one. Yet few saw him on the streets of Belverus. Men said he spent much time in the hills, in curious conclaves with surviving remnants of an old race: dark, silent folk who claimed descent from an ancient Idngdom. Men whispered of drums beating far up in the dreaming hills, of fires glowing in the darkness, and strange chantings borne on the winds, chantings and rituals forgotten centuries ago except as meaningless formulas mumbled beside mountain hearths in villages whose inhabitants differed strangely from the people of the valleys.

The reason for these conclaves none knew, unless it was Orastes, who frequently accompanied the Pythonian, and on whose countenance a haggard shadow was growing.

But in the full flood of spring a sudden whisper passed over the sinking kingdom that woke the land to eager life. It came like a murmurous wind drifting up from the south, waking men sunk in the apathy of despair. Yet how it first came none could truly say. Some spoke of a strange, grim old woman who came down from the mountains with her hair flowing in the wind, and a great gray wolf following her like a dog. Others whispered of the priests of Asura who stole like furtive phantoms from Gunderiand to the marches of Poitain, and to the forest villages of the Bossonians.

However the word came, revolt ran like a flame along the borders. Outlying Nemedian garrisons were stormed and put to the sword, foraging parties were cut to pieces; the west was up in arms, and there was a different air about the rising, a fierce resolution and inspired wrath rather than the frantic despair that had motivated the preceding revolts. It was not only the common people; barons were fortifying their castles and hurling defiance at the governors of the provinces. Bands of Bossonians were seen moving along the edges of the marches: stocky, resolute men in brigandines and steel caps, with longbows in their hands. From the inert stagnation of dissolution and ruin the realm was suddenly alive, vibrant and dangerous. So Amalric sent in haste for Tarascus, who came with an army.

In the royal palace in Tarantia the two kings and Amalric discussed the rising. They had not sent for Xaltotun, immersed in his cryptic studies in the Nemedian hills. Not since that bloody day in the valley of the Valkia had they called upon him for aid of his magic, and he had drawn apart, communing but little with them, apparently indifferent to their intrigues.

Nor had they sent for Orastes, but he came, and he was white as spume blown before the storm. He stood in the gold-domed chamber where the kings held conclave and they beheld in amazement his haggard stare, the fear they had never guessed the mind of Orastes could hold.

"You are weary, Orastes," said Amalric. "Sit upon this divan and I will have a slave fetch you wine. You have ridden hard--"

Orastes waved aside the invitation.

"I have killed three horses on the road from Belverus. I cannot drink wine, I cannot rest, until I have said what I have to say."

He paced back and forth as if some inner fire would not let him stand motionless, and halting before his wondering companions:

"When we employed the Heart of Ahriman to bring a dead man back to life," Orastes said abruptly, "we did not weigh the consequences of tampering in the black dust of the past. The fault is mine, and the sin. We thought only of our four ambitions, forgetting what ambitions this man might himself have. And we have loosed a demon upon the earth, a fiend inexplicable to common humanity. I have plumbed deep in evil, but there is a limit to which I, or any man of my race and age, can go. My ancestors were clean men, without any demoniacal taint; it is only I who have sunk into the pits, and I can sin only to the extent of my personal individuality. Out behind Xaltotun lie a thousand centuries of black magic and diabolism, an ancient tradition of evil. He is beyond our conception not only because he is a wizard himself, but also because he is the son of a race of wizards.

"I have seen things that have blasted my soul. In the heart of the slumbering hills I have watched Xaltotun commune with the souls of the damned, and invoke the ancient demons of forgotten Acheron. I have seen the accursed descendants of that accursed empire worship him and hail him as their arch-priest. I have seen what he plots-and I tell you it is no less than the restoration of the ancient, black, grisly kingdom of Acheron!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Amalric. "Acheron is dust. There are not enough survivals to make an empire. Not even Xaltotun can reshape the dust of three thousand years."

"You know little of his black powers," answered Orastes grimly. "I have seen the very hills take on an alien and ancient aspect under the spell of his incantations. I have glimpsed, like shadows behind the realities, the dim shapes and outlines of valleys, forests, mountains and lakes that are not as they are today, but as they were in that dim yesterday-have even sensed, rather than glimpsed, the purple towers of forgotten Python shimmering like figures of mist in the dusk.

"And in the last conclave to which I accompanied him, understanding of his sorcery came to me at last, while the drums beat and the beast- like worshippers howled with their heads in the dust. I tell you he would restore Acheron by his magic, by the sorcery of a gigantic blood-sacrifice such as the world has never seen. He would enslave the world, and with a deluge of blood wash away the present and restore the past!"

"You are mad!" exclaimed Tarascus.

"Mad?" Orastes turned a haggard stare upon him. "Can any man see what I have seen and remain wholly sane? Yet I speak the truth. He plots the return of Acheron, with its towers and wizards and kings and horrors, as it was in the long ago. The descendants of Acheron will serve him as a nucleus upon which to build, but it is the blood and the bodies of the people of the world today that will furnish the mortar and the stones for the rebuilding. I cannot tell you how. My own brain reels when I try to understand. But I have seen! Acheron will be Acheron again, and even the hills, the forests and the rivers will resume their ancient aspect. Why not? If I, with my tiny store of knowledge, could bring to life a man dead three thousand years, why cannot the greatest wizard of the world bring back to life a kingdom dead three thousand years? Out of the dust shall Acheron arise at his bidding."

"How can we thwart him?" asked Tarascus, impressed.

"There is but one way," answered Orastes. "We must steal the Heart of Ahriman!"

"But I--" began Tarascus involuntarily, then closed his mouth quickly.

None had noticed him, and Orastes was continuing.

"It is a power that can be used against him. With it in my hands I might defy him. But how shall we steal it? He has it hidden in some secret place, from which not even a Zamorian thief might filch it. I cannot learn its hiding-place. If he would only sleep again the sleep of the black lotus-but the last time he slept thus was after the battle of the Valkia, when he was weary because of the great magic he had performed, and--"

The door was locked and bolted, but it swung silently open and Xaltotun stood before them, calm, tranquil, stroking his patriarchal beard; but the lambent lights of hell flickered in his eyes.

"I have taught you too much," he said calmly, pointing a finger like an index of doom at Orastes. And before any could move, he had cast a handful of dust on the floor near the feet of the priest, who stood like a man turned to marble. It flamed, smoldered; a blue serpentine of smoke rose and swayed upward about Orastes in a slender spiral. And when it had risen above his shoulders it curled about his neck with a whipping suddenness like the stroke of a snake. Orastes' scream was choked to a gurgle. His hands flew to his neck, his eyes were distended, his tongue protruded. The smoke was like a blue rope about his neck; then it faded and was gone, and Orastes slumped to the floor a dead man.

Xaltotun smote his hands together and two men entered, men often observed accompanying him-small, repulsively dark, with red, oblique eyes and pointed, rat-like teeth. They did not speak. Lifting the corpse, they bore it away.

Dismissing the matter with a wave of his hand, Xaltotun seated himself at the ivory table about which sat the pale kings. "Why are you in conclave?" he demanded. "The Aquilonians have risen in the west," answered Amalric, recovering from the grisly jolt the death of Orastes had given him. "The fools believe that Conan is alive, and coming at the head of a Poitanian army to reclaim his kingdom. If he had reappeared immediately after Valkia, or if a rumor had been circulated that he lived, the central provinces would not have risen under him, they feared your powers so. But they have become so desperate under Valerius's misrule that they are ready to follow any man who can unite them against us, and prefer sudden death to torture and continual misery.

"Of course the tale has lingered stubbornly in the land that J Conan was not really slam at Valkia, but not until recently have I the masses accepted it. But Pallantides is back from exile in Ophir, swearing that the king was ill in his tent that day, and that a man- at-arms wore his harness, and a squire who but recently recovered from the stroke of a mace received at Valkia confirms his tale-or pretends to.

"An old woman with a pet wolf has wandered up and down the land, proclaiming that King Conan yet lives, and will return some day to reclaim the crown. And of late the cursed priests of Asura sing the same song. They claim that word has come to them by some mysterious means that Conan is returning to reconquer his domain. I cannot catch either her or them. This is, of course, a trick of Trocero's. My spies tell me there is indisputable evidence that the Poitanians are gathering to invade Aquilonia. I believe that Trocero will bring forward some pretender who he will claim is King Conan."

Tarascus laughed, but there was no conviction in his laughter. He surreptitiously felt a scar beneath his jupon, and remembered ravens that cawed on the trail of a fugitive; remembered the body of his squire, Arideus, brought back from the border mountains horribly mangled, by a great gray wolf, his terrified soldiers said. But he also remembered a red jewel stolen from a golden chest while a wizard slept, and he said nothing.

And Valerius remembered a dying nobleman who gasped out a tale of fear, and he remembered four Khitans who disappeared into the mazes of the south and never returned. But he held his tongue, for hatred and suspicions of his allies ate at him like a worm, and he desired nothing so much as to see both rebels and Nemedians go down locked in the death grip.

But Amalric exclaimed, "It is absurd to dream that Conan lives!"

For answer Xaltotun cast a roll of parchment on the table.

Amalric caught it up, glared at it. From his lips burst a furious, incoherent cry. He read:

To Xaltotun, grand fakir of Nemedia: Dog of Acheron, I am returning to my kingdom, and I mean to hang your hide on a bramble.

CONAN.

"A forgery!" exclaimed Amalric.

Xaltotun shook his head.

"It is genuine. I have compared it with the signature on the royal documents in the libraries of the court. None could imitate that bold scrawl."

"Then if Conan lives," muttered Amalric, "this uprising will not be like the others, for he is the only man living who can unite the Aquilonians. But," he protested, "this is not like Conan. Why should he put us on guard with his boasting? One would think that he would strike without warning, after the fashion of the barbarians."

"We are already warned," pointed out Xaltotun. "Our spies have told us of preparations for war in Poitain. He could not cross the mountains without our knowledge; so he sends his defiance in characteristic manner."

"Why to you?" demanded Valerius. "Why not to me, or to Tarascus?"

Xaltotun turned his inscrutable gaze upon the king. "Conan is wiser than you," he said at last. "He already knows what you kings have yet to leam-that it is not Tarascus, nor Valerius, no, nor Amalric, but Xaltotun who is the real master of the western nations."

They did not reply; they sat staring at him, assailed by a numbing realization of the truth of his assertion.

"There is no road for me but the imperial highway," said Xaltotun. "But first we must crush Conan. I do not know how he escaped me at Belverus, for knowledge of what happened while I lay in the slumber of the black lotus is denied me. But he is in the south, gathering an army. It is his last, desperate blow, made possible only by the desperation of the people who have suffered under Valerius. Let them rise; I hold them all in the palm of my hand. We will wait until he moves against us, and then we will crush him once and for all.

"Then we shall crush Poitain and Gunderland and the stupid Bossonians. After them Ophir, Argos, Zingara, Koth-all the nations of the world we shall weld into one vast empire. You shall rule as my satraps, and as my captains shall be greater than kings are now. I am unconquerable, for the Heart of Ahriman is hidden where no man can ever wield it against me again."

Tarascus averted his gaze, lest Xaltotun read his thoughts. He knew the wizard had not looked into the golden chest with its carven serpents that had seemed to sleep, since he laid the Heart therein. Strange as it seemed, Xaltotun did not know that the Heart had been stolen; the strange jewel was beyond or outside the ring of his dark wisdom; his uncanny talents did not warn him that the chest was empty. Tarascus did not believe that Xaltotun knew the full extent of Orastes' revelations, for the Pythonian had not mentioned the restoration of Acheron, but only the building of a new, earthly empire. Tarascus did not believe that Xaltotun was yet quite sure of his power; if they needed his aid in their ambitions, no less he needed theirs. Magic depended, to a certain extent after all, on sword strokes and lance thrusts. The king read meaning in Amalric's furtive glance; let the wizard use his arts to help them defeat their most dangerous enemy. Time enough then to turn against him. There might yet be a way to cheat this dark power they had raised.

Chapter 21
: Drums of Peril

CONFIRMATION OF THE war came when the army of Poitain, ten thousand strong, marched through the southern passes with waving banners and shimmer of steel. And at their head, the spies swore, rode a giant figure in black armor, with the royal lion of Aquilonia worked in gold upon the breast of his rich silken sur-coat. Conan lived! The king lived! There was no doubt of it in men's minds now, whether friend or foe.

With the news of the invasion from the south there also came word, brought by hard-riding couriers, that a host of Gundermen was moving southward, reinforced by the barons of the northwest and the northern Bossonians. Tarascus marched with thirty-one thousand men to Galparan, on the river Shirki, which the Gundermen must cross to strike at the towns still held by the Nemedians. The Shirki was a swift, turbulent river rushing southwestward through rocky gorges and canyons, and there were few places where an army could cross at that time of the year, when the stream was almost bank-full with the melting of the snows. All the country east of the Shirki was in the hands of the Nemedians, and it was logical to assume that the Gundermen would attempt to cross either at Galparan, or at Tanasul, which lay to the south of Galparan. Reinforcements were daily expected from Nemedia, until word came that the king of Ophir was making hostile demonstrations on Nemedia's southern border, and to spare any more troops would be to expose Nemedia to the risk of an invasion from the south.

Amalric and Valerius moved out from Tarantia with twenty-five thousand men, leaving as large a garrison as they dared to discourage revolts in the cities during their absence. They wished to meet and crush Conan before he could be joined by the rebellious forces of the kingdom.

The king and his Poitanians had crossed the mountains, but there had been no actual clash of arms, no attack on towns or fortresses. Conan had appeared and disappeared. Apparently he had turned westward through the wild, thinly settled hill country, and entered the Bossonian marches, gathering recruits as he went. Amalric and Valerius with their host, Nemedians, Aquilonian renegades, and ferocious mercenaries, moved through the land in baffled wrath, looking for a foe which did not appear.

Amalric found it impossible to obtain more than vague general tidings about Conan's movements. Scouting-pardes had a way of riding out and never returning, and it was not uncommon to find a spy crucified to an oak. The countryside was up and striking as peasants and country-folk strike-savagely, murderously and secretly. All that Amalric knew certainly was that a large force of Gundermen and northern Bossonians was somewhere to the north of him, beyond the Shirki, and that Conan with a smaller force of Poitanians and southern Bossonians was somewhere to the south-west of him.

He began to grow fearful that if he and Valerius advanced farther into the wild country, Conan might elude them entirely, march around them and invade the central provinces behind them. Amalric fell back from the Shirki valley and camped in a plain a day's ride from Tanasul. There he waited. Tarascus maintained his position at Galparan, for he feared that Conan's maneuvers were intended to draw him southward, and so let the Gundermen into the kingdom at the northern crossing.

To Amalric's camp came Xaltotun in his chariot drawn by the uncanny horses that never tired, and he entered Amalric's tent where the baron conferred with Valerius over a map spread on an ivory camp table.

This map Xaltotun crumpled and flung aside.

"What your scouts cannot learn for you," quoth he, "my spies tell me, though their information is strangely blurred and imperfect, as if unseen forces were working against me."

"Conan is advancing the Shirki river with ten thousand Poitanians, three thousand southern Bossonians, and barons of the west and south with the retainers to the number of five thousand. An army of thirty thousand Gundermen and northern Bossonians is pushing southward to join him- They have established contact by means of secret communications used by the cursed priests of Asura, who seem to be opposing me, and whom I will feed to a serpent when the battle is over-I swear it by Set!

"Both armies are headed for the crossing at Tanasul, but I do not believe that the Gundermen will cross the river. I believe that Conan will cross, instead, and join them."

"Why should Conan cross the river?"

"Because it is to his advantage to delay the battle. The longer he waits, the stronger he will become, the more precarious our position. The hills on the other side of the river swarm with people passionately loyal to his cause-broken men, refugees, fugitives from Valerius's cruelty. From all over the kingdom men are hurrying to join his army, singly and by companies. Daily, parties from our armies are ambushed and cut to pieces by the countryfolk. Revolt grows in the central provinces, and will soon burst into open rebellion. The garrisons we left there are not sufficient, and we can hope for no reinforcements from Nemedia for the time being. I see the hand of Pallantides in this brawling on the Ophirean frontier. He has kin in Ophir.

"If we do not catch and crush Conan quickly the provinces will be in blaze of revolt behind us. We shall have to fall back to Tarantia to defend what we have taken; and we may have to fight our way through a country in rebellion, with Conan's whole force at our heels, and then stand siege in the city itself, with enemies within as well as without. No, we cannot wait. We must crush Conan before his army grows too great, before the central provinces rise. With his head hanging above the gate at Tarantia you will see how quickly the rebellion will fall apart."

"Why do you not put a spell on his army to slay them all?" asked Valerius, half in mockery.

Xaltotun stared at the Aquilonian as if he read the full extent of the mocking madness that lurked in those wayward eyes.

"Do not worry," he said at last. "My arts shall crush Conan finally like a lizard under the heel. But even sorcery is aided by pikes and swords."

"If he crosses the river and takes up his position in the Goralian hills he may be hard to dislodge," said Amalric. "But if we catch him in the valley on this side of the river we can wipe him out. How far is Conan from Tanasul?"

"At the rate he is marching he should reach the crossing sometime tomorrow night. His men are rugged and he is pushing them hard. He should arrive there at least a day before the Gundermen."

"Good!" Amalric smote the table with his clenched fist. "I can reach Tanasul before he can. I'll send a rider to Tarascus, bidding him follow me to Tanasul. By the time he arrives I will have cut Conan off from the crossing and destroyed him. Then our combined force can cross the river and deal with the Gundermen."

Xaltotun shook his head impatiently.

"A good enough plan if you were dealing with anyone but Conan. But your twenty-five thousand men are not enough to destroy his eighteen thousand before the Gundermen come up. They will fight with the desperation of wounded panthers. And suppose the Gundermen come up while the hosts are locked in battle? You will be caught between two fires and destroyed before Tarascus can arrive. He will reach Tanasul too late to aid you."

"What then?" demanded Amalric.

"Move with your whole strength against Conan," answered the man from Acheron. "Send a rider bidding Tarascus join us here. We will wait his coming. Then we will march together to Tanasul."

"But while we wait," protested Amalric, "Conan will cross the river and join the Gundermen."

"Conan will not cross the river," answered Xaltotun.

Amalric's head jerked up and he stared into the cryptic dark eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose there were torrential rains far to the north, at the head of the Shirki? Suppose the river came down in such flood as to render the crossing at Tanasul impassable? Could we not then bring up our entire force at our leisure, catch Conan on this side of the river and crush him, and then, when the flood subsided, which I think it would do the next day, could we not cross the river and destroy the Gundermen? Thus we could use our full strength against each of these smaller forces in turn."

Valerius laughed as he always laughed at the prospect of the ruin of either friend or foe, and drew a restless hand jerkily through his unruly yellow locks. Amalric stared at the man from Acheron with mingled fear and admiration.

"If we caught Conan in Shirki valley with the hill ridges to his right and the river in flood to his left," he admitted, "without whole force we could annihilate him. Do you think-are you sure--do you believe such rains will fall?"

"I go to my tent," answered Xaltotun, rising. "Necromancy is not accomplished by the waving of a wand. Send a rider to Tarascus. And let none approach my tent."

That last command was unnecessary. No man in that host could have been bribed to approach that mysterious black silken pavilion, the door- flaps of which were always closely drawn. None but Xaltotun ever entered it, yet voices were often heard issuing from it; its walls billowed sometimes without a wind, and weird music came from it. Sometimes, deep in midnight, its silken walls were lit red by flames flickering within, limning misshapen silhouettes that passed to and fro.

Lying in his own tent that night, Amalric heard the steady rumble of a drum in Xaltotun's tent; through the darkness it boomed steadily, and occasionally the Nemedian could have sworn that a deep, croaking voice mingled with the pulse of the drum. And he shuddered, for he knew that voice was not the voice of Xaltotun. The drum rustled and muttered on like deep thunder, heard afar off, and before dawn Amalric, glancing from his tent, caught the red flicker of lightning afar on the northern horizon. In all other parts of the sky the great stars blazed whitely. But the distant lightning flickered incessantly, like the crimson glint of firelight on a tiny, turning blade.

At sunset of the next day Tarascus came up with his host, dusty and weary from hard marching, the footmen straggling hours behind the horsemen. They camped in the plain near Amalric's camp, and at dawn the combined army moved westward.

Ahead of him roved a swarm of scouts, and Amalric waited impatiently for them to return and tell of the Poitanians trapped beside a furious flood. But when the scouts met the column it was with the news that Conan had crossed the river!

"What?" exclaimed Amalric. "Did he cross before the flood?"

"There was no flood," answered the scouts, puzzled. "Late last night he came up to Tanasul and flung his army across."

"No flood?" exclaimed Xaltotun, taken aback for the first time in Amalric's knowledge. "Impossible! There were mighty rains upon the headwaters of the Shirki last night and the night before that!"

"That may be your lordship," answered the scout. "It is true the water was muddy, and the people of Tanasul said that the river rose perhaps a foot yesterday; but that was not enough to prevent Conan's crossing."

Xaltotun's sorcery had failed! The thought hammered in Amalric's brain. His horror of this strange man out of the past had grown steadily since that night in Belverus when he had seen a brown, shriveled mummy swell and grow into a living man. And the death of Orastes had changed lurking horror into active fear. In his heart was a grisly conviction that the man- or devil-was invincible. Yet now he had undeniable proof of his failure.

Yet even the greatest of necromancers might fail occasionally, thought the baron. At any rate, he dared not oppose the man from Acheron-yet. Orastes was dead, writhing in Mitra only knew what nameless hell, and Amalric knew his sword would scarcely prevail where the black wisdom of the renegade priest had failed. What grisly abomination Xaltotun plotted lay in the unpredictable future. Conan and his host were a present menace against which Xaltotun's wizardry might well be needed before the play was all played.

They came to Tanasul, a small fortified village at the spot where a reef of rocks made a natural bridge across the river, passable always except in times of greatest flood. Scouts brought in the news that Conan had taken up his position in the Gpralian hills, which began to rise a few miles beyond the river. And just before sundown the Gundermen had arrived in his camp.

Amalric looked at Xaltotun, inscrutable and alien in the light of the flaring torches. Night had fallen.

"What now? Your magic has failed. Conan confronts us with an army nearly as strong as our own, and he has the advantage of position. We have a choice of two evils: to camp here and await his attack, or to fall back toward Tarantia and await reinforcements."

"We are ruined if we wait," answered Xaltotun. "Cross the river and camp on the plain. We will attack at dawn."

"But his position is too strong!" exclaimed Amalric.

"Fool!" A gust of passion broke the veneer of the wizard's calm. "Have you forgotten Valkia? Because some obscure elemental principle prevented the flood do you deem me helpless? I had intended that your spears should exterminate our enemies; but do not fear: it is my arts shall crush their host. Conan is in a trap. He will never see another sun set. Cross the river!"

They crossed by the flare of torches. The hoofs of the horses clinked on the rocky bridge, splashed through the shallows. The glint of the torches on shields and breast-plates was reflected redly in the black water. The rock bridge was broad on which they crossed, but even so it was past midnight before the host was camped in the plain beyond. Above them they could see fires winking redly in the distance. Conan had tamed a bay in the Goralian hills, which had more than once before served as the last Stand of an Aquilonian king. Amalric left his pavilion and strode restlessly through the camp.

A weird glow flickered in Xaltotun's tent, and from time to time a demoniacal cry slashed the silence, and there was a low sinister muttering of a drum that rustled rather than rumbled.

Amalric, his instincts whetted by the night and the circumstances, felt that Xaltotun was opposed by more than physical force. Doubts of the wizard's power assailed him. He glanced at the fires high above him, and his face set in grim lines. He and his army were deep in the midst of a hostile country. Up there among those hills lurked thousands of wolfish figures out of whose hearts and souls all emotion and hope had been scourged except a frenzied hate for their conquerors, a mad lust for vengeance. Defeat meant annihilation, retreat through a land swarming with blood-mad enemies. And on the morrow he must hurl his host against the grimmest fighter in the western nations, and his desperate horde. If Xaltotun failed them now-

Half a dozen men-at-arms strode out of the shadows. The firelight glinted on their breast-plates and helmet crests. Among them they half led, half dragged a gaunt figure in tattered rags. Saluting, they spoke: "My lord, this man came to the outposts and said he desired word with King Valerius. He is an Aquilonian."

He looked more like a wolf-a wolf the traps had scarred. Old sores that only fetters make showed on his wrists and ankles. A great brand, the mark of hot iron, disfigured his face. His eyes glared through the tangle of his matted hair as he half crouched before the baron.

"Who are you, you filthy dog?" demanded the Nemedian. "Call me Tiberias," answered the man, and his teeth clicked in an involuntary spasm. "I have come to tell you how to trap Conan."

"A traitor, eh?" rumbled the baron.

"Men say you have gold," mouthed the man, shivering under his rags. "Give some to me! Give me gold and I will show you how to defeat the king!" His eyes glazed widely, his outstretched, upturned hands were spread like quivering claws.

Amalric shrugged his shoulders in distaste. But no tool was too base for his use.

"If you speak the truth you shall have more gold than you can carry," he said. "If you are a liar and a spy I will have you crucified head- down. Bring him along."

In the tent of Valerius, the baron pointed to the man who crouched shivering before them, huddling his rags about him.

"He says he knows a way to aid us on the morrow. We will need aid, if Xaltotun's plan is no better than it has proved so far. Speak on, dog."

The man's body writhed in strange convulsions. Words came in a stumbling rush:

"Conan camps at the head of the Valley of Lions. It is shaped like a fan, with steep hills on either side. If you attack him tomorrow you will have to march straight up the valley. You cannot climb the hills on either side. But if King Valerius will deign to accept my service, I will guide him through the hills and show him how he can come upon King Conan from behind. But if it is to be done at all, we must start soon. It is many hours' riding, for one must go miles to the west, then miles to the north, then turn eastward and so come into the Valley of Lions from behind, as the Gundermen came."

Amalric hesitated, tugging his chin. In these chaotic times it was not rare to find men willing to sell their souls for a few gold pieces.

"If you lead me astray you will die," said Valerius. "You are aware of that, are you not?"

The man shivered, but his wide eyes did not waver.

"If I betray you, slay me!"

"Conan will not divide his force," mused Amalric. "He will need all his men to repel our attack. He cannot spare any to lay ambushes in the hills. Besides, this fellow knows his hide depends on his leading you as he promised. Would a dog like him sacrifice himself? Nonsense! No, Valerius, I believe the man is honest."

"Or a greater thief than most, for he would sell his liberator," laughed Valerius. "Very well. I will follow the dog. How many men can you spare me?"

"Five thousand should be enough," answered Amalric. "A surprize attack on their rear will throw them into confusion, and that will be enough. I shall expect your attack about noon."

"You will know when I strike," answered Valerius. As Amalric returned to his pavilion he noted with gratification that Xaltotun was still in his tent, to judge from the blood-freezing cries that shuddered forth into the night air from time to time. When presently he heard the clink of steel and the jingle of bridles in the outer darkness, he smiled grimly. Valerius had about served his purpose. The baron knew that Conan was like a wounded lion that rends and tears even in his death-throes. When Valerius struck from the rear, the desperate strokes of the Cimmerian might well wipe his rival out of existence before he himself succumbed. So much the better. Amalric felt he could well dispense with Valerius, once he had paved the way for a Nemedian victory.

The five thousand horsemen who accompanied Valerius were hard-bitten Aquilonian renegades for the most part. In the still starlight they moved out of the sleeping camp, following the westward trend of the great black masses that rose against the stars ahead of them. Valerius rode at their head, and beside him rode Tiberias, a leather thong about his wrist gripped by a man-at-arms who rode on the other side of him. Others kept close behind with drawn swords.

"Play us false and you die instantly," Valerius pointed out. "I do not know every sheep-path in these hills, but I know enough about the general configuration of the country to know the directions we must take to come in behind the Valley of Lions. See that you do not lead us astray."

The man ducked his head and his teeth chattered as he volubly assured his captor of his loyalty, staring up stupidly at the banner that floated over him, the golden serpent of the old dynasty.

Skirting the extremities of the hills that locked the Valley of Lions, they swung wide to the west. An hour's ride and they turned north, forging through wild and rugged hills, following dim trails and tortuous paths. Sunrise found them some miles northwest of Conan's position, and here the guide turned eastward and led them through a maze of labyrinths and crags. Valerius nodded, judging their position by various peaks thrusting up above the others. He had kept his bearings in a general way, and he knew they were still headed in the right direction.

But now, without warning, a gray fleecy mass came billowing down from the north, veiling the slopes, spreading out through the valleys. It blotted out the sun; the world became a blind gray void in which visibility was limited to a matter of yards. Advance became a stumbling, groping muddle. Valerius cursed. He could no longer see the peaks that had served him as guide-posts. He must depend wholly upon the traitorous guide. The golden serpent drooped in the windless air.

Presently Tiberias seemed himself confused; he halted, stared about uncertainly.

"Are you lost, dog?" demanded Valerius harshly.

"Listen!"

Somewhere ahead of them a faint vibration began, the rhythmic rumble of a drum.

"Conan's drum!" exclaimed the Aquilonian.

"If we are close enough to hear the drum," said Valerius, "why do we not hear the shouts and the clang of arms? Surely battle has joined."

"The gorges and the winds play strange tricks," answered Tiberias, his teeth chattering with the ague that is frequently the lot of men who have spent much time in damp underground dungeons. Listen!"

"They are fighting down in the valley!" cried Tiberias. "The drum is beating on the heights. Let us hasten!"

He rode straight on toward the sound of the distant drum as one who knows his ground at last. Valerius followed, cursing the fog. Then it occurred to him that it would mask his advance. Conan could not see him coming. He could be at the Cimmerian's back before the noonday sun dispelled the mists.

Just now he could not tell what lay on either hand, whether cliffs, thickets or gorges. The drum throbbed unceasingly, growing louder as they advanced, but they heard no more of the battle. Valerius had no idea toward what point of the compass they were headed. He started as he saw gray rock walls looming through the smoky drifts on either hand, and realized that they were riding through a narrow defile. But the guide showed no sign of nervousness, and Valerius hove a sigh of relief when the walls widened out and became invisible in the fog. They were through the defile; if an ambush had been planned, it would have been made in that pass.

But now Tiberias halted again. The drum was rumbling louder, and Valerius could not determine from what direction the sound was coming. Now it seemed ahead of him, now behind, now on one hand or the other. Valerius glared about him impatiently, sitting on his war-horse with wisps of mist curling about him and the moisture gleaming on his armor. Behind him the long lines of steel-clad riders faded away and away like phantoms into the mist. "Why do you tarry, dog?" he demanded. The man seemed to be listening to the ghostly drum. Slowly he straightened in his saddle, turned his head and faced Valerius, and the smile on his lips was terrible to see.

"The fog is thinning, Valerius," he said in a new voice, pointing a bony finger. "Look!"

The drum was silent. The fog was fading away. First the crests of cliffs came in sight above the gray clouds, tall and spectral. Lower and lower crawled the mists, shrinking, fading. Valerius started up in his stirrups with a cry that the horsemen echoed behind him. On all sides of them the cliffs towered. They were not in a wide, open valley as he had supposed. They were in a blind gorge walled by sheer cliffs hundreds of feet high. The only entrance or exit was the narrow defile through which they had ridden.

"Dog!" Valerius struck Tiberias full in the mouth with his clenched mailed hand. "What devil's trick is this?" Tiberias spat out a mouthful of blood and shook with fearful laughter.

"A trick that shall rid the world of a beast! Look, dog!" Again Valerius cried out, more in fury than in fear. The defile was blocked by a wild and terrible band of men who stood silent as images-ragged, shock-headed men with spears in their hands-hundreds of them. And up on the cliffs appeared other faces-thousands of faces-wild, gaunt, ferocious faces, marked by fire and steel and starvation. "A trick of Conan's!" raged Valerius.

"Conan knows nothing of it," laughed Tiberias. "It was the plot of broken men, of men you ruined and turned to beasts. Amalric was right. Conan has not divided his army. We are the rabble who followed him, the wolves who skulked in these hills, the homeless men, the hopeless men. This was our plan, and the priests of Asura aided us with their mist. Look at them, Valerius! Each bears the mark of your hand, on his body or on his heart!

"Look at me! You do not know me, do you, what of this scar your hangman burned upon me? Once you knew me. Once I was lord of Amilius, the man whose sons you murdered, whose daughter your mercenaries ravished and slew. You said I would not sacrifice myself to trap you? Almighty gods, if I had a thousand lives I would give them all to buy your doom!

"And I have bought it! Look on the men you broke, dead man who once played the king! Their hour has come! This gorge is your tomb. Try to climb the cliffs: they are steep, they are high. Try to fight your way back through the defile: spears will block your path, boulders will crush you from above! Dog! I will be waiting for you in hell!"

Throwing back his head he laughed until the rocks rang. Valerius leaned from his saddle and slashed down with his great sword, severing shoulder-bone and breast. Tiberias sank to the earth, still laughing ghastlily through a gurgle of gushing blood.

The drums had begun again, encircling the gorge with guttural thunder; boulders came crushing down; above the screams of dying men shrilled the arrows in blinding clouds from the cliffs.

Chapter 22

: The Road to Acheron

DAWN WAS JUST whitening the east when Amalric drew up his hosts in the mouth of the Valley of Lions. This valley was flanked by low, rolling but steep hills, and the floor pitched upward in a series of irregular natural terraces. On the uppermost of these terraces Conan's army held its position, awaiting the attack. The host that had joined him, marching down from Gundennan, had not been composed exclusively of spearmen. With them had come seven thousand Bossonian archers, and four thousand barons and their retainers of the north and west, swelling the ranks of his cavalry.

The pikemen were drawn up in a compact wedge-shaped formation at the narrow head of the valley. There were nineteen thousand of them, mostly Gundermen, though some four thousand were Aquilonians of the other provinces. They were flanked on either hand by five thousand Bossonian archers. Behind the ranks of the pikemen the knights sat, their steeds motionless, lances raised: ten thousand knights of Poitain, nine thousand Aquilonians, barons and their retainers.

It was a strong position. His flanks could not be turned, for that would mean climbing the steep, wooded hills in the teeth of the arrows and swords of the Bossonians. His camp lay directly behind him, in a narrow, steep-walled valley which was indeed merely a continuation of the Valley of Lions, pitching up at a higher level. He did not fear a surprize from the rear, because the hills behind him were full of refugees and broken men whose loyalty to him was beyond question.

But if his position was hard to shake, it was equally hard to escape from. It was a trap as well as a fortress for the defenders, a desperate last stand of men who did not expect to survive unless they were victorious. The only line of retreat possible was through the narrow valley at their rear.

Xaltotun mounted a hill on the left side of the valley, near the wide mouth. This hill rose higher than the others, and was known as the King's Altar, for a reason long forgotten. Only Xaltotun knew, and his memory dated back three thousand years.

He was not alone. His two familiars, silent, hairy, furtive and dark, were with him, and they bore a young Aquilonian girl, bound hand and foot. They laid her on an ancient stone, which was curiously like an altar, and which crowned the summit of the hill. For long centuries it had stood there, worn by the elements until many doubted that it was anything but a curiously shapen natural rock. But what it was, and why it stood there, Xaltotun remembered from of old. The familiars went away, with their bent backs like silent gnomes, and Xaltotun stood alone beside the stone altar, his dark beard blown in the wind, overlooking the valley.

He could see clear back to the winding Shirki, and up into the hills beyond the head of the valley. He could see the gleaming wedge of steel drawn up at the head of the terraces, the burganets of the archers glinting among the rocks and bushes, the silent knights motionless on their steeds, their pennons flowing above their helmets, their lances rising in a bristling thicket.

Looking in the other direction he could see the long serried lines of the Nemedians moving in ranks of shining steel into the mouth of the valley. Behind them the gay pavilions of the lords and knights and the drab tents of the common soldiers stretched back almost to the river.

Like a river of a molten steel the Nemedian host flowed into the valley, the great scarlet dragon rippling over it. First marched the bowmen, in even ranks, arbalests half raised, bolts nocked, fingers on triggers. After them came the pikemen, and behind them the real strength of the army-the mounted knights, their banners unfurled to the wind, their lances lifted, walking their great steeds forward as if they rode to a banquet.

And higher up on the slopes the smaller Aquilonian host stood grimly silent.

There were thirty thousand Nemedian knights, and, as in most Hyborian nations, it was the chivalry which was the sword of the army. The footmen were used only to clear the way for a charge of the armored knights. There were twenty-one thousand of these, pikemen and archers.

The bowmen began loosing as they advanced, without breaking ranks, launching their quarrels with a whir and tang. But the bolts fell short or rattled harmlessly from the overlapping shields of the Gundennen. And before the arbalesters could come within killing range, the arching shafts of the Bossonians were wreaking havoc in their ranks.

A little of this, a futile attempt at exchanging fire, and the Nemedian bowmen began falling back in disorder. Their armor was light, their weapons no match for the Bossonian longbows. The western archers were sheltered by bushes and rocks. Moreover, the Nemedian footmen lacked something of the morale of the horsemen, knowing as they did that they were being used merely to clear the way for the knights.

The crossbowmen fell back, and between their opening lines the pikemen advanced. These were largely mercenaries, and their masters had no compunction about sacrificing them. They were intended to mask the advance of the knights until the latter were within smiting distance. So while the arbalesters plied they bolts from either flank at long range, the pikemen marched into the teeth of the blast from above, and behind them the knights came on.

When the pikemen began to falter beneath the savage hail of death that whistled down the slopes among them, a trumpet blew, their companies divided to right and left, and through them the mailed knights thundered.

They ran full into a cloud of stinging death. The clothyard shafts found every crevice in their armor and the housings of the steeds. Horses scrambling up the grassy terraces reared and plunged backward, bearing their riders with them. Steel-clad forms littered the slopes. The charge wavered and ebbed back.

Back down in the valley Amalric reformed his ranks. Tarascus was fighting with drawn sword under the scarlet dragon, but it was the baron of Tor who commanded that day. Amalric swore as he glanced at the forest of lance-tips visible above and beyond the head-pieces of the Gundennen. He had hoped his retirement would draw the knights out in a charge down the slopes after him, to be raked from either flank by his bowmen and swamped by the numbers of his horsemen. But they had not moved. Camp-servants brought skins of water from the river. Knights doffed their helmets and drenched their sweating heads. The wounded on the slopes screamed vainly for water. In the upper valley, springs supplied the defenders. They did not thirst that long, hot spring day.

On the King's Altar, beside the ancient, carven stone, Xaltotun watched the steel tide ebb and flow. On came the knights, with waving plumes and dipping lances. Through a whistling cloud of arrows they plowed to break like a thundering wave on the bristling wall of spears and shields. Axes rose and fell above the plumed helmets, spears thrust upward, bringing down horses and riders. The pride of the Gundermen was no less fierce than that of the knights. They were not spear-fodder, to be sacrificed for the glory of better men. They were the finest infantry in the world, with a tradition that made their morale unshakable. The kings of Aquilonia had long learned the worth of unbreakable infantry. They held their formation unshaken; over their gleaming ranks flowed the great lion banner, and at the tip of the wedge a giant figure in black armor roared and smote like a hurricane, with a dripping ax that split steel and bone alike.

The Nemedians fought as gallantly as their traditions of high courage demanded. But they could not break the iron wedge, and from the wooded knolls on either hand arrows raked their close-packed ranks mercilessly. Their own bowmen were useless, their pikemen unable to climb the heights and come to grips with the Bossonians. Slowly, stubbornly, sullenly, the grim knights fell back, counting their empty saddles. Above them the Gundermen made no outcry of triumph. They closed their ranks, locking up the gaps made by the fallen. Sweat ran into their eyes from under their steel caps. They gripped their spears and waited, their fierce hearts swelling with pride that a king should fight on foot with them. Behind them the Aquilonian knights had not moved. They sat their steeds, grimly immobile.

A knight spurred a sweating horse up the hill called the King's Altar, and glared at Xaltotun with bitter eyes.

"Amalric bids me say that it is time to use your magic, wizard," he said. "We are dying like flies down there in the valley. We cannot break their ranks."

Xaltotun seemed to expand, to grow tall and awesome and terrible.

"Return to Amalric," he said. "Tell him to reform his ranks for a charge, but to await my signal. Before that signal is given he will see a sight that he will remember until he lies dying!"

The knight saluted as if compelled against his will, and thundered down the hill at breakneck pace.

Xaltotun stood beside the dark altarstone and stared across the valley, at the dead and wounded men on the terraces, at the grim, blood-stained band at the head of the slopes, at the dusty, steel-clad ranks reforming in the vale below. He glanced up at the sky, and he glanced down at the slim white figure on the dark stone. And lifting a dagger inlaid with archaic hieroglyphs, he intoned an immemorial invocation:

"Set, god of darkness, scaly lord of the shadows, by the blood of a virgin and the sevenfold symbol I call to your sons below the black earth! Children of the deeps, below the red earth, under the black earth, awaken and shake your awful manes! Let the hills rock and the stones topple upon my enemies! Let the sky grow dark above them, the earth unstable beneath their feet! Let a wind from the deep black earth curl up beneath their feet, and blacken and shrivel them--"

He halted short, dagger lifted. In the tense silence the roar of the hosts rose beneath him, borne on the wind.

On the other side of the altar stood a man in a black hooded robe, whose coif shadowed pale delicate features and dark eyes calm and meditative.

"Dog of Asura!" whispered Xaltotun, his voice was like the hiss of an angered serpent. "Are you mad, that you seek your doom? Ho, Baal! Chiron!"

"Call again, dog of Acheron!" said the other, and laughed. "Summon them loudly. They will not hear, unless your shouts reverberate in hell."

From a thicket on the edge of the crest came a somber old woman in a peasant garb, her hair flowing over her shoulders, a great gray wolf following at her heels.

"Witch, priest and wolf," muttered Xaltotun grimly, and laughed. "Fools, to pit your charlatan's mummery against my arts! With a wave of my hand I brush you from my path!"

"Your arts are straws in the wind, dog of Python," answered the Asurian. "Have you wondered why the Shirki did not come down in flood and trap Conan on the other bank? When I saw the lightning in the night I guessed your plan, and my spells dispersed the clouds you had summoned before they could empty their torrents. You did not even know that your rain-making wizardry had failed."

"You lie!" cried Xaltotun, but the confidence in his voice was shaken. "I have felt the impact of a powerful sorcery against mine--but no man on earth could undo the rain-magic, once made, unless he possessed the very heart of sorcery."

"But the flood you plotted did not come to pass," answered the priest. "Look at your allies in the valley, Pythonian! You have led them to the slaughter! They are caught in the fangs of the trap, and you cannot aid them. Look!"

He pointed. Out of the narrow gorge of the upper valley, behind the Poitanians, a horseman came flying, whirling something about his head that flashed in the sun. Recklessly he hurled down the slopes, through the ranks of the Gundermen, who sent up a deep-throated roar and clashed their spears and shields like thunder in the hills. On the terraces between the hosts the sweat-soaked horse reared and plunged, and his wild rider yelled and brandished the thing in his hands like one demented. It was the torn remnant of a scarlet banner, and the sun struck dazzlingly on the golden scales of a serpent that writhed thereon.

"Valerius is dead!" cried Hadrathus ringingly. "A fog and a drum lured him to his doom! I gathered that fog, dog of Python, and I dispersed it! I, with my magic which is greater than your magic!"

"What matters it?" roared Xaltotun, a terrible sight, his eyes blazing, his features convulsed. "Valerius was a fool. I do not need him. I can crush Conan without human aid!"

"Why have you delayed?" mocked Hadrathus. "Why have you allowed so many of your allies to fall pierced by arrows and spitted on spears?"

"Because blood aids great sorcery!" thundered Xaltotun, in a voice that made the rocks quiver. A lurid nimbus played about his awful head. "Because no wizard wastes his strength thoughtlessly. Because I would conserve my powers for the great days to be, rather than employ them in a hill-country brawl. But now, by Set, I shall loose them to the uttermost! Watch, dog of Asura, false priest of an outworn god, and see a sight that shall blast your reason for evermore!"

Hadrathus threw back his head and laughed, and hell was in his laughter.

"Look, black devil of Python!"

His hand came from under his robe holding something that flamed and burned in the sun, changing the light to a pulsing golden glow in which the flesh of Xaltotun looked like the flesh of a corpse.

Xaltotun cried out as if he had been stabbed.

"The Heart! The Heart of Ahriman!"

"Aye! The one power that is greater than your power!"

Xaltotun seemed to shrivel, to grow old. Suddenly his beard was shot with snow, his locks flecked with gray.

"The Heart!" he mumbled. "You stole it! Dog! Thief!"

"Not I! It has been on a long journey far to the southward. But now it is in my hands, and your black arts cannot stand against it. As it resurrected you, so shall it hurl you back into the night whence it drew you. You shall go down the dark road to Acheron, which is the road of silence and the night. The dark empire, unreborn, shall remain a legend and a black memory. Conan shall reign again. And the Heart of Ahriman shall go back into the cavern below the temple of Mitra, to burn as a symbol of the power of Aquilonia for a thousand years!"

Xaltotun screamed inhumanly and rushed around the altar, dagger lifted; but from somewhere-out of the sky, perhaps, or the great jewel that blazed in the hand of Hadrathus-shot a jetting beam of blinding blue light. Full against the breast of Xaltotun it flashed, and the hills re-echoed the concussion. The wizard of Acheron went down as though struck by a thunderbolt, and before he touched the ground he was fearfully altered. Beside the altar-stone lay no fresh-slain corpse, but a shriveled mummy, a brown, dry, unrecognizable carcass sprawling among moldering swathings.

Somberly old Zeiata looked down.

"He was not a living man," she said. "The Heart lent him a false aspect of life, that deceived even himself. I never saw him as other than a mummy."

Hadrathus bent to unbind the swooning girl on the altar, when from among the trees appeared a strange apparition-Xaltotun's chariot drawn by the weird horses. Silently they advanced to the altar and halted, with the chariot wheel almost touching the brown withered thing on the grass. Hadrathus lifted the body of the wizard and placed it in the chariot. And without hesitation the uncanny steeds turned and moved off southward, down the hill. And Hadrathus and Zeiata and the gray wolf watched them go-down the long road to Acheron which is beyond the ken of men.

Down in the valley Amalric had stiffened in his saddle when he saw that wild horseman curvetting and caracoling on the slopes while he brandished that blood-stained serpent-banner. Then some instinct jerked his head about, toward the hill known as the King's Altar. And his lips parted. Every man in the valley saw it--an arching shaft of dazzling light that towered up from the summit of the hill, showering golden fire. High above the hosts it burst in a blinding blaze that momentarily paled the sun. "That's not Xaltotun's signal!" roared the baron. "No!" shouted Tarascus. "It's a signal to the Aquilonians!

"Look!" Above them the immobile ranks were moving at last, and a deep- throated roar thundered across the vale.

"Xaltotun has failed us!" bellowed Amalric furiously. "Valerius has failed us! We have been led into a trap! Mitra's curse on Xaltotun who led us here! Sound the retreat!"

"Too late!" yelled Tarascus. "Look!"

Up on the slopes the forest of lances dipped, leveled. The ranks of the Gundermen rolled back to right and left like a parting curtain. And with a thunder like the rising roar of a hurricane, the knights of Aquilonia crashed down the slopes.

The impetus of that charge was irresistible. Bolts driven by the demoralized arbalesters glanced from their shields, their bent helmets. Their plumes and pennons streaming out behind them, their lances lowered, they swept over the wavering lines of pikemen and roared down the slopes like a wave.

Amalric yelled an order to charge, and the Nemedians with desperate courage spurred their horses at the slopes. They still outnumbered the attackers.

But they were weary men on tired horses, charging uphill. The onrushing knights had not struck a blow that day. Their horses were fresh. They were coming downhill and they came like a thunderbolt. And like a thunderbolt they smote the struggling ranks of the Nemedians- smote them, split them apart, ripped them asunder and dashed the remnants headlong down the slopes.

After them on foot came the Gundermen, blood-mad, and the Bossonians were swarming down the hills, loosing as they ran at every foe that still moved.

Down the slopes washed the tide of battle, the dazed Nemedians swept on the crest of the wave. Their archers had thrown down their arbalests and were fleeing. Such pikemen as had survived the blasting charge of the knights were cut to pieces by the ruthless Gundermen.

In a wild confusion the battle swept through the wide mouth of the valley and into the plain beyond. All over the plain swarmed the warriors, fleeing and pursuing, broken into single combat and clumps of smiting, hacking knights on rearing, wheeling horses. But the Nemedians were smashed, broken, unable to re-form or make a stand. By the hundreds they broke away, spurring for the river. Many reached it, rushed across and rode eastward. The countryside was up behind them; the people hunted them like wolves. Few ever reached Tarantia.

The final break did not come until the fall of Amalric. The baron, striving in vain to rally his men, rode straight at the clump of knights that followed the giant in black armor whose surcoat bore the royal lion, and over whose head floated the golden lion banner with the scarlet leopard of Poitain beside it. A tall warrior in gleaming armor couched his lance and charged to meet the lord of Tor. They met like a thunderclap. The Nemedian's lance, striking his foe's helmet, snapped bolts and rivets and tore off the casque, revealing the features of Pallantides. But the Aquilonian's lance-head crashed through shield and breast-plate to transfix the baron's heart.

A roar went up as Amalric was hurled from his saddle, snapping the lance that impaled him, and the Nemedians gave way as a barrier bursts under the surging impact of a tidal wave. They rode for the river in a blind stampede that swept the plain like a whirlwind. The hour of the Dragon had passed.

Tarascus did not flee. Amalric was dead, the color-bearer slain, and the royal Nemedian banner trampled in the blood and dust. Most of his knights were fleeing and the Aquilonians were riding them down; Tarascus knew the day was lost, but with a handful of faithful followers he raged through the melee, conscious of but one desire-to meet Conan, the Cimmerian. And at last he met him.

Formations had been destroyed utterly, close-knit bands broken asunder and swept apart. The crest of Trocero gleamed in one part of the plain, those of Prospero and Pallantides in others. Conan was alone. The house-troops of Tarascus had fallen one by one. The two kings met man to man.

Even as they rode at each other, the horse of Tarascus sobbed and sank under him. Conan leaped from his own steed and ran at him, as the king of Nemedia disengaged himself and rose. Steel flashed blindingly in the sun, clashed loudly, and blue sparks flew; then a clang of armor as Tarascus measured his full length on the earth beneath a thunderous stroke of Conan's broadsword.

The Cimmerian paced a mail-shod foot on his enemy's breast, and lifted his sword. His helmet was gone; he shook back his black mane and his blue eyes blazed with their old fire.

"Do you yield?"

"Will you give me quarter?" demanded the Nemedian.

"Aye. Better than you'd have given me, you dog. Life for you and all your men who throw down their arms. Though I ought to split your head for an infernal thief," the Cimmerian added.

Tarascus twisted his neck and glared over the plain. The remnants of the Nemedian host were flying across the stone bridge with swarms of victorious Aquilonians at their heels, smiting with the fury of glutted vengeance. Bossonians and Gundermen were swarming through the camp of their enemies, tearing the tents to pieces in search of plunder, seizing prisoners, ripping open the baggage and upsetting the wagons.

Tarascus cursed fervently, and then shrugged his shoulders, as well as he could, under the circumstances.

"Very well. I have no choice. What are your demands?"

"Surrender to me all your present holdings in Aquilonia. Order your garrisons to march out of the castles and towns they hold, without their arms, and get your infernal armies out of Aquilonia as quickly as possible. In addition you shall return all Aquilonians sold as slaves, and pay an indemnity to be designated later, when the damage your occupation of the country has caused has been properly estimated. You will remain as hostage until these terms have been carried out."

"Very well," surrendered Tarascus. "I will surrender all the castles and towns now held by my garrisons without resistance, and all the other things shall be done. What ransom for my body?"

Conan laughed and removed his foot from his foe's steel-clad breast, grasped his shoulder and heaved him to his feet. He started to speak, then turned to see Hadrathus approaching him. The priest was as calm and self-possessed as ever, picking his way between rows of dead men and horses.

Conan wiped the sweat-smeared dust from his face with bloodstained hand. He had fought all through the day, first on foot with the pikemen, then in the saddle, leading the charge. His surcoat was gone, his armor splashed with blood and battered with strokes of sword, mace and ax. He loomed gigantically against a background of blood and slaughter, like some grim pagan hero of mythology.

"Well done, Hadrathus!" quoth he gustily. "By Crom, I am glad to see your signal! My knights were almost mad with impatience and eating their hearts out to be at sword-strokes. I could not have held them much longer. What of the wizard?"

"He has gone down the dim road to Acheron," answered Hadrathus. "And I-I am for Tarantia. My work is done here, and I have a task to perform at the temple of Mitra. All our work is done here. On this field we have saved Aquilonia-and more than Aquilonia. Your ride to your capital will be a triumphal procession through a kingdom mad with joy. All Aquilonia will be cheering the return of their king. And so, until we meet again in the great royal hall-farewell!"

Conan stood silently watching the priest as he went. From various parts of the field knights were hurrying toward him. He saw Pallantides, Trocero, Prospero, Servius, Gallannus, their armor splashed with crimson. The thunder of battle was giving way to a roar of triumph and acclaim. All eyes, hot with strife and shining with exultation, were turned toward the great black figure of the king; mailed arms brandished red-stained swords. A confused torrent of sound rose, deep and thunderous as the sea-surf: "Hail, Conan, king of Aquilonia!"

Tarascus spoke.

"You have not yet named my ransom."

Conan laughed and slapped his sword home in its scabbard. He flexed his mighty arms, and ran his blood-stained fingers through his thick black locks, as if feeling there his re-won crown.

"There is a girl in your seraglio named Zenobia."

"Why, yes, so there is."

"Very well." The king smiled as at an exceedingly pleasant memory. "She shall be your ransom, and naught else. I will come to Belverus for her as I promised. She was a slave in Nemedia, but I will make her queen of Aquilonia!"

THE END

Contents

THE HYBORIAN AGE

By Robert E. Howard

(Nothing in this article is to be considered as an attempt to advance any theory in opposition to accepted history. It is simply a fictional background for a series of fiction-stories. When I began writing the Conan stories a few years ago, I prepared this 'history' of his age and the peoples of that age, in order to lend him and his sagas a greater aspect of realness. And I found that by adhering to the 'facts' and spirit of that history, in writing the stories, it was easier to visualize (and therefore to present) him as a real flesh- and-blood character rather than a ready-made product. In writing about him and his adventures in the various kingdoms of his Age, I have never violated the 'facts' or spirit of the 'history' here set down, but have followed the lines of that history as closely as the writer of actual historical-fiction follows the lines of actual history. I have used this 'history' as a guide in all the stories in this series that I have written.)

Of that epoch known by the Nemedian chroniclers as the Pre-Cataclysmic Age, little is known except the latter part, and that is veiled in the mists of legendry. Known history begins with the waning of the Pre- Cataclysmic civilization, dominated by the kingdoms of Kamelia, Valusia, Verulia, Grondar, Thule and Commoria. These peoples spoke a similar language, arguing a common origin. There were other kingdoms, equally civilized, but inhabited by different, and apparently older races.

The barbarians of that age were the Picts, who lived on islands far out on the western ocean; the Adanteans, who dwelt on a small continent between the Pictish Islands and the main, or Thurian Continent; and the Lemurians, who inhabited a chain of large islands in the eastern hemisphere.

There were vast regions of unexplored land. The civilized kingdoms, though enormous in extent, occupied a comparatively small portion of the whole planet. Valusia was the western-most kingdom of the Thurian Continent; Grondar the eastern-most. East of Grondar, whose people were less highly cultured than those of their kindred kingdoms, stretched a wild and barren expanse of deserts. Among the less arid stretches of desert, in the jungles, and among the mountains, lived scattered clans and tribes of primitive savages. Far to the south there was a mysterious civilization, unconnected with the Thurian culture, and apparently pre-human in its nature. On the far-eastern shores of the Continent there lived another race, human, but mysterious and non-Thurian, with which the Lemurians from time to time came in contact. They apparently came from a shadowy and nameless continent lying somewhere east of the Lemurian Islands.

The Thurian civilization was crumbling; their armies were composed largely of barbarian mercenaries. Picts, Atlanteans and Lemurians were their generals, their statesmen, often their kings. Of the bickerings of the kingdoms, and the wars between Valusia and Commoria, as well as the conquests by which the Atlanteans founded a kingdom on the mainland, there were more legends than accurate history.

Then the Cataclysm rocked the world. Atlantis and Lemuria sank, and the Pictish Islands were heaved up to form the mountain peaks of a new continent. Sections of the Thurian Continent vanished under the waves, or sinking, formed great inland lakes and seas. Volcanoes broke forth and terrific earthquakes shook down the shining cities of the empires. Whole nations were blotted out.

The barbarians fared a little better than the civilized races. The inhabitants of the Pictish Islands were destroyed, but a great colony of them, settled among the mountains of Valusia's southern frontier, to serve as a buffer against foreign invasion, was untouched. The Continental kingdom of the Atlanteans likewise escaped the common ruin, and to it came thousands of their tribesmen in ships from the sinking land. Many Lemurians escaped to the eastern coast of the Thurian Continent, which was comparatively untouched. There they were enslaved by the ancient race which already dwelt there, and their history, for thousands of years, is a history of brutal servitude.

In the western part of the Continent, changing conditions created strange forms of plant and animal life. Thick jungles covered the plains, great rivers cut their roads to the sea, wild mountains were heaved up, and lakes covered the ruins of old cities in fertile valleys. To the Continental kingdom of the Atlanteans, from sunken areas, swarmed myriads of beasts and savages--ape-men and apes. Forced to battle continually for their lives, they yet managed to retain vestiges of their former state of highly advanced barbarism. Robbed of metals and ores, they became workers in stone like their distant ancestors, and had attained a real artistic level, when their struggling culture came into contact with the powerful Pictish nation. The Picts had also reverted to flint, but had advanced more rapidly in the matter of population and war-science. They had none of the Atlanteans' artistic nature; they were a ruder, more practical, more prolific race. They left no pictures painted or carved on ivory, as did their enemies, but they left remarkably efficient flint weapons in plenty.

These stone-age kingdoms clashed, and in a series of bloody wars, the outnumbered Atlanteans were hurled back into a state of savagery, and the evolution of the Picts was halted. Five hundred years after the Cataclysm the barbaric kingdoms have vanished. It is now a nation of savages--the Picts--carrying on continual warfare with tribes of savages--the Atlanteans. The Picts had the advantage of numbers and unity, whereas the Atlanteans had fallen into loosely knit clans. That was the west of that day.

In the distant east, cut off from the rest of the world by the heaving up of gigantic mountains and the forming of a chain of vast lakes, the Lemurians are toiling as slaves of their ancient masters. The far south is still veiled in mystery. Untouched by the Cataclysm, its destiny is still pre-human. Of the civilized races of the Thurian Continent, a remnant of one of the non-Valusian nations dwells among the low mountains of the southeast--the Zhemri. Here and there about the world are scattered clans of apish savages, entirely ignorant of the rise and fall of the great civilizations. But in the far north another people are slowly coming into existence.

At the time of the Cataclysm, a band of savages, whose development was not much above that of the Neanderthal, fled to the north to escape destruction. They found the snow-countries inhabited only by a species of ferocious snow-apes--huge shaggy white animals, apparently native to that climate. These they fought and drove beyond the Arctic circle, to perish, as the savages thought. The latter, then, adapted themselves to their hardy new environment and throve.

After the Pictish-Atlantean wars had destroyed the beginnings of what might have been a new culture, another, lesser cataclysm further altered the appearance of the original continent, left a great inland sea where the chain of lakes had been, to further separate west from east, and the attendant earthquakes, floods and volcanoes completed the ruin of the barbarians which their tribal wars had begun.

A thousand years after the lesser cataclysm, the western world is seen to be a wild country of jungles and lakes and torrential rivers. Among the forest-covered hills of the northwest exist wandering bands of ape-men, without human speech, or the knowledge of fire or the use of implements. They are the descendants of the Atlanteans, sunk back into the squalling chaos of jungle-bestiality from which ages ago their ancestors so laboriously crawled. To the southwest dwell scattered clans of degraded, cave-dwelling savages, whose speech is of the most primitive form, yet who still retain the name of Picts, which has come to mean merely a term designating men--themselves, to distinguish them from the true beasts with which they contend for life and food. It is their only link with their former stage. Neither the squalid Picts nor the apish Atlanteans have any contact with other tribes or peoples.

Far to the east, the Lemurians, levelled almost to a bestial plane themselves by the brutishness of their slavery, have risen and destroyed their masters. They are savages stalking among the ruins of a strange civilization. The survivors of that civilization, who have escaped the fury of their slaves, have come westward. They fall upon that myterious pre-human kingdom of the south and overthrow it, substituting their own culture, modified by contact with the older one. The newer kingdom is called Stygia, and remnants of the older nation seemed to have survived, and even been worshipped, after the race as a whole had been destroyed.

Here and there in the world small groups of savages are showing signs of an upward trend; these are scattered and unclassified. But in the north, the tribes are growing. These people are called Hyborians, or Hybori; their god was Bori--some great chief, whom legend made even more ancient as the king who led them into the north, in the days of the great Cataclysm, which the tribes remember only in distorted folklore.

They have spread over the north, and are pushing southward in leisurely treks. So far they have not come in contact with any other races; their wars have been with one another. Fifteen hundred years in the north country have made them a tall, tawny-haired, grey-eyed race, vigorous and warlike, and already exhibiting a well-defined artistry and poetism of nature. They still live mostly by the hunt, but the southern tribes have been raising cattle for some centuries. There is one exception in their so far complete isolation from other races: a wanderer into the far north returned with the news that the supposedly deserted ice wastes were inhabited by an extensive tribe of ape-like men, descended, he swore, from the beasts driven out of the more habitable land by the ancestors of the Hyborians. He urged that a large war-party be sent beyond the arctic circle to exterminate these beasts, whom he swore were evolving into true men. He was jeered at; a small band of adventurous young warriors followed him into the north, but none returned.

But tribes of the Hyborians were drifting south, and as the population increased this movement became extensive. The allowing age was an epoch of wandering and conquest. Across the history of the world tribes and drifts of tribes move and shift in an everchanging panorama.

Look at the world five hundred years later. Tribes of tawnyured Hyborians have moved southward and westward, con-uenng and destroying many of the small unclassified clans.

Absorbing the blood of conquered races, already the descendants of the older drifts have begun to show modified racial traits, and these mixed races are attacked fiercely by new, purer-blooded drifts, and swept before them, as a broom sweeps debris impartially, to become even more mixed and mingled in the tangled debris of races and tag- ends of races.

As yet the conquerors have not come in contact with the older races. To the southeast the descendants of the Zhemri, given impetus by new blood resulting from admixture with some unclassified tribe, are beginning to seek to revive some faint shadow of their ancient culture. To the west the apish Atlanteans are beginning the long climb upward. They have completed the cycle of existence; they have long forgotten their former existence as men; unaware of any other former state, they are starting the climb unhelped and unhindered by human memories. To the south of them the Picts remain savages, apparently defying the laws of Nature by neither progressing nor retrogressing. Far to the south dreams the ancient mysterious kingdom of Stygia. On its eastern borders wander clans of nomadic savages, already known as the Sons of Shem.

Next to the Picts, in the broad valley of Zingg, protected by great mountains, a nameless band of primitives, tentatively classified as akin to the Shemites, has evolved an advanced agricultural system and existence.

Another factor has added to the impetus of Hyborian drift. A tribe of that race has discovered the use of stone in building, and the first Hyborian kingdom has come into being--the rude and barbaric kingdom of Hyperborea, which had its beginning in a crude fortress of boulders heaped to repel tribal attack. The people of this tribe soon abandoned their horse-hide tents for stone houses, crudely but mightily built, and thus protected, they grew strong. There are few more dramatic events in history than the rise of the rude, fierce kingdom of Hyperborea, whose people turned abruptly from their nomadic life to rear dwellings of naked stone, surrounded by cyclopean walls--a race scarcely emerged from the polished stone age, who had by a freak of chance, learned the first rude principles of architecture.

The rise of this kingdom drove forth many other tribes, for, defeated in the war, or refusing to become tributary to their castle-dwelling kinsmen, many clans set forth on long treks that took them halfway around the world. And already the more northern tribes are beginning to be harried by gigantic blond savages, not much more advanced than ape-men.

The tale of the next thousand years is the tale of the rise of the Hyborians, whose warlike tribes dominate the western world. Rude kingdoms are taking shape. The tawny-haired invaders have encountered the Picts, driving them into the barren lands of the west. To the northwest, the descendants of the Atlanteans, climbing unaided from apedom into primitive savagery, have not yet met the conquerors. Far to the east the Lemurians are evolving a strange semi-civilization of their own. To the south the Hyborians have founded the kingdom of Koth, on the borders of those pastoral countries known as the Lands of Shem, and the savages of those lands, partly through contact with the Hyborians, partly through contact with the Stygians who have ravaged them for centuries, are emerging from barbarism. The blond savages of the far north have grown in power and numbers so that the northern Hyborian tribes move southward, driving their kindred clans before them. The ancient kingdom of Hyperborea is overthrown by one of these northern tribes, which, however, retains the old name. Southeast of Hyperborea a kingdom of the Zhemri has come into being, under the name of Zamora. To the southwest, a tribe of Picts have invaded the fertile valley of Zingg, conquered the agricultural people there, and settled among them. This mixed race was in turn conquered later by a roving tribe of Hybori, and from these mingled elements came the kingdom of Zingara.

Five hundred years later the kingdoms of the world are clearly defined. The kingdoms of the Hyborians--Aquilonia, Nemedia, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Koth, Ophir, Argos, Corinthia, and one known as the Border Kingdom--dominate the western world. Zamora lies to the east, and Zingara to the southwest of these kingdoms--people alike in darkness of complexion and exotic habits, but otherwise unrelated. Far to the south sleeps Stygia, untouched by foreign invasion, but the peoples of Shem have exchanged the Stygian yoke for the less galling one of Koth.

The dusky masters have been driven south of the great river Styx, Nilus, or Nile, which, flowing north from the shadowy hinterlands, turns almost at right angles and flows almost due west through the pastoral meadowlands of Shem, to empty into the great sea. North of Aquilonia, the western-most Hyborian kingdom, are the Cimmerians, ferocious savages, untamed by the invaders, but advancing rapidly because of contact with them; they are the descendants of the Atlanteans, now progressing more steadily than their old enemies the Picts, who dwell in the wilderness west of Aquilonia.

Another five centuries and the Hybori peoples are the possessors of a civilization so virile that contact with it virtually snatched out of the wallow of savagery such tribes as it touched. The most powerful kingdom is Aquilonia, but others vie with it in strength and mixed race; the nearest to the ancient root-stock are the Gundermen of Gunderland, a northern province of Aquilonia. But this mixing has not weakened the race. They are supreme in the western world, though the barbarians of the wastelands are growing in strength.

In the north, golden-haired, blue-eyed barbarians, descendants of the blond arctic savages, have driven the remaining Hyborian tribes out of the snow countries, except the ancient kingdom of Hyperborea, which resists their onslaught. Their country is called Nordheim, and they are divided into the red-haired Vanir of Vanaheim, and the yellow- haired AEsir of Asgard.

Now the Lemurians enter history again as Hyrkanians. Through the centuries they have pushed steadily westward, and now a tribe skirts the southern end of the great inland sea--Vilayet--and establishes the kingdom of Turan on the southwestern shore. Between the inland sea and the eastern borders of the native kingdoms lie vast expanses of steppes and in the extreme north and extreme south, deserts. The non- Hyrkanian dwellers of these territories are scattered and pastoral, unclassified in the north, Shemitish in the south, aboriginal, with a thin strain of Hyborian blood from wandering conquerors. Toward the latter part of the period other Hyrkanian clans push westward, around the northern extremity of the inland sea, and clash with the eastern outposts of the Hyperboreans.

Glance briefly at the peoples of that age. The dominant of Hyborians are no longer uniformly tawny-haired and grey-eyed. They have mixed with other races. There is a strong Shemitish, even a Stygian strain among the peoples of Koth, and to a lesser extent, of Argos, while in the case of the latter, admixture with the Zingarans has been more extensive than with the Shemites. The eastern Brythunians have intermarried with the dark-skinned Zamorians, and the people of southern Aquilonia have mixed with the brown Zingarans until black hair and brown eyes are the dominant type hi Poitain, the southern- most province. The ancient kingdom of Hyperborea is more aloof than the others, yet there is alien blood in plenty in its veins, from the capture of foreign women--Hyrkanians, AEsir and Zamorians. Only in the province of Gunderland, where the people keep no slaves, is the pure Hyborian stock found unblemished. But the barbarians have kept their bloodstream pure; the Cimmerians are tall and powerful, with dark hair and blue or grey eyes. The people of Nordheim are of similar build, but with white skins, blue eyes and golden or red hair. The Picts are of the same type as they always were--short, very dark, with black eyes and hair. The Hyrkanians are dark and generally tall and slender, though a squat slant-eyed type is more and more common among them, resulting from mixture with a curious race of intelligent, though stunted, aborigines, conquered by them among the mountains east of Vilayet, on their westward drift. The Shemites are generally of medium height, though sometimes when mixed with Stygian blood, gigantic, broadly and strongly built, with hook noses, dark eyes and blue-black hair. The Stygians are tall and well made, dusky, straight-featured-- at least the ruling classes are of that type. The lower classes are a down-trodden, mongrel horde, a mixture of negroid, Stygian, Shemitish, even Hyborian bloods. South of Stygia are the vast black kingdoms of the Amazons, the Kushites, the Atlaians and the hybrid empire of Zembabwei.

Between Aquilonia and the Pictish wilderness lie the Bossonian marches, peopled by descendants of an aboriginal race, conquered by a tribe of Hyborians, early in the first ages of the Hyborian drift. This mixed people never attained the civilization of the purer Hyborians, and was pushed by them to the very fringe of the civilized world. The Bossonians are of medium height and complexion, their eyes brown or grey, and they are mesocephalic. They live mainly by agriculture, in large walled villages, and are part of the Aquilonian kingdom. Their marches extend from the Border kingdom in the north to Zingara in the southwest, forming a bulwark for Aquilonia against both the Cimmerians and the Picts. They are stubborn defensive fighters, and centuries of warfare against northern and western barbarians have caused them to evolve a type of defense almost impregnable against direct attack.

Five hundred years laters the Hyborian civilization was swept away. Its fall was unique in that it was not brought about by internal decay, but by the growing power of the barbarian nations and the Hyrkanians. The Hyborian peoples were overthrown while their vigorous culture was in its prime.

Yet it was Aquilonia's greed which brought about that overthrow, though indirectly. Wishing to extend their empire, her kings made war on their neighbors. Zingara, Argos and Ophir were annexed outright, with the western cities of Shem, which had, with their more eastern kindred, recently thrown off the yoke of Koth. Koth itself, with Corinthia and the eastern Shemitish tribes, was forced to pay Aquilonia tribute and lend aid in wars. An ancient feud had existed between Aquilonia and Hyperborea, and the latter now marched to meet the armies of her western rival. The plains of the Border Kingdom were the scene of a great and savage battle, in which the northern hosts were utterly defeated, and retreated into their snowy fastnesses, whither the victorious Aquilonians did not pursue them. Nemedia, which had successfully resisted the western kingdom for centuries, now drew Brythunia and Zamora, and secretly, Koth, into an alliance which bade fair to crush the rising empire. But before their armies could join battle, a new enemy appeared in the east, as the Hyrkanians made their first real thrust at the western world. Reinforced by adventurers from east of Vilayet, the riders of Turan swept over Zamora, devastated eastern Corinthia, and were met on the plains of Brythunia by the Aquilonians who defeated them and hurled them flying eastward. But the back of the alliance was broken, and Nemedia took the defensive in future wars, aided occasionally by Brythunia and Hyperborea, and, secretly, as usual, by Koth. This defeat of the Hyrkanians showed the nations the real power of the western kingdom, whose splendid armies were augmented by mercenaries, many of them recruited among the alien Zingarans, and the barbaric Picts and Shemites. Zamora was reconquered from the Hyrkanians, but the people discovered that they had merely exchanged an eastern master for a western master. Aquilonian soldiers were quartered there, not only to protect the ravaged country, but also to keep the people in subjection. The Hyrkanians were not convinced; three more invasions burst upon the Zamorian borders, and the Lands of Shem, and were hurled back by the Aquilonians, though the Turanian armies grew larger as hordes of steel-clad riders rode out of the east, skirting the southern extremity of the inland sea.

But it was in the west that a power was growing destined to throw down the kings of Aquilonia from their high places. In the north there was incessant bickering along the Cimmerian borders between the black- haired warriors and the Nordheimir; and the AEsir, between wars with the Vanir, assailed Hyperborea and pushed back the frontier, destroying city after city. The Cimmerians also fought the Picts and Bossonians impartially, and several times raided into Aquilbnia itself, but their wars were less invasions than mere plundering forays.

But the Picts were growing amazingly in population and power. By a strange twist of fate, it was largely due to the efforts of one man, and he an alien, that they set their feet upon the ways that led to eventual empire. This man was Arus, a Nemedian priest, a natural-born reformer. What turned his mind toward the Picts is not certain, but this much is history--he determined to go into the western wilderness and modify the rude ways of the heathen by the introduction of the gentle worship of Mitra. He was not daunted by the grisly tales of what had happened to traders and explorers before him, and by some whim of fate he came among the people he sought, alone and unarmed, and was not instantly speared.

The Picts had benefited by contact with Hyborian civilization, but they had always fiercely resisted that contact. That is to say, they had learned to work crudely in copper and tin, which were found scantily in their country, and for which latter metal they raided into the mountains of Zingara, or traded hides, whale's teeth, walrus tusks and such few things as savages have to trade. They no longer lived in caves and tree-shelters, but built tents of hides, and crude huts, copied from those of the Bossonians. They still lived mainly by the chase,

since their wilds swarmed with game of all sorts, and the rivers and sea with fish, but they had learned how to plant grain, which they did sketchily, preferring to steal it from their neighbors the Bossonians and Zingarans. They dwelt in clans which were generally at feud with each other, and their simple customs were blood-thirsty and utterly inexplicable to a civilized man, such as Arus of Nemedia. They had no direct contact with the Hyborians, since the Bossonians acted as a buffer between them. But Arus maintained that they were capable of progress, and events proved the truth of his assertion-- though scarcely in the way he meant.

Arus was fortunate in being thrown in with a chief of more than usual intelligence--Gorm by name. Gorm cannot be explained, any more than Genghis Khan, Othman, Attila, or any of those individuals, who, born in naked lands among untutored barbarians, yet possess the instinct for conquest and empire-building. In a sort of bastard-Bossonian, the priest made the chief understand his purpose, and though extremely puzzled, Gorm gave him permission to remain among his tribe unbutch- ered--a case unique in the history of the race. Having learned the language Arus set himself to work to eliminate the more unpleasant phases of Pictish life--such as human sacrifice, blood-feud, and the burning alive of captives. He harangued Gorm at length, whom he found to be an interested, if unresponsive listener. Imagination reconstructs the scene--the black-haired chief, in his tiger-skins and necklace of human teeth, squatting on the dirt floor of the wattle hut, listening intently to the eloquence of the priest, who probably sat on a carven, skin-covered block of mahogany provided in his honor--clad in the silken robes of a Nemedian priest, gesturing with his slender white hands as he expounded the eternal rights and justices which were the truths of Mitra. Doubtless he pointed with repugnance at the rows of skulls which adorned the walls of the hut and urged Gorm to forgive his enemies instead of putting their bleached remnants to such use. Arus was the highest product of an innately artistic race, refined by centuries of civilization; Gorm had behind him a heritage of a hundred thousand years of screaming savagery--the pad of the tiger was in his stealthy step, the grip of the gorilla in his black-nailed hands, the fire that burns in a leopard's eyes burned in his.

Arus was a practical man. He appealed to the savage's sense of material gain; he pointed out the power and splendor of the Hyborian kingdoms, as an example of the power of Mitra, whose teachings and works had lifted them up to their high places. And he spoke of cities, and fertile plains, marble walls and iron chariots, jeweled towers, and horsemen in their glittering armor riding to battle. And Gorm, with the unerring instinct of the barbarian, passed over his words regarding gods and their teachings, and fixed on the material powers thus vividly described. There in that mud-floored wattle hut, with the silk-robed priest on the mahogany block, and the dark-skinned chief crouching in his tiger-hides, was laid the foundations of empire.

As has been said, Arus was a practical man. He dwelt among the Picts and found much that an intelligent man could do to aid humanity, even when that humanity was cloaked in tiger-skins and wore necklaces of human teeth. Like all priests of Mitra, he was instructed in many things. He found that there were vast deposits of iron ore in the Pictish hills, and he taught the natives to mine, smelt and work it into implements--agricultural implements, as he fondly believed. He instituted other reforms, but these were the most important things he did: he instilled in Gorm a desire to see the civilized lands of the world; he taught the Picts how to work in iron; and he established contact between them and the civilized world. At the chiefs request he conducted him and some of his warriors through the Bossonian marches, where the honest villagers stared in amazement, into the glittering outer world.

Arus no doubt thought that he was making converts right and left, because the Picts listened to him, and refrained from smiting him with their copper axes. But the Pict was little calculated to seriously regard teachings which bade him forgive his enemy and abandon the warpath for the ways of honest drudgery. It has been said that he lacked artistic sense; his whole nature led to war and slaughter. When the priest talked of the glories of the civilized nations, his dark- skinned listeners were intent, not on the ideals of his religion, but on the loot which he unconsciously described in the narration of rich cities and shining lands. When he told how Mitra aided certain kings to overcome their enemies, they paid scant heed to the miracles of Mitra, but they hung on the description of battle-lines, mounted knights, and maneuvers of archers and spearmen. They harkened with keen dark eyes and inscrutable countenances, and they went their ways without comment, and heeded with flattering intent-ness his instructions as to the working of iron, and kindred arts.

Before his coming they had filched steel weapons and armor from the Bossonians and Zingarans, or had hammered out their own crude arms from copper and bronze. Now a new world opened to them, and the clang of sledges re-echoed throughout the land. And Gorm, by virtue of this new craft, began to assert his dominance over other clans, partly by war, partly by craft and diplomacy, in which latter art he excelled all other barbarians.

Picts now came and went freely into Aquilonia, under safe-conduct, and they returned with more information as to armor-forging and sword- making. More, they entered Aquilonia's mercenary armies, to the unspeakable disgust of the sturdy Bossonians. Aquilonia's kings toyed with the idea of playing the Picts against the Cimmerians, and possibly thus destroying both menaces, but they were too busy with their policies of aggression in the south and east to pay much heed to the vaguely known lands of the west, from which more and more stocky warriors swarmed to take service among the mercenaries.

These warriors, their service completed, went back to their wilderness with good ideas of civilized warfare, and that contempt for civilization which arises from familiarity with it. Drums began to beat in the hills, gathering-fires smoked on the heights, and savage sword-makers hammered their steel on a thousand anvils. By intrigues and forays too numerous and devious to enumerate, Gorm became chief of chiefs, the nearest approach to a king the Picts had had in thousands of years. He had waited long; he was past middle age. But now he moved against the frontiers, not in trade, but in war.

Arus saw his mistake too late; he had not touched the soul of the pagan, in which lurked the hard fierceness of all the ages. His persuasive eloquence had not caused a ripple in the Pictish conscience. Gorm wore a corselet of silvered mail now, instead of the tiger-skin, but underneath he was unchanged--the everlasting barbarian, unmoved by theology or philosophy, his instincts fixed unerringly on rapine and plunder.

The Picts burst on the Bossonian frontiers with fire and sword, not clad in tiger-skins and brandishing copper axes as of yore, but in scale-mail, wielding weapons of keen steel. As for Arus, he was brained by a drunken Pict, while making a last effort to undo the work he had unwittingly done. Gorm was not without gratitude; he caused the skull of the slayer to be set on the top of the priest's cairn. And it is one of the grim ironies of the universe that the stones which covered Arus's body should have been adorned with that last touch of barbarity--above a man to whom violence and blood-vengeance were revolting.

But the newer weapons and mail were not enough to break the lines. For years the superior armaments and sturdy courage of the Bossonians held the invaders at bay, aided, when necessary, by imperial Aquilonian troops. During this time the Hyrkanians came and went, and Zamora was added to the empire.

Then treachery from an unexpected source broke the Bossonian lines. Before chronicling this treachery, it might be well to glance briefly at the Aquilonian empire. Always a rich kingdom, untold wealth had been rolled in by conquest, and sumptuous splendor had taken the place of simple and hardy living. But degeneracy had not yet sapped the kings and the people; though clad in silks and cloth-of-gold, they were still a vital, virile race. But arrogance was supplanting their former simplicity. They treated less powerful people with growing contempt, levying more and more tributes on the conquered. Argos, Zingara, Ophir, Zamora and the Shemite countries were treated as subjugated provinces, which was especially galling to the proud Zingarans, who often revolted, despite savage retaliations.

Koth was practically tributary, being under Aquilonia's 'protection' against the Hyrkanians. But Nemedia the western empire had never been able to subdue, although the latter's triumphs were of the defensive sort, and were generally attained with the aid of Hyperborean armies. During this period Aquilonia's only defeats were: her failure to annex Nemedia; the rout of an army sent into Cimmeria; and the almost complete destruction of an army by the AEsir. Just as the Hyrkanians found themselves unable to withstand the heavy cavalry charges of the Aquilonians, so the latter, invading the snow-countries, were overwhelmed by the ferocious hand-to-hand fighting of the Nordics. But Aquilonia's conquests were pushed to the Nilus, where a Stygian army was defeated with great slaughter, and the king of Stygia sent tribute--once at least--to divert invasion of his kingdom. Brythunia was reduced in a series of whirlwind wars, and preparations were made to subjugate the ancient rival at last--Nemedia.

With their glittering hosts greatly increased by mercenaries, the Aquilonians moved against their old-time foe, and it seemed as if the thrust were destined to crush the last shadow of Nemedian independence. But contentions arose between the Aquilonians and their Bossonian auxiliaries.

As the inevitable result of imperial expansion, the Aquilonians had become haughty and intolerant. They derided the ruder, unsophisticated Bossonians, and hard feeling grew between them--the Aquilonians despising the Bossonians and the latter resenting the attitude of their masters--who now boldly called themselves such, and treated the Bossonians like conquered subjects, taxing them exorbitantly, and conscripting them for their wars of territorial expansion--wars the profits of which the Bossonians shared little. Scarcely enough men were left in the marches to guard the frontier, and hearing of Pictish outrages in their homelands, whole Bossonian regiments quit the Nemedian campaign and marched to the western frontier, where they defeated the dark-skinned invaders in a great battle.

This desertion, however, was the direct cause of Aquilonia's defeat by the desperate Nemedians, and brought down on the Bossonians the cruel wrath of the imperialists--intolerant and short-sighted as imperialists invariably are. Aquilonian regiments were secretly brought to the borders of the marches, the Bossonian chiefs were invited to attend a great conclave, and, in the guise of an expedition against the Picts, bands of savage Shemitish soldiers were quartered among the unsuspecting villagers. The unarmed chiefs were massacred, the Shemites turned on their stunned hosts with torch and sword, and the armored imperial hosts were hurled ruthlessly on the unsuspecting people. From north to south the marches were ravaged and the Aquilonian armies marched back from the borders, leaving a ruined and devastated land behind them.

And then the Pictish invasion burst in full power along those borders. It was no mere raid, but the concerted rush of a whole nation, led by chiefs who had served in Aquilonian armies, and planned and directed by Gorm--an old man now, but with the fire of his fierce ambition undimmed. This time there were no strong walled villages in their path, manned by sturdy archers, to hold back the rush until the imperial troops could be brought up. The remnants of the Bossonians were swept out of existence, and the blood-mad barbarians swarmed into Aquilonia, looting and burning, before the legions, warring again with the Nemedians, could be marched into the west. Zingara seized this opportunity to throw off the yoke, which example was followed by Corinthia and the Shemites. Whole regiments of mercenaries and vassals mutinied and marched back to their own countries, looting and burning as they went. The Picts surged irresistibly eastward, and host after host was trampled beneath their feet. Without their Bossonian archers the Aquilonians found themselves unable to cope with the terrible arrow-fire of the barbarians. From all parts of the empire legions were recalled to resist the onrush, while from the wilderness horde after horde swarmed forth, in apparently inexhaustible supply. And in the midst of this chaos, the Cimmerians swept down from their hills, completing the ruin. They looted cities, devastated the country, and retired into the hills with their plunder, but the Picts occupied the land they had over-run. And the Aquilonian empire went down in fire and blood.

Then again the Hyrkanians rode from the blue east. The withdrawal of the imperial legions from Zamora was their incitement. Zamora fell easy prey to their thrusts, and the Hyrkanian king established his capital in the largest city of the country. This invasion was from the ancient Hyrkanian kingdom of Turan, on the shores of the inland sea, but another, more savage Hyrkanian thrust came from the north. Hosts of steel-clad riders galloped around the northern extremity of the inland sea, traversed the icy deserts, entered the steppes, driving the aborigines before them, and launched themselves against the western kingdoms. These newcomers were not at first allies with the Turanians, but skirmished with them as with the Hyborians; new drifts of eastern warriors bickered and fought, until all were united under a great chief, who came riding from the very shores of the eastern ocean. With no Aquilonian armies to oppose them, they were invincible. They swept over and subjugated Brythunia, and devastated southern Hyperborea, and Corinthia. They swept into the Cimmerian hills, driving the black-haired barbarians before them, but among the hills, where cavalry was less effectual, the Cimmerians turned on them, and only a disorderly retreat, at the end of a whole day of bloody fighting, saved the Hyrkanian hosts from complete annihilation.

While these events had been transpiring, the kingdoms of Shem had conquered their ancient master, Koth, and had been defeated in an attempted invasion of Stygia. But scarcely had they completed their degradation of Koth, when they were overrun by the Hyrkanians, and found themselves subjugated by sterner masters than the Hyborians had ever been. Meanwhile the Picts had made themselves complete masters of Aquilonia, practically blotting out the inhabitants. They had broken over the borders of Zingara, and thousands of Zingarans, fleeing the slaughter into Argos, threw themselves on the mercy of the westward- sweeping Hyrkanians, who settled them in Zamora as subjects. Behind them as they fled, Argos was enveloped in the flame and slaughter of Pictish conquest, and the slayers swept into Ophir and clashed with the westward-riding Hyrkanians. The latter, after their conquest of Shem, had overthrown a Stygian army at the Nilus and over-run the country as far south as the black kingdom of Amazon, of whose people they brought back thousands as captives,

settling them among the Shemites. Possibly they would have completed their conquests in Stygia, adding it to their widening empire, but for the fierce thrusts of the Picts against their western conquests.

Nemedia, unconquerable by Hyborians, reeled between the riders of the east and the swordsmen of the west, when a tribe of AEsir, wandering down from their snowy lands, came into the kingdom, and were engaged as mercenaries; they proved such able warriors that they not only beat off the Hyrkanians, but halted the eastward advance of the Picts.

The world at that time presents some such picture: a vast Pictish empire, wild, rude and barbaric, stretches from the coasts of Vanaheim in the north to the southern-most shores of Zingara. It stretches east to include all Aquilonia except Gunder-land, the northern-most province, which, as a separate kingdom in the hills, survived the fall of the empire, and still maintains its independence. The Pictish empire also includes Argos, Ophir, the western part of Koth, and the western-most lands of Shem. Opposed to this barbaric empire is the empire of the Hyrkanians, of which the northern boundaries are the ravaged lines of Hyperborea, and the southern, the deserts south of the lands of Shem. Zamora, Brythunia, the Border Kingdom, Corinthia, most of Koth, and all the eastern lands of Shem are included in this empire. The borders of Cimmeria are intact; neither Pict nor Hyrkanian has been able to subdue these warlike barbarians. Nemedia, dominated by the AEsir mercenaries, resists all invasions. In the north Nordheim, Cimmeria and Nemedia separate the conquering races, but in the south, Koth has become a battle-ground where Picts and Hyrkanians war incessantly. Sometimes the eastern warriors expel the barbarians from the kingdom entirely; again the plains and cities are in the hands of the western invaders. In the far south, Stygia, shaken by the Hyrkanian invasion, is being encroached upon by the great black kingdoms. And in the far north, the Nordic tribes are restless, warring continually with the Cimmerians, and sweeping the Hyperborean frontiers.

Gorm was slain by Hialmar, a chief of the Nemedian ALsir. He was a very old man, nearly a hundred years old. In the seventy-five years which had elapsed since he first heard the tale of empires from the lips of Arus--a long time in the life of a man, but a brief space in the tale of nations--he had welded an empire from straying savage clans, he had overthrown a civilization. He who had been born in a mud-walled, wattle-roofed hut, in his old age sat on golden thrones, and gnawed joints of beef presented to him on golden dishes by naked slave-girls who were the daughters of kings. Conquest and the acquiring of wealth altered not the Pict; out of the ruins of the crushed civilization no new culture arose phoenix-like. The dark hands which shattered the artistic glories of the conquered never tried to copy them. Though he sat among the glittering ruins of shattered palaces and clad his hard body in the silks of vanquished kings, the Pict remained the eternal barbarian, ferocious, elemental, interested only in the naked primal principles of life, unchanging, unerring in his instincts which were all for war and plunder, and in which arts and the cultured progress of humanity had no place. Not so with the AEsir who settled in Nemedia. These soon adopted many of the ways of their civilized allies, modified powerfully, however, by their own intensely virile and alien culture.

For a short age Pict and Hyrkanian snarled at each other over the ruins of the world they had conquered. Then began the glacier ages, and the great Nordic drift. Before the southward moving ice-fields the northern tribes drifted, driving kindred clans before them. The y£sir blotted out the ancient kingdom of Hyperborea, and across its ruins came to grips with the Hyrkan-ians. Nemedia had already become a Nordic kingdom, ruled by the descendants of the AEsir mercenaries. Driven before the onrushing tides of Nordic invasion, the Cimmerians were on the march, and neither army nor city stood before them. They surged across and completely destroyed the kingdom of Gun-derland, and marched across ancient Aquilonia, hewing their irresistible way through the Pictish hosts. They defeated the Nordic-Nemedians and sacked some of their cities, but did not halt. They continued eastward, overthrowing a Hyrkanian army on the borders of Brythunia.

Behind them hordes of ALsir and Vanir swarmed into the lands, and the Pictish empire reeled beneath their strokes. Nemedia was overthrown, and the half-civilized Nordics fled before their wilder kinsmen, leaving the cities of Nemedia ruined and deserted. These fleeing Nordics, who had adopted the name of the older kingdom, and to whom the term Nemedian henceforth refers, came into the ancient land of Koth, expelled both Picts and Hyrkanians, and aided the people of Shem to throw off the Hyrkanian yoke. All over the western world, the Picts and Hyrkanians were staggering before this younger, fiercer people. A band of ALsir drove the eastern riders from Brythunia and settled there themselves, adopting the name for themselves. The Nordics who had conquered Hyperborea assailed their eastern enemies so savagely that the dark-skinned descendants of the Lemurians retreated into the steppes, pushed irresistibly back toward Vilayet.

Meanwhile the Cimmerians, wandering southeastward, destroyed the ancient Hyrkanian kingdom of Turan, and settled on the southwestern shores of the inland sea. The power of the eastern conquerors was broken. Before the attacks of the Nordheimr and the Cimmerians, they destroyed all their cities, butchered such captives as were not fit to make the long march, and then, herding thousands of slaves before them, rode back into the mysterious east, skirting the northern edge of the sea, and vanishing from western history, until they rode out of the east again, thousands of years later, as Huns, Mongols, Tatars and Turks. With them in their retreat went thousands of Zamorians and Zingarans, who were settled together far to the east, formed a mixed race, and emerged ages afterward as gypsies.

Meanwhile, also, a tribe of Vanir adventurers had passed along the Pictish coast southward, ravaged ancient Zingara, and come into Stygia, which, oppressed by a cruel aristocratic ruling class, was staggering under the thrusts of the black kingdoms to the south. The red-haired Vanir led the slaves in a general revolt, overthrew the reigning class, and set themselves up as a caste of conquerors. They subjugated the northern-most black kingdoms, and built a vast southern empire, which they called Egypt. From these red-haired conquerors the earlier Pharaohs boasted descent.

The western world was now dominated by Nordic barbarians. The Picts still held Aquilonia and part of Zingara, and the western coast of the continent. But east to Vilayet, and from the Arctic circle to the lands of Shem, the only inhabitants were roving tribes of Nordheimr, excepting the Cimmerians, settled in the old Turanian kingdom. There were no cities anywhere, except in Stygia and the lands of Shem; the invading tides of Picts, Hyrkanians, Cimmerians and Nordics had levelled them in ruins, and the once dominant Hyborians had vanished from the earth, leaving scarcely a trace of their blood in the veins of their conquerors. Only a few names of lands, tribes and cities remained in the languages of the barbarians, to come down through the centuries connected with distorted legend and fable, until the whole history of the Hyborian age was lost sight of in a cloud of myths and fantasies. Thus in the speech of the gypsies lingered the terms Zingara and Zamora; the AEsir who dominated Nemedia were called Nemedians, and later figured in Irish history, and the Nordics who settled in Brythunia were known as Brythunians, Brythons or Britons.

There was no such thing, at that time, as a consolidated Nordic empire. As always, the tribes had each its own chief or king, and they fought savagely among themselves. What their destiny might have been will not be known, because another terrific convulsion of the earth, carving out the lands as they are known to moderns, hurled all into chaos again. Great strips of the western coast sank; Vanaheim and western Asgard--uninhabited and glacier-haunted wastes for a hundred years--vanished beneath the waves. The ocean flowed around the mountains of western Cimmeria to form the North Sea; these mountains became the islands later known as England, Scotland and Ireland, and the waves rolled over what had been the Pictish wilderness and the Bossonian marches. In the north the Baltic Sea was formed, cutting Asgard into the peninsulas later known as Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and far to the south the Stygian continent was broken away from the rest of the world, on the line of cleavage formed by the river Nilus in its westward trend. Over Argos, western Koth and the western lands of Shem, washed the blue ocean men later called the Mediterranean. But where land sank elsewhere, a vast expanse west of Stygia rose out of the waves, forming the whole western half of the continent of Africa.

The buckling of the land thrust up great mountain ranges in the central part of the northern continent. Whole Nordic tribes were blotted out, and the rest retreated eastward. The territory about the slowly drying inland sea was not affected, and there, on the western shores, the Nordic tribes began a pastoral existence, living in more or less peace with the Cimmerians, and gradually mixing with them. In the west the remnants of the Picts, reduced by the cataclysm once more to the status of stone-age savages, began, with the incredible virility of their race, once more to possess the land, until, at a later age, they were overthrown by the westward drift of the Cimmerians and Nordics. This was so long after the breaking-up of the continent that only meaningless legends told of former empires.

This drift comes within the reach of modern history and need not be repeated. It resulted from a growing population which thronged the steppes west of the inland sea--which still later, much reduced in size, was known as the Caspian--to such an extent that migration became an economic necessity. The tribes moved southward, northward and westward, into those lands now known as India, Asia Minor and central and western Europe.

They came into these countries as Aryans. But there were variations among these primitive Aryans, some of which are still recognized today, others which have long been forgotten. The blond Achaians, Gauls and Britons, for instance, were descendants of pure-blooded AEsir. The Nemedians of Irish legendry were the Nemedian AEsir. The Danes were descendants of pure-blooded Vanir; the Goths--ancestors of the other Scandinavian and Germanic tribes, including the Anglo- Saxons--were descendants of a mixed race whose elements contained Vanir, AEsir and Cimmerian strains. The Gaels, ancestors of the Irish and Highland Scotch, descended from pure-blooded Cimmerian clans. The Cymric tribes of Britain were a mixed Nordic-Cimmerian race which preceded the purely Nordic Britons into the isles, and thus gave rise to a legend of Gaelic priority. The Cimbri who fought Rome were of the same blood, as well as the Gimmerai of the Assyrians and Grecians, and Gomer of the Hebrews. Other clans of the Cimmerians adventured east of the drying inland sea, and a few centuries later mixed with Hyrkanian blood, returned westward as Scythians. The original ancestors of the Gaels gave their name to modern Crimea.

The ancient Sumerians had no connection with the western race. They were a mixed people, of Hyrkanian and Shemitish bloods, who were not taken with the conquerors in their retreat. Many tribes of Shem escaped that captivity, and from pure-blooded Shemites, or Shemites mixed with Hyborian or Nordic blood, were descended the Arabs, Israelites, and other straighter-featured Semites. The Canaanites, or Alpine Semites, traced their descent from Shemitish ancestors nuxed with the Kushites settled among them by their Hyrkanian masters; the Elamites were a typical race of this type. The short, thick-limbed Etruscans, base of the Roman race, were descendants of a people of mixed Stygian, Hyrkanian and Pictish strains, and originally lived in the ancient kingdom of Koth. The Hyrkanians, retreating to the eastern shores of the continent, evolved into the tribes later known as Tatars, Huns, Mongols and Turks.

The origins of other races of the modern world may be similarly traced; in almost every case, older far than they realize, their history stretches back into the mists of the forgotten Hyborian age...

THE END

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ALLEYS OF PERIL
By Robert E. Howard

THE MINUTE I seen the man they'd picked to referee the fight between me and Red McCoy, I didn't like his looks. His name was Jack Ridley and he was first mate aboard the Castleton, one of them lines which acts very high tone, making their officers wear uniforms. Bah! The first cap'n I ever sailed with never wore nothing at sea but a pair of old breeches, a ragged undershirt and a month's growth of whiskers. He used to say uniforms was all right for navy admirals and bell-hops but they was a superflooity anywheres else.

Well, this Ridley was a young fellow, slim and straight as a spar, with cold eyes and a abrupt manner. I seen right off that he was a bucko which wouldn't even let his crew shoot craps on deck if he could help it. But I decided not to let his appearance get on my nerves, but to ignore him and knock McCoy stiff as quick as possible so I couldst have the rest of the night to myself.

They is a old feud between the *Sea Girl* and McCoy's ship, the *Whale*. The minute the promoter of the Waterfront Fight Arena heard both our ships had docked, he rushed down and signed us up for a fifteen-round go--billed it as a grudge fight, which it wasn't nothing but, and packed the house.

The crews of both ships was holding down ringside seats and the special police was having a merry time keeping 'em from wrecking the place. The Old Man was rared back on the front row and ever few seconds he'd take a long swig out of a bottle, and yell: "Knock the flat-footed ape's lousy head off, Steve!" And then he'd shake his fist across at Cap'n Branner of the *Whale*, and the compliments them two old sea horses wouldst exchange wouldst have curled a Hottentot's hair.

You can judge by this that the Waterfront Fight Arena is kinda free and easy in its management. It is. It caters to a rough and ready class, which yearns for fast action, in the ring or out. Its performers is mostly fighting sailors and longshoremen, but, if you can stand the crowd that fills the place, you'll see more real mayhem committed there in one evening than you'll see in a year in the politer clubs of the world.

Well, it looked like every sailor in Hong Kong was there that night. Finally the announcer managed to make hisself heard above the howls of the mob, and he bellered: "The main attrackshun of the evenin'! Sailor Costigan, one hunnerd an' ninety pounds, of the *Sea Girl*--"

"The trimmest craft afloat!" roared the Old Man, heaving his empty bottle at Cap'n Branner.

"And Red McCoy, one hunnerd an' eighty-five pounds, of the *Whale*," went on the announcer, being used to such interruption. "Referee, First Mate Ridley of the steamship Castleton, the management havin' requested him to officiate this evenin'. Now, gents, this is a grudge fight, as you all know. You has seen both these boys perform, an'--"

"And if you don't shut up and give us some action we'll wreck the dump and toss your mangled carcass amongst the ruins!" screamed the maddened fans. "Start somethin' before we do!"

The announcer smiled gently, the gong sounded, and me and Red went together like a couple of wildcats. He was a tough baby, one of them squat, wide-built fellows. I'm six feet; he was four inches shorter, but they wasn't much difference in our weight. He was tough and fast, with one of these here bulldog faces, and how that sawed-off brick-top could hit!

Well, nothing much of interest happened in the first three rounds. Of course, we was fighting hard, neither of us being clever, but both strong on mixing it. But we was both too tough to show much damage that early in the fight. He'd cut my lip and skinned my ear and loosened some teeth, and I'd dropped him for no-count a couple of times, but outside of that nothing much had happened.

We'd stood toe-to-toe for three rounds, flailing away right and left and neither giving back a step, but, just before the end of the third, my incessant body punching began to show even on that chunk of granite they called Red McCoy. For the first time he backed out of a mix-up, and just before the gong I caught him with a swinging right to the belly that made him grunt and bat his eyes.

SO I COME out for the fourth round full of snap and ginger and promptly run into a right hook that knocked me flat on my back. The crowd went crazy, and the *Whale*'s men begun to kiss each other in their ecstasy, but I arose without a count and, ducking the cruel and unusual right swing McCoy tossed at me, I sunk my left to the wrist in his belly and crashed my right under his heart.

This shook Red from stem to stern and, realizing that my body blows was going to beat him if he didn't do something radical, he heaved over a hay-making right with everything he had behind it. It had murder writ all over it, and when it banged solid on my ear so you could hear it all over the house, the crowd jumped up and yelled: "There he goes!" But I'm a glutton for punishment if I do say so, and I merely tittered amusedly, shook my head to clear it, and caressed Red with a left hook that broke his nose.

The baffled look on his face caused me to bust into hearty laughter, in the midst of which Red closed my left eye with a right- hander he started in Mesopotamia. Enraged for the first time that night, I rammed a blasting left hook to his midriff, snapped his head back between his shoulders with another left, and sank my terrible right mauler to the wrist in his belly just above the waist-line.

He immediately went to the canvas like he figured on staying there indefinitely, and his gang jumped up and yelled "Foul!" till I bet they was plainly heard in Bombay. They knowed it wasn't no foul, but when Red heard 'em, he immediately put both hands over his groin and writhed around like a snake with a busted back.

The referee came over, and as I stood smiling amusedly to hear them howl about fouls, I suddenly noticed he wasn't counting.

"Say, you, ain't you goin' to count this ham out?" I asked.

"Shut up, you cad!" he snapped to my utter amazement. "Get out of this ring. You're disqualified!"

And while I gaped at him, he helped Red to his feet and raised his hand.

"McCoy wins on a foul!" he shouted. The crowd sat speechless for a second and then went into hysterics. The Old Man went for the *Whale*'s skipper, the two crews pitched in free and hearty, the rest of the crowd took sides and began to bash noses, and Red's handlers started working over him. The smug look he give me and the wink he wunk, drove me clean cuckoo. I grabbed Ridley's shoulder as he started through the ropes.

"You double-crossin' louse," I ground. "You can't get away with that! You know that wasn't no foul!"

"Take your hands off me," he snapped. "You deliberately hit low, Costigan."

"You're a liar!" I roared, maddened, and crack come his fist in my mouth quick as lightning, and I hit the canvas on the seat of my trunks. Before I could hop up, a bunch of men pounced on me and held me whilst I writhed and yelled and cussed till the air was blue.

"I'll get you for this!" I bellered. "I'll take you apart and scatter the pieces to the sharks, you gyppin', lyin', thievin' son of a skunk!"

He looked down at me very scornful. "A fine specimen of sportsmanship you are," he sneered, and his tongue cut me like a keen knife. "Keep out of my way, or I'll give you a belly-full of what you want. Let him loose--I'll handle him!"

"Handle him my eye!" said one of the fellows holding me. "Get outa here while gettin's good. They ain't but ten of us settin' on him and we're givin' out. Either beat it or get seven or eight other birds to help hold him!"

He laughed kind of short, and, climbing from the ring, strode out of the building between rassling, slugging and cursing groups of bellering fans, many of which was yellin' for his blood. Funny how some men can get by with anything. Here was hundreds of tough birds which was raving mad at Ridley, yet he just looked 'em in the eye and they give back and let him past. Good thing for him, though, that my white bulldog Mike was too busy licking Cap'n Branner's police dog to go for him.

WELL, EVENTUALLY THE cops had things quieted, separated the dogs and even pried the Old Man and Cap'n Branner apart, with their hands full of whiskers they had tore off each other.

I didn't take no part in the rough-house. As quick as I could get dressed and put some collodion on my cuts, I slipped out the back way by myself. I even left Mike with Bill O'Brien because I didn't want him interfering and chewing up my man; I wanted nobody but me to get hold of Mister Jack Ridley and beat him into a red hash. He wasn't going to cow me with the cold stare of his eyes, because I was going to close both of 'em.

Honest to cats, I dunno when I ever been so mad in my life. I was sure he'd deliberately jobbed me and throwed the fight to McCoy, and what was worse, he'd slugged me in the face and got away with it. A red haze swum in front of me and I growled deep black curses which made people stop and stare at me as I swaggered along the waterfront streets.

After a while I seen a barkeep I knowed and I asked him if he'd seen Ridley.

"No," said he, "but if you're after him, I'll give you a tip. Lay off him. He's a hard man to fool with."

That only made me madder. "I'll lay off him," I snarled, "after I've made hash for the fishes outa him, the dirty, double-crossin', thievin' rat! I'll--"

At this minute the barkeep commenced to shine glasses like he was trying for a record, and I turned around to see a girl standing just behind me. She was a white girl and she was a beauty. Her face very white, all except her red lips and her hair was blacker than mine. Her eyes was deep and a light gray, shaded by heavy lashes. And them eyes was the tip-off. At first glance she mighta been a ordinary American flapper, but no flapper ever had eyes like them. They was deep but they was hard. They was yellow sparks of light dancing in them, and I had a funny feeling that they'd shine in the dark like a cat's.

"You were speaking of Mr. Jack Ridley, of the Castleton?" she asked.

"Yeah, I was, Miss," I said, dragging off my ragged old cap.

"Who are you?"

"Steve Costigan, A. B. mariner aboard the trader *Sea Girl*, outa San Francisco."

"You hate Ridley?"

"Well, to be frank, I ain't got no love for him," I said. "He just robbed me of a fight I won fair and square."

She eyed me for a minute. I ain't no beauty. In fact, I been told by my closest enemies that I look more like a gorilla than a human being. But she seemed plenty satisfied.

"Come into the back room," she said, and, to the bartender: "Send us a couple of whisky-and-sodas."

In the back room, as we sipped our drinks, she said, "You hate Ridley, eh? What would you do to him if you could?"

"Anything," I said bitterly. "Hangin's too good for a rat like him."

She rested her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands, and, looking into my eyes, she said, "Do you know who I am?"

"Yeah," I answered. "I ain't never seen you before, but you couldn't be nobody else but the girl the Chinese call the 'White Tigress.'"

Her narrow eyes glittered a little and she nodded.

"Yes. And would you like to know what drove a decent white girl into the shadows of the Orient--made an innocent, trusting child into one of a band of international criminals, and the leader of desperate tongmen? Well, I'll tell you in a few words. It was the heartlessness of a man--the man who took me from my home in England, lied to me, deceived me, and finally left me to the tender mercies of a yellow mandarin in interior China."

I shuffled my feet kind of restless; I felt sorry for her and didn't know what to say. She leaned toward me, her voice dropped almost to whisper, while her eyes burned into mine: "The man who betrayed and deserted me was the man who robbed you tonight--Jack Ridley!"

"Why, the low-down swine!" I ejaculated.

"I, too, want revenge," she breathed. "We can be useful to each other. I will send a note to Ridley asking him to come to a certain place in the Alley of Rats. He will come. There you will meet him. There will be no one to hold you this time."

I grinned--kinda wolfishly, I reckon. "Leave the rest to me."

"No one will ever know," she murmured, which kind of puzzled me. "Hong Kong's waterfront has many secrets and many mysteries. I will send a man with you to guide you to the place. Then, come to me here tomorrow night; I can use you. A man like you need not work away his life on a trading schooner."

She clapped her hands. A Chinaboy come in. She spoke to him in the language for a minute, and he bowed and beat it. She arose: "I am going now. In a few minutes your guide will come. Do as he says. Good luck to you; may you avenge us both."

SHE GLIDED OUT and left me sitting there sipping my licker and wondering what it was all about. I'd heard of the White Tigress; who in China ain't? A white girl who had more power amongst the yellow boys than the Chinese government did. Who was she? How come her to get so much pull? Them as knowed didn't say. That she was a international crook she'd

just admitted. Some said she was a pirate on the sly; some said she was the secret wife of a big mandarin; some said she was a spy for a big European power. Anyway, nobody knowed for sure, but everybody agreed that anybody which crossed her was outa luck.

Well, I set there and guzzled my licker, and pretty soon in come the meanest, scrawniest looking piece uh humanity I ever seen. A ragged, dirty shrimp he was, with a evil, furtive face.

"Bli'me, mate," said he, "le's be up and doin'. It's a nice night's work we got ahead of us."

"Suits me," said I, and I follered him out of the saloon by a side door into the nasty, dimly lighted streets, and through twisty alleys which wasn't lighted at all. They stunk like sin and I couldst hear the stealthy rustling noises which always goes on in such places. Rats, maybe, but if a yellow-faced ghost hadda jumped around my neck, I wouldn'ta been surprised a bit.

Well, the cockney seemed to know his way, though my sense of direction got clean bumfuzzled. At last he opened a door and I follered him into a squalid, ramshackle room which was as dark as the alleys. He struck a light and lit a candle on a rough table. They was chairs there, and he brought out a bottle. A door opened out of the room into some other part of the place, I guess; the windows was heavily barred and I saw a trap door in the middle of the floor. I could hear the slow, slimy waves sucking and lapping under us, and I knowed the house was built out over the water.

"Mate," said the Cockney, after we'd finished about half the bottle, "it comes to me that we're a couple o' blightin' idjits to be workin' for a skirt."

"What d'ya mean?" I asked, taking a pull at the bottle.

"Well, 'ere's us, two red-blooded 'e-men, takin' orders from a lousy little frail, 'andin' the swag h'over to 'er, and takin' wot she warnts to 'and us, w'en we could 'ave the 'ole lot. Take this job 'ere now--"

I stared at him. "I don't get you."

He glanced around furtive-like, and lowered his voice: "Mate, let's cop the sparkler for ourselves and shove out! We can get back to Hengland or the States and live like blurry lords for a while. Hi'm sick o' this bloody dump."

"Say, you," I snarled, "what'r you drivin' at? What sparkler?"

"W'y, lorlumme," said he, "the sparkler we takes off Mate Ridley afore we dumps his carcass through that trapdoor."

"Hold everything!" I was up on my feet, all in a muddle. "I didn't contract to do no murder."

"Wot!" said the Cockney. "Bli'me! The Tigress says as you was yearnin' for Ridley's gore!"

'Well, I am," I growled, "but she didn't get my meanin'. I didn't mean I wanted to kill him, though, come to think about it, it mighta sounded like it. But I ain't no murderer, though killin' is what he needs after the way he treated that poor kid. When he comes through that door, I'm goin' to hammer him within a inch of his life, understand, but they ain't goin' to be no murder done--not tonight. You can bump him later, if you want to. But you got to let me pound him first, and I ain't goin' to be in on no assassination."

"But we got to finish him," argued the Cockney, "or him and To Yan will have all the bobbies in the world after us."

"Say," I said, "the Tigress didn't say nothin' about no jewel nor no To Yan. What's they got to do with it? She said Ridley brung her into China and left her flat--"

"Banan orl!" sneered the Cockney. "She was spoofin' you proper, mate. Ridley never even seen 'er. Hi dunno 'ow she got into so much power in China myself, but she's got somethin' on a mandarin and a clique o' government officials. She's been a crook ever since she was big enough to steal the blinkin' paint orf 'er bloomin' cradle.

"Listen to me, mate, and we 'ands 'er the double-cross proper. I wasn't to spill this to you, y'understand. I was to cop the sparkler after you'd bumped Ridley, and say nuthin' to you about it, see? But Hi'm sick o' takin' orders orf the 'ussy.

"Old To Yan, the chief of the Yan Tong, 'as a great fancy to Ridley. Fact is, Ridley's old man and the old Chinee 'as been close friends for years. Right now, To Yan's oldest darter is in Hengland gettin' a Western eddication. Old To Yan's that progressive and hup to the times. Well, it's the yellow girl's birthday soon, and To Yan's sendin' 'er a birthday present as would make your heyes bug out. Bli'me! It's the famous Ting ruby, worth ten thousand pounds--maybe more. Old To Yan give it to Jack Ridley to take to the girl, bein' as Ridley's ship weighs anchor for Hengland tomorrer. I dunno 'ow the Tigress found hout habout it, but that's wot she's hafter."

"I see," said I, grinding my teeth. "I was the catspaw, hey? She handed me a line to rub me up to do her dirty work. She thought I wanted to bump Ridley, anyway. Why'n't she have some of her own thugs do it?"

"That's the blightin' smoothness o' 'er," said the Cockney. "Why risk one o' her own men on a job like that, w'en 'ere was a tough sailor sizzlin' for the blinkin' hopportunity? She really thought you was wantin' to bump Ridley; she didn't know you just warnted to beat 'im hup. If you'd bumped 'im and got caught, she wouldn't a been connected with it, so's it could be proved, because you ain't one o' 'er regular men. She thought you was the right man for the job, anyway, because, mate, if Hi may say so, you looks like a natural-born murderer. But look 'ere--let's cross 'er, and do the trick hon our hown."

"Not a chance," I snapped. "Unlock that door and let me out!"

"Let you hout to squeal hon me," he whined, a red light beginning to gleam in his little rat eyes. "Not me, says you! Watch hout, you Yankee swine--!"

I saw the flash of his knife as he came at me, and I kicked a chair into his legs; and while he was spitting curses like a cat and trying to untangle hisself, I bent my right on his jaw and he took the count.

WITH SCARCELY A glance at his recumbent form, I twisted the lock off the door and stalked forth into the darkness. I groped around in a lot of twisty back alleys for a while, expecting any minute to get a knife in my back or fall into the bay, but finally I blundered into a narrow street which was dimly lit and soon found myself back in a more civilized portion of the waterfront. And a few minutes later who do I see emerging from a saloon but a man I recognized as a stoker aboard the Castleton.

"Hey, you," I accosted him politely, "where is that lousy first mate of yours?"

"Try and find out, you boneheaded mick," he answered rudely. "What d'ya think uh that?"

"Chew on this awhile," I growled, clouting him heartily in the mush, and for a few seconds a merry time was had by all. But pretty quick I smashed a right hook under his heart that took all the fight out of him, along with his wind.

Having brung him to by a liberal deluge of water from a nearby horse trough, I said: "All right, if you got to be so stubborn you won't answer a civil question, I won't insist. But lemme tell you somethin', and you can pass it on to that four-flushin' mate--when I get my hands on him, I'm goin' make him eat that foul decision. And say, you better find him and tell him that if he keeps packin' around what To Yan give him, he's goin' to lose it, along with his life. He'll understand what I mean. And tell him to stay away from the Alley of Rats, if he ain't already gone there."

Well, it was mighty late by this time. The streets was nearly deserted, even them which usually has a crowd of revelers on 'em all night. I was sleepy, but knowing that the Castleton was sailing the next morning, I took one more stroll around, hoping to run onto the mate. I was sure he hadn't gone aboard yet, because he always spent his nights ashore when he could.

After hunting for maybe an hour or more, I was about to give it up. I was passing a dark alleyway when something come slipping out, looking like a slim white ghost. It was the White Tigress.

"Wait a minute, Costigan," she said, as friendly as you please. "May I speak to you just a moment?"

"You got a nerve, Miss," I said reproachfully, "after the bunk you handed me--"

"Ah, don't be angry at me," she cooed, patting my arm. "Forget it. I'll make it up to you, if you'll just come with me. You're the kind of a man I admire."

I'm the prize boob of the Asiatics. I follered her along the little, dark, smelly alley, through an arched doorway and into a kind of small court, lighted by smoky lamps. Then she turned on me and I got a chill.

Boy, all the cat-spirit in her eyes was up and blazing. Her face was whiter than ever, her red lips writhed into a snarl, and of all the concentrated venom I ever seen flaming out of a woman's eyes, it was there! Murder, destruction, torture, sudden death and damnation she looked at me.

"I reckon maybe I better be going Miss," I said, kind of nervous. "It's gettin' late and the Old Man'll be expectin' me back--"

"Stand where you are!" she said in a voice so low it was almost a whisper.

"But the cook may be drunk and I'll have to make breakfast for the crew!" I said wildly, beginning to get desperate.

"Shut up, you fool!" she exclaimed in a voice which plumb shook with passion. "I'll fix you, you dumb, imbecilic, boneheaded, double- crossing beast! It was you who warned Ridley, wasn't it? And he ditched the ruby and never showed up at the Alley of Rats. It was just by pure luck that we got him at all. But he'll tell what he did with the gem before we get through with him. And as for you--"

She stopped a minute and her eyes ran up and down my huge frame gloatingly; she actually licked her lips like a cat over a mouse.

"When I finish with you, you'll have learned not to interfere with my affairs," she added, taking a long, thin raw-hide whip from somewhere and flicking it through the air. "I'm going to lash you within an inch of your life," she announced. "You won't be the first, either. I'm going to flay you and cut you to pieces. I'm going to whip you until you're a blind, whimpering, writhing mass of raw flesh."

"Now listen, Miss," I said, with quiet dignity, "I like to oblige a lady but they is such a thing as carryin' curtesy too far. I ain't goin' to let you even touch me with that cat."

"I didn't suppose you would," she sneered, "so I provided for that." She clapped her hands and into the courtyard from nowhere come five big Chinese. They was big, too; the smallest was larger than me and the biggest looked more like a elephant than a man. They come for me from all sides like shadows.

"Grab him, boys," she snapped in English, and I give a wolfish grin. I was plumb at ease now I had men to deal with. They was reaching for me when I went into action. A trained fighter can clean up a roomful of white civilians--and a Chinee can't take a punch. Quick as a flash I threw my whole shoulder-weight behind the left I smashed into the yellow map of the one in front of me; blood spattered and he sagged down, out cold. The next instant the rest was on me like a pack of wolves, but I whirled, ducking under a pair of arms and dropping the owner with a right hook to the heart. For the next few seconds it was a kind of whirlwind of flailing arms and legs, with me as the center.

At first they tried to capture me alive, but, being convinced of the futility of this endeavor, they tried to kill me. A knife licked along my arm, and the sting of the wound maddened me. With a roar, I crashed my right down on the neck of the Chinee which had me around the legs, driving him against the ground so hard his face splattered like a tomato. Then, reaching back and getting a good hold on the yellow boy which was both strangling me from behind and trying to knife me, I tossed him over my head. He hit on his neck and didn't get up. I then ducked a hatchet swiped at me by the biggest of the gang, and, rising on my toes, I reached his jaw and crashed him with a torrid left hook. I didn't need to hit him again.

THE FIGHT HAD took maybe a minute and a half. I glanced scornfully at the prostrate figures of my victims, and then looked around for the Tigress. She was crouched back in a angle of the wall, with a kind of stunned look in her eyes, the whip dangling from her limp fingers. She give me one horrified look and shuddered and murmured something about a gorilla.

"Well," I said, kind of sarcastic, "it don't look like they is goin' to be no whippin' tonight--or have you got some more hatchet-men hid away somewheres? If you have, trot 'em out. Action is what I crave."

"Great heavens," she murmured, "are you human? Do you realize that you've just laid out five professional murderers? And--and--what are you going to do with me?"

Seeing that she was scared gave me a idea. Maybe I could make her tell something about Ridley.

"You come with me," I growled, and taking her arm, I marched her out of the courtyard by another way, until we come to another courtyard similar to the one we'd left, but open enough so I couldst see if anybody tried to slip up on me. Spite of what she'd did, I felt kind of ashamed of myself, because if I ever seen a scared girl, it was the White Tigress. Her knees

knocked together and she looked like she thought I'd eat her. When she thought I wasn't looking, she dropped the whip like it was hot, giving me a most guilty glance. I reckon she thought maybe I'd use it on her, and I felt clean insulted.

"Where's Jack Ridley?" I asked her, and she named a place I'd never heard of.

"Don't hit me," she begged, though I never hit a woman and hadst made not the slightest threatening motion at her. "I'll tell you about it. I sent the note to Ridley and waited for the Cockney to come and report to me. He had orders to hide you in a safe place after you'd turned the trick, and then come back and tell me about it. But after a while the Cockney turned up with a welt on his jaw, and said you'd balked on the job. He said you knew about the ruby somehow and that you proposed that you and he kill Ridley, take the stone and skip--"

"Aha," thought I to myself, "I bet he lied hisself into a jamb!"

"--but I realized that you couldn't have known about it unless he told you, so I laid into him with the raw-hide and pretty soon he admitted that he let it slip about the ruby. But he said you wanted him to double-cross me, and he wouldn't do it, and you knocked him out and left. He said that after he came to he waited a while, intending to kill Ridley himself, but the mate never showed up. I knew the Cockney was lying about part of it, at least, but I believed him when he said that likely you had killed Ridley yourself and skipped. I started my gang out looking for you, but they caught Ridley instead. It was just by chance.

"They brought him to the hang-out and we searched him, but he didn't have the ruby on him and he wouldn't tell what he'd done with it. We did worm it out of him that he was on his way to the Alley of Rats in answer to the note he got, when a stoker on his ship met him and warned him to keep away. While we were getting ready to make him talk, one of my boys brought me word that he'd just seen you on the streets, and I thought I'd settle the score between us. I'm sorry; I'll never try it again. What are you going to do with me?"

"How do I know you're tellin' the truth?" I asked.

She shuddered. "I'd be afraid to lie to you. You're the only man I ever saw that I was afraid of. Don't be angry--but I saw a gorilla kill six or seven niggers on the West African Coast once, and, when you were fighting those China-boys, you looked just like him."

I was too offended to say anything for a second, and she kind of whimpered: "Please, what are you going to do with me? Please let me go!"

"I'm goin' to let you take me to where you got Jack Ridley," I growled, mopping the blood off my cut arm, and working it so it wouldn't get stiff. "I got a account to settle with the big cheese-- and you ain't goin' to torture no Americans while I can stand on my two feet. Lead the way!"

WELL, I'D OF been in a jamb if she'd refused, because I don't know what I coulda done to make her--it just ain't in me to be rough with no women--but my bluff worked. She didn't argue at all. She led me out of the courtyard, down three or four narrow, deserted streets, across a bunch of back alleys, and finally through a narrow doorway.

Here she stopped. The room was very dimly lighted by a street lamp that burned just outside and through the cracks in the wall I could see they was a light in the room beyond.

I had my hand on her arm, just so she wouldn't try to give me the slip, but I guess she thought I'd wring her neck if she crossed me, because she whispered: "Ridley's in there, but there's a gang of men with him."

"How many and who all are they?" I whispered.

"Smoky and Squint-Eye and Snake and the Dutchman; and then there's Wladek and--"

Just then I heard a nasty voice rise that I recognized as belonging to the said Smoky--a shady character but one which I hadn't known was mixed up in the Tigress game: "Orl right, you bloody Yank, we'll see wot you says after we've touched yer up a bit wiv a 'ot h'iron, eh, mates?"

I let go the girl's arm and slid to the door, soft and easy. And then I found out the Tigress wasn't near as scared as she'd pretended, because she jumped back and yelled: "Look out, boys!"

Secrecy being now out of the question, the best thing was to get in the first punch. I hit that door like a typhoon and crashed right through it. I had a fleeting glimpse of a smoky lamp in a bracket on the wall, of a rope-wrapped figure on a bunk and a ring of startled, evil faces.

"Ow, murder!" howled somebody I seen was the Cockney. "It's that bloody sailor again!" And he dived through the nearest window.

In that room they was a Chinee, a Malay, a big Russian and six thugs which was a mixed mess of English, Dutch and American. As I come through the door, I slugged the big Russian on the jaw and finished him for the evening, and grabbing the Chinee and the Malay by their necks, I disposed of them by slammin' their heads together. Then the rest of the merry men rose up and come down on me like a wolf on the fold, and the real hilarity commenced.

It was just a whirlwind. Fists, boots, bottles and chairs! And a few knives and brass knuckles throwed in for good measure. We romped all over the room and busted the chairs and shattered the table, and it was while I was on the floor, on top of three of them while the other three was dancing a horn-pipe on me, that I got hold of a heavy chair-leg. Shaking off my assailants for a instant, I arose and smote Dutchy over the head with a joyous abandon that instantly reduced the number of my foes to five. Another swat broke Snake's arm, and at that moment a squint-eyed yegg ran in and knifed me in the ribs. I give a roar of irritation and handed him one that finished him and the chair- leg simultaneous.

At this moment a red-headed thug laid my scalp open with a pair of brass knuckles, and Smoky planted his hob-nailed boots in my ribs so hard it put me on my back again, where the survivors leaped on me with howls of delirious joy. But I was far from through, though rather breathless.

Biting a large hunk out of the thumb a scar-faced beachcomber tried to shove in my eyes, I staggered up again. Doing this meant lifting Smoky too, as he was on my back, industriously gnawing my ear. With a murmur of resentment, I shook him off and flattened him with a right-handed smash that broke three ribs; and, ducking the chair Scar- Face swung at me, I crashed him with a left that smashed his nose and knocked out all his front teeth.

Red-Head was still swinging at me with the brass knuckles, and he contrived to gash my jaw pretty deep before I broke his jaw with a hay-making right swing. As the poem says, the tumult and the clouting died, and, standing panting in the body-littered room, I shook the blood and sweat outa my eyes and glared around for more thugs to conquer.

But I was the only man on his feet. I musta been a sight. All my clothes was tore off except my pants, and they wasn't enough of them left to amount to anything. I was bleeding from a dozen cuts. I was bruised all over and I had another black eye to go with the one McCoy had give me earlier in the evening. I looked around for Ridley and seen him lying on the bunk where he was tied up, staring at me like he'd never seen a critter like me before. I looked for the Tigress but she was gone.

SO I WENT over and untied Ridley, and he never said a word; acted like he was kinda stunned. He worked his fingers and glanced at the victims on the floor, some of which was groaning and cussing, and some of which was slumbering peaceful.

"Gettin' the circulation back in your hands?" I asked, and he nodded.

"All right," said I, "Put up your mitts; I'm goin' to knock you into the middle of Kingdom Come."

"Good Lord, man," he cried, "you've saved my life--and you mean you want to fight me?"

"What the hell did you think?" I roared. "Think I come around to thank you for jobbin' me out of a rightful decision? I never fouled nobody in my life!"

"But you're in no shape to fight now!" he exclaimed. "You've just whipped a roomful of men and taken more punishment than I thought any human being could take, and live! You're bleeding like a stuck hog. Both your eyes are half-closed, your lips are pulped, your scalp's laid open, one of your ears is mangled, and you've got half a dozen knife cuts on you. I saw one of those fellows stab you in the ribs--"

"Aw, it just slid along 'em," I said. "If you think I'm marked up, you oughta seen me after I went fifteen rounds to a draw with Iron Mike Brennon. But listen, that ain't neither here nor there. You ain't as big as I am, but you got the reputation of a fighter. Now you put up your mitts like a man."

Instead, he dropped his hands to his sides. "I won't fight you. Not after what you've just done for me. Do you realize that you've burst into the secret den of the most dangerous crook in China--and cleaned up nine of her most desperate gangmen, practically bare- handed?"

"But what about that foul?" I asked petulantly.

"I was wrong," he said. "I was standing behind McCoy and didn't really get a good look at the blow you dropped him with. Honestly, it looked low to me, and when McCoy began to writhe around on the canvas, I thought you had fouled him. But if you did, it wasn't intentional. A man like you wouldn't deliberately hit another fighter low. You didn't even hit these thugs below the belt, though God knows you had every right. Now then, I apologize for that foul decision, and for hitting you, and for what I said to you. If you want to take a swing at me anyway, I won't blame you, but I'm not going to fight you."

He looked at me with steady eyes and I seen he wasn't afraid of me, or handing me no bluff. And, somehow, I was satisfied.

"Well," I said, mopping the blood off my scalp, "that's all right. I just wanted you to know I don't fight foul. Now let's get outa here. Say--the White Tigress was here with me--where'd she go, do you reckon?"

"I don't know. And I don't want to know. If I don't see her again, it will be soon enough. It must have been she who sent me that note earlier in the night."

"It was. And I don't understand, if you was goin' to do what it said, why it took you so long. You shoulda been at the Alley of Rats before the stoker had time to find you and give you my warnin'."

"Well," he said, "I hesitated for nearly an hour after getting the note, as to whether I'd go or not, but finally decided I would. But I left the To Yan ruby with the captain. On the way, the stoker met me and gave me your tip, which he didn't understand but thought I ought to know nevertheless. So I didn't go to the Alley of Rats, but later on a gang jumped me, tied me up and brought me here. And say, how is it that you're mixed up in all this?"

"It's a long story," I said, as we come out into one of the politer streets, "and--"

"And just now you need those cuts and bruises dressed. Come with me and I'll attend to that. You can tell me all about it while I bandage you."

"All right," I said, "but let's make it snappy 'cause I got business."

"Got a girl in this port, have you?"

"Naw," I said. "I think I can find the promoter of the Waterfront Fight Arena at his saloon about now, and I want to ask him to get Red McCoy to fight me at the Arena again tomorrow night."

THE END

By Robert E. Howard

A FAMILIAR STOCKY SHAPE, stood with a foot on the brass rail, as I entered the American Bar, in Hong-kong. I glared at the shape disapprovingly, recognizing it as Bill McGlory of the Dutchman. That is one ship I enthusiastically detest, this dislike being shared by all the bold lads aboard the *Sea Girl*, from the cap'n to the cook.

I shouldered up along the bar. Ignoring Bill, I called for a whisky straight.

"You know, John," said Bill, addressing hisself to the bartender, "you got no idee the rotten tubs which calls theirselves ships that's tied up to the wharfs right now. Now then, the *Sea Girl* for instance. An' there's a guy named Steve Costigan--"

"You know, John," I broke in, addressing myself to the bartender, "it's clean surprisin' what goes around on their hind laigs callin' theirselves sailor-men, these days. A baboon got outa the zoo at Brisbane and they just now spotted it on the wharfs here in Hong-kong."

"You don't say," said John the bar-keep. "Where'd it been?"

"To sea," I said. "It'd shipped as A.B. mariner on the Dutchman and was their best hand."

With which caustic repartee, I stalked out in gloating triumph, leaving Bill McGlory gasping and strangling as he tried to think of something to say in return. To celebrate my crushing victory over the enemy I swaggered into the La Belle Cabaret and soon seen a good looking girl setting alone at a table. She was toying with her cigaret and drink like she was bored, so I went over and set down.

"Evenin', Miss," I says, doffing my cap. "I'm just in from sea and cravin' to toss my money around. Do you dance?"

She eyed me amusedly from under her long, drooping lashes and said: "Yes, I do, on occasion. But I don't work here, sailor."

"Oh, excuse me, Miss," I said, getting up. "I sure beg your pardon."

"That's all right," she said. "Don't run away. Let's sit here and talk."

"That's fine," I said, setting back down again, when to my annoyance a sea-going figger bulked up to the table.

"Even', Miss," said Bill McGlory, fixing me with a accusing stare. "Is this walrus annoyin' you?"

"Listen here, you flat-headed mutt--" I begun with some heat, but the girl said: "Now, now, don't fight, boys. Sit down and let's all talk sociably. I like to meet people from the States in this heathen land. My name is Kit Worley and I work for Tung Yin, the big Chinese merchant."

"Private secretary or somethin'?" says Bill.

"Governess to his nieces," said she. "But don't let's talk about me. Tell me something about yourselves. You boys are sailors, aren't you?"

"I am," I replied meaningly. Bill glared at me.

"Do tell me about some of your voyages," said she hurriedly. "I just adore ships."

"Then you'd sure like the Dutchman, Miss Worley," beamed Bill. "I don't like to brag, but for trim lines, smooth rig, a fine figger and speed, they ain't a sailin' craft in the China trade can hold a candle to her. She's a dream. A child could steer her."

"Or anybody with a child's mind," I says. "And does--when you're at the wheel."

"Listen here, you scum of the Seven Seas," said Bill turning brick color. "You layoff the Dutchman. I'd never have the nerve to insult a sweet ship like her if I sailed in a wormy, rotten-timbered, warped-decked, crank-ruddered, crooked-keeled, crazy-rigged tub like the *Sea Girl*."

"You'll eat them words with a sauce of your own blood," I howled.

"Boys!" said Miss Worley. "Now, boys."

"Miss Worley," I said, getting up and shedding my coat, "I'm a law-abidin' and peaceful man, gentle and generous to a fault. But they's times when patience becomes a vice and human kindness is a stumblin' block on the road of progress. This baboon in human form don't understand no kind of moral suasion but a bust on the jaw."

"Come out in the alley," squalled Bill, bounding up like a jumping-jack.

"Come on," I said. "Let's settle this here feud once and for all. Miss Worley," I said, "wait here for the victor. I won't be gone long."

Out in the alley, surrounded by a gang of curious coolies, we squared off without no more ado. We was well matched, about the same height and weighing about 190 pounds each. But as we approached each other with our fists up, a form stepped between. We stopped and glared in outraged surprise. It was a tall, slender Englishman with a kind of tired, half humorous expression.

"Come, come, my good men," he said. "We can't have this sort of thing, you know. Bad example to the natives and all that sort of thing. Can't have white men fighting in the alleys these days. Times too unsettled, you know. Must uphold the white man's standard."

"Well, by golly," I said. "I've had a hundred fights in Hong-kong and nobody yet never told me before I was settin' a bad example to nobody."

"Bad tactics, just the same," he said. "And quite too much unrest now. If the discontented Oriental sees white men bashing each other's bally jaws, the white race loses just that much prestige, you see."

"But what right you got buttin' into a private row?" I complained.

"Rights vested in me by the Chinese government, working with the British authorities, old topper," said the Englishman. "Brent is the name."

"Sir Peter Brent of the Secret Service, hey?" I grunted. "I've heard tell of you. But I dunno what you could do if we was to tell you to go chase yourself."

"I could summon the bally police and throw you in jail, old thing," he said apologetically. "But I don't want to do that."

"Say," I said, "You got any idee how many Chinee cops it'd take to lug Steve Costigan and Bill McGlory to the hoosegow?"

"A goodly number, I should judge," said he. "Still if you lads persist in this silly feud, I shall have to take the chance. I judge fifty would be about the right number."

"Aw, hell," snorted Bill, hitching up his britches. "Let's rock him to sleep and go on with the fray. He can't do nothin'."

But I balked. Something about the slim Britisher made me feel mad and ashamed too. He was so frail looking alongside us sluggers.

"Aw, let it slide for the time bein'," I muttered. "We'd have to lay him out first before he'd let us go on, and he's too thin to hit. We might bust him in half. Let it go, if he's so plumb set on it. We got the whole world to fight in."

"You're gettin' soft and sentimental," snorted Bill. And with that he swaggered off in high disgust.

I eyed him morosely.

"Now he'll probably think I was afraid to fight him," I said gloomily. "And it's all your fault."

"Sorry, old man," said Sir Peter. "I'd have liked to have seen the mill myself, by jove. But public duty comes first, you know. Come, forget about it and have a drink."

"I ain't a-goin' to drink with you," I said bitterly. "You done spoilt my fun and made me look like a coward."

And disregarding his efforts to conciliate me, I shoved past him and wandered gloomily down the alley. I didn't go back to the La Belle. I was ashamed to admit to Miss Worley that they wasn't no fight. But later on I got to thinking about it and wondering what Bill told her in case he went back to her. It would be just like him to tell her I run out on him and refused to fight, I thought, or that he flattened me without getting his hair ruffled. He wasn't above punching a wall or something and telling her he skinned them knuckles on my jaw.

So I decided to look Miss Worley up and explain the whole thing to her--also take her to a theater or something if she'd go. She was a very pretty girl, refined and educated--anybody could tell that--yet not too proud to talk with a ordinary sailorman. Them kind is few and far betweenst.

I asked a bar-keep where Tung Yin lived and he told me. "But," he added, "you better keep away from Tung Yin. He's a shady customer and he don't like whites."

"You're nuts," I said. "Any man which Miss Kit Worley works for is bound to be okay."

"Be that as it may," said the bar-keep. "The cops think that Tung Yin was some way mixed up in the big diamond theft."

"What big diamond theft?" I said.

"Gee whiz," he said. "Didn't you hear about the big diamond theft last month?"

"Last month I was in Australia," I said impatiently.

"Well," he said, "somebody stole the Royal Crystal--that's what they called the diamond account of a emperor of China once usin' it to tell fortunes, like the gypsies use a crystal ball, y'know. Somebody stole it right outa the government museum. Doped the guards, hooked the stone and got clean away. Slickest thing I ever heard of in my life. That diamond's worth a fortune. And some think that Tung Yin had a hand in it. Regular international ruckus. They got Sir Peter Brent, the big English detective, workin' on the case now."

"Well," I said, "I ain't interested. Only I know Tung Yin never stole it, because Miss Worley wouldn't work for nobody but a gent."

SO I WENT TO TUNG YIN'S place. It was a whopping big house, kinda like a palace, off some distance from the main part of the city. I went in a 'ricksha and got there just before sundown. The big house was set out by itself amongst groves of orange trees and cherry trees and the like, and I seen a airplane out in a open space that was fixed up like a landing field. I remembered that I'd heard tell that Tung Yin had a young Australian aviator named Clanry in his employ. I figgered likely that was his plane.

I started for the house and then got cold feet. I hadn't never been in a rich Chinee's dump before and I didn't know how to go about it. I didn't know whether you was supposed to go up and knock on the door and ask for Miss Kit Worley, or what. So I decided I'd cruise around a little and maybe I'd see her walking in the garden. I come up to the garden, which had a high wall around it, and I climbed up on the wall and looked over. They was lots of flowers and cherry trees and a fountain with a bronze dragon, and over near the back of the big house they was another low wall, kind of separating the house from the garden. And I seen a feminine figger pass through a small gate in this wall.

Taking a chance it was Miss Worley, I dropped into the garden, hastened forward amongst the cherry trees and flowers, and blundered through the gate into a kind of small court. Nobody was there, but I seen a door just closing in the house so I went right on through and come into a room furnished in the usual Chinese style, with tapestries and screens and silk cushions and them funny Chinese tea tables and things. A chorus of startled feminine squeals brung me up standing and I gawped about in confusion. Miss Worley wasn't nowhere in sight. All I seen was three or four Chinese girls which looked at me like I was a sea serpent.

"What you do here?" asked one of them.

"I'm lookin' for the governess," I said, thinking that maybe these was Tung Yin's nieces. Though, by golly, I never seen no girls which had less of the schoolgirl look about 'em.

"Governor?" she said. "You crazee? Governor him live along Nanking."

"Naw, naw," I said. "Gover-ness, see? The young lady which governesses the big boy's nieces--Tung Yin's nieces."

"You crazee," she said decisively. "Tung Yin him got no fool nieces."

"Say, listen," I said. "We ain't gettin' nowhere. I can't speak Chinee and you evidently can't understand English. I'm lookin' for Miss Kit Worley, see?"

"Ooooh!" she understood all right and looked at me with her slant eyes widened. They all got together and whispered while I got nervouser and nervouser. I didn't like the look of things, somehow. Purty soon she said: "Mees Worley she not live along here no more. She gone."

"Well," I said vaguely, "I reckon I better be goin'." I started for the door, but she grabbed me. "Wait," she said. "You lose your head, suppose you go that way."

"Huh?" I grunted, slightly shocked and most unpleasantly surprised. "What? I ain't done nothin'."

She made a warning gesture and turning to one of the other girls said: "Go fetch Yuen Tang."

The other girl looked surprised: "Yuen Tang?" she said kind of dumb-like, like she didn't understand. The first girl snapped something at her in Chinee and give her a disgusted push through the door. Then she turned to me.

"Tung Yin no like white devils snooping around," she said with a shake of her head. "Suppose he find you here, he cut your head off--snick," she said dramatically, jerking her finger acrost her throat.

I will admit cold sweat bust out on me.

"Great cats," I said plaintively. "I thought this Tung Yin was a respectable merchant. I ain't never heard he was a mysterious mandarin or a brigand or somethin'. Stand away from that door, sister. I'm makin' tracks."

Again she shook her head and laying a finger to her lips cautiously, she beckoned me to look through the door by which I'd entered. The gate opening into the garden from the courtyard was partly open.

What I seen made my hair stand up. It was nearly dark. The garden looked shadowy and mysterious, but it was still light enough for me to make out the figgers of five big coolies sneaking along with long curved knives in their hands.

"They look for you," whispered the girl. "Tung Yin fear spies. They know somebody climb the wall. Wait, we hide you."

THEY GRABBED ME AND pushed me into a kind of closet and shut the door, leaving me in total darkness. How long I stood there sweating with fear and nervousness, I never knowed. I couldn't hear much in there and what I did hear was muffled, but it seemed like they was a lot of whispering and muttering going on through the house. Once I heard a kind of galloping like a lot of men running, then they was some howls and what sounded like a voice swearing in English.

Then at last the door opened. A Chinaman in the garb of a servant looked in and I was about to bust him one, when I seen the Chinese girl looking over his shoulder.

"Come out cautiously," he said, in his hissing English. "I am your friend and would aid you to escape, but if you do not follow my directions exactly, you will not live to see the sunrise. Tung Yin will butcher you."

"Holy cats," I said vaguely. "What's he got it in for me for? I ain't done nothin'."

"He mistrusts all men," said the Chinaman. "I am Yuen Tang and I hate his evil ways, though circumstances have forced me to do his bidding. Come."

That was a nice mess for a honest seaman to get into, hey? I followed Yuen Tang and the girl, sweating profusely, and they led me through long, deserted corridors and finally stopped before a heavy barred door.

"Through this door lies freedom," hissed Yuen Tang. "To escape from the house of Tung Yin you must cross the chamber which lies beyond this portal. Once through, you will come to an outer door and liberty. Here." He shoved a small but wicked looking pistol into my hand.

"What's that for?" I asked nervously, recoiling. "I don't like them things."

"You may have to shoot your way through," he whispered. "No man knows the guile of Tung Yin. In the darkness of the chamber he may come upon you with murder in his hand."

"Oh gosh," I gasped wildly. "Ain't they no other way out?"

"None other," said Yuen Tang. "You must take your chance."

I felt like my legs was plumb turning to taller. And then I got mad. Here was me, a peaceful, law-abiding sailorman, being hounded and threatened by a blame yellow-belly I hadn't never even seen.

"Gimme that gat," I growled. "I ain't never used nothin' but my fists in a fray, but I ain't goin' to let no Chinee carve me up if I can help it."

"Good," purred Yuen Tang. "Take the gun and go swiftly. If you hear a sound in the darkness, shoot quick and straight."

So, shoving the gun into my sweaty fingers, him and the girl opened the door, pushed me through and shut the door behind me. I turned quick and pushed at it. They'd barred it on the other side and I could of swore I heard a sort of low snicker.

I strained my eyes trying to see something. It was as dark as anything. I couldn't see nothing nor hear nothing. I started groping my way forward, then stopped short. Somewhere I heard a door open stealthily. I started sweating. I couldn't see nothing at all, but I heard the door close again, a bolt slid softly into place and I had the uncanny sensation that they was somebody in that dark room with me.

CUSSING FIERCELY TO myself because my hand shook so, I poked the gun out ahead of me and waited. A stealthy sound came to me from the other side of the chamber and I pulled the trigger wildly. A flash of fire stabbed back at me and I heard the lead sing past my ear as I ducked wildly. I was firing blindly, as fast as I could jerk the trigger, figgering on kind of swamping him with the amount of lead I was throwing his way. And he was shooting back just as fast. I seen the flash spitting in a continual stream of fire and the air was full of lead, from the sound. I heard the bullets sing past my ears so close they nearly combed my hair, and spat on the wall behind me. My hair stood straight up, but I kept on jerking the trigger till the gun was empty and no answering shots came.

Aha, I thought, straightening up. I've got him. And at that instant, to my rage and amazement, there sounded a metallic click from the darkness. It was incredible I should miss all them shots, even in the dark. But it must be so, I thought wrathfully. He wasn't laying on the floor full of lead; his gun was empty too. I knowed that sound was the hammer snapping on a empty shell.

And I got real mad. I seen red. I throwed away the gun and, cussing silently, got on my all-fours and begun to crawl stealthily but rapidly acrost the floor. If he had a knife, this mode of attack would give me some advantage.

That was a blame big chamber. I judge I'd traversed maybe half the distance across it when my head come into violent contact with what I instinctively realized was a human skull. My opponent had got the same idee I had. Instantly we throwed ourselves ferociously on each other and there begun a most desperate battle in the dark. My unseen foe didn't seem to have no knife, but he was a bearcat in action. I was doing my best, slugging, kicking, rassling and ever and anon sinking my fangs into his hide, but I never see the Chinaman that could fight like this 'un fought. I never seen one which could use his fists, but this 'un could.

I heard 'em swish past my head in the dark and purty soon I stopped one of them fists with my nose. Whilst I was trying to shake the blood and stars outa my eyes, my raging opponent clamped his teeth in my ear and set back. With a maddened roar, I hooked him in the belly with such heartiness that he let go with a gasp and curled up like a angle-worm. I then climbed atop of him and set to work punching him into a pulp, but he come to hisself under my very fists, as it were, pitched me off and got a scissors hold that nearly caved my ribs in.

Gasping for breath, I groped around and having found one of his feet, got a toe-hold and started twisting it off. He give a ear-piercing and bloodthirsty yell and jarred me loose with a terrific kick in the neck.

We arose and fanned the air with wild swings, trying to find each other in the dark. After nearly throwing our arms out of place missing haymakers, we abandoned this futile and aimless mode of combat and having stumbled into each other, we got each other by the neck with our lefts and hammered away with our rights.

A minute or so of this satisfied my antagonist, who, after a vain attempt to find my right and tie it up, throwed hisself blindly and bodily at me. We went to the floor together. I got a strangle hold on him and soon had him gurgling spasmodically. A chance swat on the jaw jarred me loose, but I come back with a blind swing that by pure chance crunched solidly into his mouth. Again we locked horns and tumbled about on the floor.

"DERN YOUR YELLER hide," said the Chinaman between gasps. "You're the toughest Chinee I ever fit in my life, but I'll get you yet!"

"Bill McGlory," I said in disgust. "What you doin' here?"

"By golly," said he. "If I didn't know you was Tung Yin, I'd swear you was Steve Costigan."

"I am Steve Costigan, you numb-skull," I said impatiently, hauling him to his feet.

"Well, gee whiz," he said. "Them girls told me I might have to shoot Tung Yin to make my getaway, but they didn't say nothin' about you. Where is the big shot?"

"How should I know?" I snapped. "Yuen Tang and a girl told me Tung Yin was goin' to chop my head off. And they gimme a gun and pushed me in here. What you doin' anyway?"

"I come here to see Miss Worley," he said. "She'd done left when I went back to the La Belle. I looked around the streets for her, then I decided I'd come out to Tung Yin's and see her."

"And who told you you could come callin' on her?" I snarled.

"Well," he said smugly, "anybody could see that girl had fell for me. As far as that goes, who told you to come chasin' after her?"

"That's entirely different," I growled. "Go ahead with your story."

"Well," he said, "I come and knocked on the door and a Chinaman opened it and I asked for Miss Worley and he slammed the door in my face. That made me mad, so I prowled around and found a gate unlocked in the garden wall and come in, hopin' to find her in the garden. But a gang of tough lookin' coolies spotted me and though I tried to explain my peaceful intentions, they got hard and started wavin' knives around.

"Well, Steve, you know me. I'm a peaceful man but I ain't goin' be tromped on. I got rights, by golly. I hauled off and knocked the biggest one as cold as a wedge. Then I lit out and they run me clean through the garden. Every time I made for the wall, they headed me off, so I run through the courtyard into the house and smack into Tung Yin hisself. I knowed him by sight, you see. He had a golden pipe-case which he was lookin' at like he thought it was a million dollars or somethin'. When he seen me, he quick stuck it in his shirt and give a yelp like he was stabbed.

"I tried to explain, but he started yelling to the coolies in Chinese and they bust in after me. I run through a door ahead of 'em and slammed it in their faces and bolted it, and whilst I was holding it on one side and they was tryin' to kick it down on the other side, up come a Chinagirl which told me in broken English that she'd help me, and she hid me in a closet. Purty soon her and a coolie come and said that Tung Yin was huntin' me in another part of the house, and that they'd help me escape. So they took me to a door and gimme a gun and said if I could get through the room I'd be safe. Then they shoved me in here and bolted the door behind me. The next thing I knowed, bullets was singin' past my ears like a swarm of bees. You sure are a rotten shot, Steve."

"You ain't so blamed hot yourself," I sniffed. "Anyway, it looks to me like we been took plenty, and you sure are lucky to be alive. For some reason or other Tung Yin wanted to get rid of us and he seen a good way to do it without no risk to his own hide, by gyppin' us into bumpin' each other off. Wait, though--looks to me like that mutt Yuen Tang engineered this deal. Maybe Tung Yin didn't know nothin' about it."

"Well, anyway," said Bill, "they's somethin' crooked goin' on here that these Chinese don't want known. They think we're government spies, I betcha."

"Well, let's get outa here," I said.

"I bet they think we're both dead," said Bill. "They told me these walls was sound-proof. I bet they use this for a regular murder room. I been hearin' a lot of dark tales about Tung Yin. I'm surprised a nice girl like Miss Worley would work for him."

"Aw," I said, "we musta misunderstood her. She don't work here. The Chinagirls told me so. He ain't got no nieces. It musta been somebody else."

"Well let's get out and argy later," Bill said. "Come on, let's feel around and find a door."

"Well," I said, "what good'll that do? The doors is bolted, ain't they?"

"Well, my gosh," he said, "can't we bust 'em down? Gee whiz, you'd stop to argy if they was goin' to shoot you."

We felt around and located the walls and we hadn't been groping long before I found what I knowed was bound to be a door. I told Bill and he come feeling his way along the wall. Then I heard something else.

"Easy, Bill," I whispered. "Somebody's unboltin' this door from the other side."

STANDING THERE SILENTLY, we plainly heard the sound of bolts being drawn. Then the door began opening and a crack of light showed. We flattened ourselves on either side of the door and waited, nerves tense and jumping.

Right then my white bulldog, Mike, could 'a' been able to help, if he hadn't been laid up with distemper.

The door opened. A Chinaman stuck his head in, grinning nastily. He had a electric torch in his hand and he was flashing it around over the floor--to locate the corpses, I reckon.

Before he had time to realize they wasn't no corpses, I grabbed him by the neck and jerked him headlong into the room. Bill connected a heavy right swing with his jaw. The Chinee stiffened, out cold. I let him fall careless-like to the floor. He'd dropped the light when Bill socked him. It went out when it hit the floor, but Bill groped around, and found it and flashed it on.

"Let's go," said Bill, so we went into the dark corridor outside and shut the door and bolted it. Bill flashed his light around, for it was dark in the corridor. We went along it and come through a door. Lights was on in that chamber, and in them adjoining it, but everything was still and deserted. We stole very warily through the rooms but we seen nobody, neither coolies, servants nor girls.

The house was kind of disheveled and tumbled about. Some of the hangings and things was gone. Things was kind of jerked around like the people had left all of a sudden, taking part of their belongings with 'em.

"By golly," said Bill. "This here's uncanny. They've moved out and left it with us."

I was opening a door and started to answer, then stopped short. In the room beyond, almost within arm's length, as I seen through the half open door, was Yuen Tang. But he wasn't dressed in servant's clothes no more. He looked like a regular mandarin. He had a golden pipe case in his hands and he was gloating over it like a miser over his gold.

"There's Yuen Tang," I whispered.

"Yuen Tang my pet pig's knuckle," snorted Bill. "That's Tung Yin hisself."

The Chinaman heard us and his head jerked up. His eyes flared and then narrowed wickedly. He stuck the case back in his blouse, quick but fumbling, like anybody does when they're in a desperate hurry to keep somebody from seeing something.

His other hand went inside his waist-sash and come out with a snub-nosed pistol. But before he could use it, me and Bill hit him simultaneous, one on the jaw and one behind the ear. Either punch woulda settled his hash. The both of 'em together dropped him like a pole-axed steer. The gun flew outa his hand and he hit the floor so hard the golden pipe case dropped outa his blouse and fell open on the floor.

"Let's get going before he comes to," said I impatiently, but Bill had stopped and was stooping with his hands on his knees, eying the pipe case covetously.

"Boy, oh boy," he said. "Ain't that some outfit? I betcha it cost three or four hundred bucks. I wisht I was rich. Them Chinee merchant princes sure spread theirselves when it comes to elegance."

I looked into the case which laid open on the floor. They was a small pipe with a slender amber stem and a ivory bowl, finely carved and yellow with age, some extra stems, a small silver box of them funny looking Chinese matches, and a golden rod for cleaning the pipe.

"By golly," said Bill, "I always wanted one of them ivory pipes."

"Hey," I said, "You can't hook Tung Yin's pipe. He ain't a-goin' to like it."

"Aw, it won't be stealin'," said Bill. "I'll leave him mine. 'Course it's made outa bone instead of ivory, but it cost me a dollar'n a half. Wonder you didn't bust it while ago when we was fightin'. I'll change pipes with him and he won't notice it till we're outa his reach."

"Well, hustle, then," I said impatiently. "I don't hold with no such graft, but what can you expect of a mutt from the Dutchman? Hurry up, before Tung Yin comes to and cuts our heads off."

So Bill took the ivory pipe and put his pipe in the case and shut the case up and stuck it back in Tung Yin's blouse. And we hustled. We come out into the courtyard. They wasn't no lanterns hanging there, or if they was they wasn't lighted, but the moon had come up and it was bright as day.

AND WE RAN RIGHT SMACK into Miss Kit Worley. There she was, dressed in flying togs and carrying a helmet in her hand. She gasped when she seen us.

"Good heavens," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"I come here to see you, Miss Worley," I said. "And Tung Yin made out like he was a servant tryin' to save me from his master, and gimme a gun and sent me into a dark room and, meanwhile, Bill had come buttin' in where he hadn't no business and they worked the same gag on him and we purty near kilt each other before we found out who we was."

She nodded, kind of bewildered, and then her eyes gleamed.

"I see," she said. "I see." She stood there twirling her helmet a minute, kind of studying, then she laid her hands on our shoulders and smiled very kindly and said: "Boys, I wish you'd do me a favor. I'm leaving in a few minutes by plane and I have a package that must be delivered. Will you boys deliver it?"

"Sure," we said. So she took out a small square package and said: "Take this to the Red Dragon. You know where that is? Sure you would. Well, go in and give it to the proprietor, Kang Woon. Don't give it to anyone else. And when you hand it to him, say, 'Tung Yin salutes you.' Got that straight?"

"Yeah," said Bill. "But gee whiz, Miss Worley, we can't leave you here to the mercy of them yellow-skinned cut-throats."

"Don't worry." She smiled. "I can handle Tung Yin. Go now, please. And thank you."

Well, she turned and went on in the house. We listened a minute and heard somebody howling and cussing in Chinese, and knowed Tung Yin had come to. We was fixing to go in and rescue Miss Worley, when we heard her talking to him, sharp and hard-like. He quieted down purty quick, so we looked at each other plumb mystified, and went on out in the garden and found the gate Bill come in at and went through it. We hadn't gone but a few yards when Bill says: "Dern it, Steve, I've lost that pipe I took offa Tung Yin."

"Well, gee whiz," I said disgustedly. "You ain't goin' back to look for it."

"I had it just before we come outa the garden," he insisted. So I went back with him, though highly disgusted, and he opened the gate and said: "Yeah, here it is. I musta dropped it as I started through the gate. Got a hole in my pocket."

About that time we seen three figgers in the moonlight crossing the garden--Miss Worley, Tung Yin and a slim, dark young fellow I knowed must be Clanry, the Australian aviator. All of 'em was dressed for flying, though Tung Yin looked like he'd just dragged on his togs recent. He looked kind of disrupted generally. As we looked we seen Miss Worley grab his arm and point and as Tung Yin turned his head, Clanry hit him from behind, hard, with a blackjack. For the second time that night the merchant prince took the count.

Miss Worley bent over him, tore his jacket open and jerked out that same golden pipe case. Then her and Clanry ran for a gate on the opposite side of the garden. They went through, leaving it open in their haste and then we saw 'em running through the moonlight to the plane, which lay amongst the orange groves. They reached it and right away we heard the roar of the propeller. They took off perfect and soared away towards the stars and outa sight.

As we watched, we heard the sound of fast driving autos. They pulled up in front of the place. We heard voices shouting commands in English and Chinese. Then Tung Yin stirred and staggered up, holding his head. From inside the house come the sound of doors being busted open and a general ruckus. Tung Yin felt groggily inside his blouse, then tore his hair, shook his fists at the sky, and run staggeringly across the garden to vanish through the other gate.

"What you reckon this is all about?" wondered Bill. "How come Miss Worley wanted Tung Yin's pipe, you reckon?"

"How should I know?" I replied. "Come on. This ain't any of our business. We got to deliver this package to Kang Woon."

So we faded away. And as we done so a backward look showed men in uniform ransacking the house and estate of Tung Yin.

No 'rickshas being available, we was purty tired when we come to the Red Dragon, in the early hours of morning. It was a low class dive on the waterfront which stayed open all night. Just then, unusual activity was going on. A bunch of natives was buzzing around the entrance and some Chinese police was shoving them back.

"Looks like Kang Woon's been raided," I grunted.

"That's it," said Bill. "Well, I been expectin' it, the dirty rat. I know he sells opium and I got a good suspicion he's a fence, too."

WE WENT UP TO THE DOOR and the Chinese cops wasn't going to let us in. We was about to haul off and sock 'em, when some autos drove up and stopped and a gang of soldiers with a Chinese officer and a English officer got out. They had a battered looking Chinaman with 'em in handcuffs. He was the one me and Bill socked and locked up in the murder room. They all went in and we fell in behind 'em and was in the dive before the cops knowed what we was doing.

It was a raid all right. The place was full of men in the uniform of the Federal army and the Chinese constabulary. Some of 'em--officers, I reckon--was questioning the drunks and beggars they'd found in the place. Over on one side was a cluster of Chinamen in irons, amongst them Kang Woon, looking like a big sullen spider. He was being questioned, but his little beady black eyes glinted dull with murder and he kept his mouth shut.

"There's the mutt which butted in, on our fight," grunted Bill in disgust.

One of the men questioning Kang Woon was Sir Peter Brent; the others was a high rank Chinese officer and a plain clothes official of some sort.

The British officer we'd followed in saluted and said: "I regret to report, Sir Peter, that the birds have flown the bally coop. We found the house deserted and showing signs of a recent and hurried evacuation. We found this Chinaman lying unconscious in an inner chamber which was locked from the outside, but we've gotten nothing out of him. We heard a plane just as we entered the house and I greatly fear that the criminals have escaped by air. Of Tung Yin and the others we found no trace at all, and though we made a careful search of the premises, we did not discover the gem."

"We did not spring the trap quick enough," said Sir Peter. "I should have suspected that they would be warned."

Well, while they was talking, me and Bill went up to Kang Woon and handed him the package. He shrunk back and glared like we was trying to hand him a snake, but we'd been told to give it to him, so we dropped it into his lap and said: "Tung Yin salutes you," just like Miss Worley had told us. The next minute we was grabbed by a horde of cops and soldiers.

"Hey," yelled Bill wrathfully. "What kinda game is this?" And he stood one of 'em on the back of his neck with a beautiful left hook.

I'm a man of few words and quick action. I hit one of 'em in the solar plexus and he curled up like a snake. We was fixing to wade through them deluded heathens like a whirlwind through a cornfield when Sir Peter sprang forward.

"Hold hard a bit, lads," he ordered. "Let those men go."

They fell away from us and me and Bill faced the whole gang belligerently, snorting fire and defiance.

"I know these men." he said. "They're honest American sailors."

"But they gave this to the prisoner," said the Chinese official, holding up the package.

"I know," said Sir Peter. "But if they're mixed up in this affair, I'm certain it's through ignorance rather than intent. They're rather dumb, you know."

Me and Bill was speechless with rage. The official said: "I'm not so sure."

THE OFFICIAL OPENED the package and said: "Ah, just as I suspected. The very case in which the gem was stolen."

He held it up and it was a jewel case with the arms of the old Chinese empire worked on it in gold. Kang Woon glowered at it and his eyes was Hell's fire itself.

"Now look." The official opened it and we all gasped. Inside was a large white gem which sparkled and glittered like ice on fire. The handcuffed Chinaman gave a howl and kind of collapsed.

"The Royal Crystal," cried the official in delight. "The stolen gem itself. Who gave you men this package?"

"None of your blamed business," I growled and Bill snarled agreement.

"Arrest them," exclaimed the official, but Sir Peter interposed again. "Wait." And he said to us: "Now, lads, I believe you're straight, but you'd best come clean, you know."

We didn't say nothing and he said: "Perhaps you don't know the facts of the case. This stone--which is of immense value--was stolen from the governmental museum. We know that it was stolen by a gang of international thieves who have been masquerading as honest merchants and traders. This gang consisted of Tung Yin, Clanry the aviator, a number of lesser crooks who pretended to be in Tung Yin's employ, and a girl called Clever Kit Worley."

"Hey, you," said Bill. "You lay offa Miss Worley."

"Aha," said Sir Peter, "I fancied I'd strike fire there. Now come, lads, didn't Clever Kit give you that stone?"

We still didn't say nothing. About that time the Chinaman the soldiers had brung with them hollered: "I'll tell. I'll tell it all. They've betrayed me and left me to go to prison alone, have they? Curse them all!"

He was kind of hysterical, but talked perfect English--was educated at Oxford, I learned later. Everybody looked at him and he spilled the beans so fast his words tripped over each other: "Tung Yin, Clanry and the Worley woman stole the Royal Crystal. They were equal partners in all the crimes they committed. We--the coolies, the dancing girls and I--were but servants, doing their bidding, getting no share of the loot, but being paid higher salaries than we could have earned honestly. Oh, it was a business proposition, I tell you.

"Tonight we got the tip that the place was to be raided--Tung Yin has plenty of spies. No sooner had we received this information than these sailors came blundering in, hunting Kit Worley, who had charmed them as she has so many men. The woman and Clanry were not in the house. They were preparing the plane for a hurried flight. Tung Yin supposed these men to be spies of the government, so he sent some of his servants to beguile the one, while he donned a disguise of menial garments and befooled the other. We sent them into a dark chamber to slay each other. And, meanwhile, we hurried our plans for escape.

"Clanry, the Worley woman and Tung Yin were planning to escape in the plane, and they promised to take me with them. Tung Yin told the coolies and dancing girls to save themselves as best they could. They scattered, looting the house as they fled. Then Tung Yin told me to look into the death chamber and see if the two foreign devils had killed each other. I did so--and was knocked senseless. What happened then I can only guess, but that Tung Yin, Clanry and Kit Worley escaped in the plane, I am certain, though how these men came to have the gem is more than I can say."

"I believe I can answer that," said Sir Peter. "I happen to know that Kang Woon here has been handling stolen goods for the Tung Yin gang. That's why we raided him tonight at the same time we sent a squad to nab the others at Tung Yin's place. But as you've seen, we were a bit too late. Kang Woon had advanced them quite a bit of money already for the privilege of handling the stone for them--the amount to be added to his commission when the gem was sold. The sale would have made them all rich, even though they found it necessary to cut it up and sell it in smaller pieces. They dared not skip without sending this stone to Kang Woon, for he knew too much. But watch."

He laid the gem on a table and hit it with his pistol butt and smashed it into bits. Everybody gawped. Kang Woon gnashed his teeth with fury.

"A fake, you see," said Sir Peter. "I doubt if any but an expert could have told the difference. I happen to have had quite a bit of experience in that line, don't you know. Yes, Tung Yin and Kit Worley and Clanry planned to double-cross Kang Woon. They sent him this fake, knowing that they would be out of his reach before he learned of the fraud. He's an expert crook, but not a jewel expert, you know. And now I suppose Tung Yin and his pals are safely out of our reach with the Royal Crystal."

WHILE WE WAS LISTENING Bill took out the pipe he'd stole from Tung Yin and began to cram tobaccer in it. He cussed disgustedly.

"Hey, Steve," said he. "What you think? Somebody's gone and crammed a big piece of glass into this pipe bowl." He was trying to work it loose.

"Gimme that pipe," I hollered and jerked it outa his hands. Disregarding his wrathful protests, I opened my knife and pried and gouged at the pipe bowl until the piece of glass rolled into my hand. I held it up and it caught the candle lights with a thousand gleams and glittering sparkles.

"The Royal Crystal," howled the Chinese. And Sir Peter grabbed it.

"By Jove," he exclaimed. "It's the real gem, right enough. Where did you get it?"

"Well," I said, "I'll tell you. Seein' as how Miss Worley is done got away and you can't catch her and put her in jail--and I don't mind tellin' you I'm glad of it, 'cause she mighta been a crook but she was nice to me. I see now why she and Clanry wanted that pipe case. It was a slick place to hide the gem in, but nothin's safe from one of them thieves offa the Dutchman. Tung Yin was goin' to double-cross Kang Woon and Clanry and Miss Worley double-crossed Tung Yin, but I betcha they look funny when they open that golden pipe case and find nothin' in it but Bill's old pipe."

"Aw," said Bill, "I betcha she keeps it to remember me by. I betcha she'll treasure it amongst her dearest soovernears."

Sir Peter kind of tore his hair and moaned: "Will you blighters tell us what it's all about and how you came by that gem?"

"Well," I said, "Tung Yin evidently had the gem in his pipe and Bill stole his pipe. And ... Well, it's a long story."

"Well, I'll be damned," said Sir Peter. "The keenest minds in the secret service fail and a pair of blundering bone-headed sailors succeed without knowing what it's all about."

"Well," said Bill impatiently, "if you mutts are through with me and Steve, we aims for to go forth and seek some excitement. Up to now this here's been about the tiresomest shore leave I've had yet."

THE END

Contents

BREED OF BATTLE

By Robert E. Howard

ME AND MY WHITE BULLDOG Mike was peaceably taking our beer in a joint on the waterfront when Porkey Straus come piling in, plumb puffing with excitement.

"Hey, Steve!" he yelped. "What you think? Joe Ritchie's in port with Terror."

"Well?" I said.

"Well, gee whiz," he said, "you mean to set there and let on like you don't know nothin' about Terror, Ritchie's fightin' brindle bull? Why, he's the pit champeen of the Asiatics. He's killed more fightin' dogs than--"

"Yeah, yeah," I said impatiently. "I know all about him. I been listenin' to what a bear-cat he is for the last year, in every Asiatic port I've touched."

"Well," said Porkey, "I'm afraid we ain't goin' to git to see him perform."

"Why not?" asked Johnnie Blinn, a shifty-eyed bar-keep.

"Well," said Porkey, "they ain't a dog in Singapore to match ag'in' him. Fritz Steinmann, which owns the pit and runs the dog fights, has scoured the port and they just ain't no canine which their owners'll risk ag'in' Terror. Just my luck. The chance of a lifetime to see the fightin'est dog of 'em all perform. And they's no first- class mutt to toss in with him. Say, Steve, why don't you let Mike fight him?"

"Not a chance," I growled. "Mike gets plenty of scrappin' on the streets. Besides, I'll tell you straight, I think dog fightin' for money is a dirty low-down game. Take a couple of fine, upstandin' dogs, full of ginger and fightin' heart, and throw 'em in a concrete pit to tear each other's throats out, just so a bunch of four-flushin' tin-horns like you, which couldn't take a punch or give one either, can make a few lousy dollars bettin' on 'em."

"But they likes to fight," argued Porkey. "It's their nature."

"It's the nature of any red-blooded critter to fight. Man or dog!" I said. "Let 'em fight on the streets, for bones or for fun, or just to see which is the best dog. But pit-fightin' to the death is just too dirty for me to fool with, and I ain't goin' to get Mike into no such mess."

"Aw, let him alone, Porkey," sneered Johnnie Blinn nastily. "He's too chicken-hearted to mix in them rough games. Ain't you, Sailor?"

"Belay that," I roared. "You keep a civil tongue in your head, you wharfside rat. I never did like you nohow, and one more crack like that gets you this." I brandished my huge fist at him and he turned pale and started scrubbing the bar like he was trying for a record.

"I wantcha to know that Mike can lick this Terror mutt," I said, glaring at Porkey. "I'm fed up hearin' fellers braggin' on that brindle murderer. Mike can lick him. He can lick any dog in this lousy port, just like I can lick any man here. If Terror meets Mike on the street and gets fresh, he'll get his belly-full. But Mike ain't goin' to get mixed up in no dirty racket like Fritz Steinmann runs and you can lay to that." I made the last statement in a voice like a irritated bull, and smashed my fist down on the table so hard I splintered the wood, and made the decanters bounce on the bar.

"Sure, sure, Steve," soothed Porkey, pouring hisself a drink with a shaky hand. "No offense. No offense. Well, I gotta be goin'."

"So long," I growled, and Porkey cruised off.

UP STROLLED A MAN WHICH had been standing by the bar. I knowed him--Philip D'Arcy, a man whose name is well known in all parts of the world. He was a tall, slim, athletic fellow, well dressed, with bold gray eyes and a steel-trap jaw. He was one of them gentleman adventurers, as they call 'em, and he'd did everything from running a revolution in South America and flying a war plane in a Balkan brawl, to exploring in the Congo. He was deadly with a six-gun, and as dangerous as a rattler when somebody crossed him.

"That's a fine dog you have, Costigan," he said. "Clean white. Not a speck of any other color about him. That means good luck for his owner."

I knowed that D'Arcy had some pet superstitions of his own, like lots of men which live by their hands and wits like him.

"Well," I said, "anyway, he's about the fightin'est dog you ever seen."

"I can tell that," he said, stooping and eying Mike close. "Powerful jaws--not too undershot--good teeth--broad between the eyes--deep chest--legs that brace like iron. Costigan, I'll give you a hundred dollars for him, just as he stands."

"You mean you want me to sell you Mike?" I asked kinda incredulous.

"Sure. Why not?"

"Why not!" I repeatedly indignantly. "Well, gee whiz, why not ask a man to sell his brother for a hundred dollars? Mike wouldn't stand for it. Anyway, I wouldn't do it."

"I need him," persisted D'Arcy. "A white dog with a dark man--it means luck. White dogs have always been lucky for me. And my luck's been running against me lately. I'll give you a hundred and fifty."

"D'Arcy," I said, "you couldst stand there and offer me money all day long and raise the ante every hand, but it wouldn't be no good. Mike ain't for sale. Him and me has knocked around the world together too long. They ain't no use talkin'."

His eyes flashed for a second. He didn't like to be crossed in any way. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"All right. We'll forget it. I don't blame you for thinking a lot of him. Let's have a drink."

So we did and he left.

I WENT AND GOT ME A shave, because I was matched to fight some tramp at Ace Larnigan's Arena and I wanted to be in shape for the brawl. Well, afterwards I was walking down along the docks when I heard somebody go: "Hssst!"

I looked around and saw a yellow hand beckon me from behind a stack of crates. I sauntered over, wondering what it was all about, and there was a Chinese boy hiding there. He put his finger to his lips. Then quick he handed me a folded piece of paper, and beat it, before I couldst ask him anything.

I opened the paper and it was a note in a woman's handwriting which read:

Dear Steve.

I have admired you for a long time at a distance, but have been too timid to make myself known to you. Would it be too much to ask you to give me an opportunity to tell you my emotions by word of mouth? If you care at all, I will meet you by the old Manchu House on the Tungen Road, just after dark.

An affectionate admirer.

P .S. Please, oh please be there! You have stole my heart away!

"Mike," I said pensively, "ain't it plumb peculiar the strange power I got over wimmen, even them I ain't never seen? Here is a girl I don't even know the name of, even, and she has been eatin' her poor little heart out in solitude because of me. Well--" I hove a gentle sigh--"it's a fatal gift, I'm afeared."

Mike yawned. Sometimes it looks like he ain't got no romance at all about him. I went back to the barber shop and had the barber to put some ile on my hair and douse me with perfume. I always like to look genteel when I meet a feminine admirer.

Then, as the evening was waxing away, as the poets say, I set forth for the narrow winding back street just off the waterfront proper. The natives call it the Tungen Road, for no particular reason as I can see. The lamps there is few and far between and generally dirty and dim. The street's lined on both sides by lousy looking native shops and hovels. You'll come to stretches which looks clean deserted and falling to ruins.

Well, me and Mike was passing through just such a district when I heard sounds of some kind of a fracas in a dark alley-way we was passing. Feet scruffed. They was the sound of a blow and a voice yelled in English: "Halp! Halp! These Chinese is killin' me!"

"Hold everything," I roared, jerking up my sleeves and plunging for the alley, with Mike at my heels. "Steve Costigan is on the job."

It was as dark as a stack of black cats in that alley. Plunging blind, I bumped into somebody and sunk a fist to the wrist in him. He gasped and fell away. I heard Mike roar suddenly and somebody howled bloody murder. Then wham! A blackjack or something like it smashed on my skull and I went to my knees.

"That's done yer, yer blawsted Yank," said a nasty voice in the dark.

"You're a liar," I gasped, coming up blind and groggy but hitting out wild and ferocious. One of my blind licks musta connected because I heard somebody cuss bitterly. And then wham, again come that blackjack on my dome. What little light they was, was behind me, and whoever it was slugging me, couldst see me better'n I could see him. That last smash put me down for the count, and he musta hit me again as I fell.

I COULDN'T OF BEEN OUT but a few minutes. I come to myself lying in the darkness and filth of the alley and I had a most splitting headache and dried blood was clotted on a cut in my scalp. I groped around and found a match in my pocket and struck it.

The alley was empty. The ground was all tore up and they was some blood scattered around, but neither the thugs nor Mike was nowhere to be seen. I run down the alley, but it ended in a blank stone wall. So I come back onto the Tungen Road and looked up and down but seen nobody. I went mad.

"Philip D'Arcy!" I yelled all of a sudden. "He done it. He stole Mike. He writ me that note. Unknown admirer, my eye. I been played for a sucker again. He thinks Mike'll bring him luck. I'll bring him luck, the double-crossin' son-of-a-seacook. I'll sock him so hard he'll bite hisself in the ankle. I'll bust him into so many pieces he'll go through a sieve--"

With these meditations, I was running down the street at full speed, and when I busted into a crowded thoroughfare, folks turned and looked at me in amazement. But I didn't pay no heed. I was steering my course for the European Club, a kind of ritzy place where D'Arcy generally hung out. I was still going at top-speed when I run up the broad stone steps and was stopped by a pompous looking doorman which sniffed scornfully at my appearance, with my clothes torn and dirty from laying in the alley, and my hair all touseled and dried blood on my hair and face.

"Lemme by," I gritted, "I gotta see a mutt."

"Gorblime," said the doorman. "You cawn't go in there. This is a very exclusive club, don't you know. Only gentlemen are allowed here. Cawn't have a blawsted gorilla like you bursting in on the gentlemen. My word! Get along now before I call the police."

There wasn't time to argue.

With a howl of irritation I grabbed him by the neck and heaved him into a nearby goldfish pond. Leaving him floundering and howling, I kicked the door open and rushed in. I dashed through a wide hallway and found myself in a wide room with big French winders. That seemed to be the main club room, because it was very scrumptiously furnished and had all kinds of animal heads on the walls, alongside of crossed swords and rifles in racks.

They was a number of Americans and Europeans setting around drinking whiskey-and-sodas, and playing cards. I seen Philip D'Arcy setting amongst a bunch of his club-members, evidently spinning yards about his adventures. And I seen red.

"D'Arcy!" I yelled, striding toward him regardless of the card tables I upset. "Where's my dog?"

PHILIP D'ARCY SPRANG UP with a kind of gasp and all the club men jumped up too, looking amazed.

"My word!" said a Englishman in a army officer's uniform. "Who let this boundah in? Come, come, my man, you'll have to get out of this."

"You keep your nose clear of this or I'll bend it clean outa shape," I howled, shaking my right mauler under the aforesaid nose. "This ain't none of your business. D'Arcy, what you done with my dog?"

"You're drunk, Costigan," he snapped. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"That's a lie," I screamed, crazy with rage. "You tried to buy Mike and then you had me slugged and him stole. I'm on to you, D'Arcy. You think because you're a big shot and I'm just a common sailorman, you can take what you want. But you ain't gettin' away with it. You got Mike and you're goin' to give him back or I'll tear your guts out. Where is he? Tell me before I choke it outa you."

"Costigan, you're mad," snarled D'Arcy, kind of white. "Do you know whom you're threatening? I've killed men for less than that."

"You stole my dog!" I howled, so wild I hardly knowed what I was doing.

"You're a liar," he rasped. Blind mad, I roared and crashed my right to his jaw before he could move. He went down like a slaughtered ox and laid still, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. I went for him to strangle him with my bare hands, but all the club men closed in between us.

"Grab him," they yelled. "He's killed D'Arcy. He's drunk or crazy. Hold him until we can get the police."

"Belay there," I roared, backing away with both fists cocked. "Lemme see the man that'll grab me. I'll knock his brains down his throat. When that rat comes to, tell him I ain't through with him, not by a dam' sight. I'll get him if it's the last thing I do."

And I stepped through one of them French winders and strode away cursing between my teeth. I walked for some time in a kind of red mist, forgetting all about the fight at Ace's Arena, where I was already due. Then I got a idee. I was fully intending to get ahold of D'Arcy and choke the truth outa him, but they was no use trying that now. I'd catch him outside his club some time that night. Meanwhile, I thought of something else. I went into a saloon and got a big piece of white paper and a pencil, and with much labor, I printed out what I wanted to say. Then I went out and stuck it up on a wooden lamp-post where folks couldst read it. It said:

I WILL PAY ANY MAN FIFTY DOLLARS ($50) THAT CAN FIND MY BULDOG MIKE WHICH WAS STOLE BY A LO-DOWN SCUNK.

STEVE COSTIGAN.

I was standing there reading it to see that the words was spelled right when a loafer said: "Mike stole? Too bad, Sailor. But where you goin' to git the fifty to pay the reward? Everybody knows you ain't got no money."

"That's right," I said. So I wrote down underneath the rest:

P. S. I AM GOING TO GET FIFTY DOLLARS FOR LICKING SOME MUTT AT ACE'S AREENER THAT IS WHERE THE REWARD MONEY IS COMING FROM.

S. C.

I then went morosely along the street wondering where Mike was and if he was being mistreated or anything. I moped into the Arena and found Ace walking the floor and pulling his hair.

"Where you been?" he howled. "You realize you been keepin' the crowd waitin' a hour? Get into them ring togs."

"Let 'em wait," I said sourly, setting down and pulling off my shoes. "Ace, a yellow-livered son-of-a-skunk stole my dog."

"Yeah?" said Ace, pulling out his watch and looking at it. "That's tough, Steve. Hustle up and get into the ring, willya? The crowd's about ready to tear the joint down."

I CLIMBED INTO MY trunks and bathrobe and mosied up the aisle, paying very little attention either to the hisses or cheers which greeted my appearance. I clumb into the ring and looked around for my opponent.

"Where's Grieson?" I asked Ace.

"'E 'asn't showed up yet," said the referee.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" howled Ace, tearing his hair. "These bone-headed leather-pushers will drive me to a early doom. Do they think a pummoter's got nothin' else to do but set around all night and pacify a ragin' mob whilst they play around? These thugs is goin' to lynch us all if we don't start some action right away."

"Here he comes," said the referee as a bath-robed figger come hurrying down the aisle. Ace scowled bitterly and held up his hands to the frothing crowd.

"The long delayed main event," he said sourly. "Over in that corner, Sailor Costigan of the *Sea Girl*, weight l90 pounds. The mutt crawlin' through the ropes is 'Limey' Grieson, weight l89. Get goin'-- and I hope you both get knocked loop-legged."

The referee called us to the center of the ring for instructions and Grieson glared at me, trying to scare me before the scrap started--the conceited jassack. But I had other things on my mind. I merely mechanically noted that he was about my height--six feet--had a nasty sneering mouth and mean black eyes, and had been in a street fight recent. He had a bruise under one ear.

We went back to our corners and I said to the second Ace had give me: "Bonehead, you ain't seen nothin' of nobody with my bulldog, have you?"

"Naw, I ain't," he said, crawling through the ropes. "And beside ... Hey, look out."

I hadn't noticed the gong sounding and Grieson was in my corner before I knowed what was happening. I ducked a slungshot right as I turned and clinched, pushing him outa the corner before I broke. He nailed me with a hard left hook to the head and I retaliated with a left to the body, but it didn't have much enthusiasm behind it. I had something else on my mind and my heart wasn't in the fight. I kept unconsciously glancing over to my corner where Mike always set, and when he wasn't there, I felt kinda lost and sick and empty.

Limey soon seen I wasn't up to par and began forcing the fight, shooting both hands to my head. I blocked and countered very slouchily and the crowd, missing my rip-roaring attack, began to murmur. Limey got too cocky and missed a looping right that had everything he had behind it. He was wide open for a instant and I mechanically ripped a left hook under his heart that made his knees buckle, and he covered up and walked away from me in a hurry, with me following in a sluggish kind of manner.

After that he was careful, not taking many chances. He jabbed me plenty, but kept his right guard high and close in. I ignores left jabs at all times, so though he was outpointing me plenty, he wasn't hurting me none. But he finally let go his right again and started the claret from my nose. That irritated me and I woke up and doubled him over with a left hook to the guts which wowed the crowd. But they yelled with rage and amazement when I failed to foller up. To tell the truth, I was fighting very absent-mindedly.

AS I WALKED BACK TO my corner at the end of the first round, the crowd was growling and muttering restlessly, and the referee said: "Fight, you blasted Yank, or I'll throw you h'out of the ring." That was the first time I ever got a warning like that.

"What's the matter with you, Sailor?" said Bonehead, waving the towel industriously. "I ain't never seen you fight this way before."

"I'm worried about Mike," I said. "Bonehead, where-all does Philip D'Arcy hang out besides the European Club?"

"How should I know?" he said. "Why?"

"I wanta catch him alone some place," I growled. "I betcha--"

"There's the gong, you mutt," yelled Bonehead, pushing me out of my corner. "For cat's cake, get in there and FIGHT. I got five bucks bet on you."

I wandered out into the middle of the ring and absent-mindedly wiped Limey's chin with a right that dropped him on his all-fours. He bounced up without a count, clearly addled, but just as I was fixing to polish him off, I heard a racket at the door.

"Lemme in," somebody was squalling. "I gotta see Meest Costigan. I got one fellow dog belong along him."

"Wait a minute," I growled to Limey, and run over to the ropes, to the astounded fury of the fans, who rose and roared.

"Let him in, Bat," I yelled and the feller at the door hollered back: "Alright, Steve, here he comes."

And a Chinese kid come running up the aisle grinning like all get- out, holding up a scrawny brindle bull-pup.

"Here that one fellow dog, Mees Costigan," he yelled.

"Aw heck," I said. "That ain't Mike. Mike's white. I thought everybody in Singapore knowed Mike--"

At this moment I realized that the still groggy Grieson was harassing me from the rear, so I turned around and give him my full attention for a minute. I had him backed up ag'in' the ropes, bombarding him with lefts and rights to the head and body, when I heard Bat yell: "Here comes another'n, Steve."

"Pardon me a minute," I snapped to the reeling Limey, and run over to the ropes just as a grinning coolie come running up the aisle with a white dog which might of had three or four drops of bulldog blood in him.

"Me catchum, boss," he chortled. "Heap fine white dawg. Me catchum fifty dolla?"

"You catchum a kick in the pants," I roared with irritation. "Blame it all, that ain't Mike."

At this moment Grieson, which had snuck up behind me, banged me behind the ear with a right hander that made me see about a million stars. This infuriated me so I turned and hit him in the belly so hard I bent his back-bone. He curled up like a worm somebody'd stepped on and while the referee was counting over him, the gong ended the round.

They dragged Limey to his corner and started working on him. Bonehead, he said to me: "What kind of a game is this, Sailor? Gee whiz, that mutt can't stand up to you a minute if you was tryin'. You shoulda stopped him in the first round. Hey, lookit there."

I glanced absent-mindedly over at the opposite corner and seen that Limey's seconds had found it necessary to take off his right glove in the process of reviving him. They was fumbling over his bare hand.

"They're up to somethin' crooked," howled Bonehead. "I'm goin' to appeal to the referee."

"HERE COMES SOME MORE mutts, Steve," bawled Bat and down the aisle come a Chinese coolie, a Jap sailor, and a Hindoo, each with a barking dog. The crowd had been seething with bewildered rage, but this seemed to somehow hit 'em in the funny bone and they begunst to whoop and yell and laugh like a passel of hyenas. The referee was roaming around the ring cussing to hisself and Ace was jumping up and down and tearing his hair.

"Is this a prize-fight or a dog-show," he howled. "You've rooint my business. I'll be the laughin' stock of the town. I'll sue you, Costigan."

"Catchum fine dawg, Meest' Costigan," shouted the Chinese, holding up a squirming, yowling mutt which done its best to bite me.

"You deluded heathen," I roared, "that ain't even a bull dog. That's a chow."

"You clazee," he hollered. "Him fine blull dawg."

"Don't listen," said the Jap. "Him bull dog." And he held up one of them pint-sized Boston bull-terriers.

"Not so," squalled the Hindoo. "Here is thee dog for you, sahib. A pure blood Rampur hound. No dog can overtake him in thee race--"

"Ye gods!" I howled. "Is everybody crazy? I oughta knowed these heathens couldn't understand my reward poster, but I thought--"

"Look out, sailor," roared the crowd.

I hadn't heard the gong. Grieson had slipped up on me from behind again, and I turned just in time to get nailed on the jaw by a sweeping right-hander he started from the canvas. Wham! The lights went out and I hit the canvas so hard it jolted some of my senses back into me again.

I knowed, even then, that no ordinary gloved fist had slammed me down that way. Limey's men hadst slipped a iron knuckle-duster on his hand when they had his glove off. The referee sprung forward with a gratified yelp and begun counting over me. I writhed around, trying to get up and kill Limey, but I felt like I was done. My head was swimming, my jaw felt dead, and all the starch was gone outa my legs. They felt like they was made outa taller.

My head reeled. And I could see stars over the horizon of dogs.

"...Four..." said the referee above the yells of the crowd and the despairing howls of Bonehead, who seen his five dollars fading away. "...Five ... Six ... Seven..."

"There," said Limey, stepping back with a leer. "That's done yer, yer blawsted Yank."

Snap! went something in my head. That voice. Them same words. Where'd I heard 'em before? In the black alley offa the Tungen Road. A wave of red fury washed all the grogginess outa me.

I FORGOT ALL ABOUT MY taller legs. I come off the floor with a roar which made the ring lights dance, and lunged at the horrified Limey like a mad bull. He caught me with a straight left coming in, but I didn't even check a instant. His arm bent and I was on top of him and sunk my right mauler so deep into his ribs I felt his heart throb under my fist. He turned green all over and crumbled to the canvas like all his bones hadst turned to butter. The dazed referee started to count, but I ripped off my gloves and pouncing on the gasping warrior, I sunk my iron fingers into his throat.

"Where's Mike, you gutter rat?" I roared. "What'd you do with him? Tell me, or I'll tear your windpipe out."

"'Ere, 'ere," squawked the referee. "You cawn't do that. Let go of him, I say. Let go, you fiend."

He got me by the shoulders and tried to pull me off. Then, seeing I wasn't even noticing his efforts, he started kicking me in the ribs. With a wrathful beller, I rose up and caught him by the nape of the neck and the seat of the britches and throwed him clean through the ropes. Then I turned back on Limey.

"You Limehouse spawn," I bellered. "I'll choke the life outa you."

"Easy, mate, easy," he gasped, green-tinted and sick. "I'll tell yer. We stole the mutt? Fritz Steinmann wanted him--"

"Steinmann?" I howled in amazement.

"He warnted a dorg to fight Ritchie's Terror," gasped Limey. "Johnnie Blinn suggested he should 'ook your Mike. Johnnie hired me and some strong-arms to turn the trick--Johnnie's gel wrote you that note--but how'd you know I was into it--"

"I oughta thought about Blinn," I raged. "The dirty rat. He heard me and Porkey talkin' and got the idee. Where is Blinn?"

"Somewheres gettin' sewed up," gasped Grieson. "The dorg like to tore him to ribbons afore we could get the brute into the bamboo cage we had fixed."

"Where is Mike?" I roared, shaking him till his teeth rattled.

"At Steinmann's, fightin' Terror," groaned Limey. "Ow, lor'--I'm sick. I'm dyin'."

I riz up with a maddened beller and made for my corner. The referee rose up outa the tangle of busted seats and cussing fans and shook his fist at me with fire in his eye.

"Steve Costigan," he yelled. "You lose the blawsted fight on a foul."

"So's your old man," I roared, grabbing my bathrobe from the limp and gibbering Bonehead. And just at that instant a regular bedlam bust loose at the ticket-door and Bat come down the aisle like the devil was chasing him. And in behind him come a mob of natives--coolies, 'ricksha boys, beggars, shopkeepers, boatmen and I don't know what all--and every one of 'em had at least one dog and some had as many as three or four. Such a horde of chows, Pekineses, terriers, hounds and mongrels I never seen and they was all barking and howling and fighting.

"Meest' Costigan," the heathens howled, charging down the aisles: "You payum flifty dolla for dogs. We catchum."

The crowd rose and stampeded, trompling each other in their flight and I jumped outa the ring and raced down the aisle to the back exit with the whole mob about a jump behind me. I slammed the door in their faces and rushed out onto the sidewalk, where the passers-by screeched and scattered at the sight of what I reckon they thought was a huge and much battered maniac running at large in a red bathrobe. I paid no heed to 'em.

Somebody yelled at me in a familiar voice, but I rushed out into the street and made a flying leap onto the running board of a passing taxi. I ripped the door open and yelled to the horrified driver: "Fritz Steinmann's place on Kang Street--and if you ain't there within three minutes I'll break your neck."

WE WENT CAREENING through the streets and purty soon the driver said: "Say, are you an escaped criminal? There's a car followin' us."

"You drive," I yelled. "I don't care if they's a thousand cars follerin' us. Likely it's a Chinaman with a pink Pomeranian he wants to sell me for a white bull dog."

The driver stepped on it and when we pulled up in front of the innocent-looking building which was Steinmann's secret arena, we'd left the mysterious pursuer clean outa sight. I jumped out and raced down a short flight of stairs which led from the street down to a side entrance, clearing my decks for action by shedding my bathrobe as I went. The door was shut and a burly black-jowled thug was lounging outside. His eyes narrowed with surprise as he noted my costume, but he bulged in front of me and growled: "Wait a minute, you. Where do you think you're goin'?"

"In!" I gritted, ripping a terrible right to his unshaven jaw.

Over his prostrate carcass I launched myself bodily against the door, being in too much of a hurry to stop and see if it was unlocked. It crashed in and through its ruins I catapulted into the room.

It was a big basement. A crowd of men--the scrapings of the waterfront--was ganged about a deep pit sunk in the concrete floor from which come a low, terrible, worrying sound like dogs growling through a mask of torn flesh and bloody hair--like fighting dogs growl when they have their fangs sunk deep.

The fat Dutchman which owned the dive was just inside the door and he whirled and went white as I crashed through. He threw up his hands and screamed, just as I caught him with a clout that smashed his nose and knocked six front teeth down his throat. Somebody yelled: "Look out, boys! Here comes Costigan! He's on the kill!"

The crowd yelled and scattered like chaff before a high wind as I come ploughing through 'em like a typhoon, slugging right and left and dropping a man at each blow. I was so crazy mad I didn't care if I killed all of 'em. In a instant the brink of the pit was deserted as the crowd stormed through the exits, and I jumped down into the pit. Two dogs was there, a white one and a big brindle one, though they was both so bloody you couldn't hardly tell their original color. Both had been savagely punished, but Mike's jaws had locked in the death-hold on Terror's throat and the brindle dog's eyes was glazing.

Joe Ritchie was down on his knees working hard over them and his face was the color of paste. They's only two ways you can break a bull dog's death-grip; one is by deluging him with water till he's half drowned and opens his mouth to breathe. The other'n is by choking him off. Ritchie was trying that, but Mike had such a bull's neck, Joe was only hurting his fingers.

"For gosh sake, Costigan," he gasped. "Get this white devil off. He's killin' Terror."

"Sure I will," I grunted, stooping over the dogs. "Not for your sake, but for the sake of a good game dog." And I slapped Mike on the back and said: "Belay there, Mike; haul in your grapplin' irons."

Mike let go and grinned up at me with his bloody mouth, wagging his stump of a tail like all get-out and pricking up one ear. Terror had clawed the other'n to rags. Ritchie picked up the brindle bull and clumb outa the pit and I follered him with Mike.

"You take that dog to where he can get medical attention and you do it pronto," I growled. "He's a better man than you, any day in the week, and more fittin' to live. Get outa my sight."

He slunk off and Steinmann come to on the floor and seen me and crawled to the door on his all-fours before he dast to get up and run, bleeding like a stuck hawg. I was looking over Mike's cuts and gashes, when I realized that a man was standing nearby, watching me.

I wheeled. It was Philip D'Arcy, with a blue bruise on his jaw where I'd socked him, and his right hand inside his coat.

"D'ARCY," I SAID, WALKING up to him. "I reckon I done made a mess of things. I just ain't got no sense when I lose my temper, and I honestly thought you'd stole Mike. I ain't much on fancy words and apologizin' won't do no good. But I always try to do what seems right in my blunderin' blame-fool way, and if you wanta, you can knock my head off and I won't raise a hand ag'in' you." And I stuck out my jaw for him to sock.

He took his hand outa his coat and in it was a cocked six-shooter.

"Costigan," he said, "no man ever struck me before and got away with it. I came to Larnigan's Arena tonight to kill you. I was waiting for you outside and when I saw you run out of the place and jump into a taxi, I followed you to do the job wherever I caught up with you. But I like you. You're a square-shooter. And a man who thinks as much of his dog as you do is my idea of the right sort. I'm putting this gun back where it belongs--and I'm willing to shake hands and call it quits, if you are."

"More'n willin'," I said heartily. "You're a real gent." And we shook. Then all at once he started laughing.

"I saw your poster," he said. "When I passed by, an Indian babu was translating it to a crowd of natives and he was certainly making a weird mess of it. The best he got out of it was that Steve Costigan was buying dogs at fifty dollars apiece. You'll be hounded by canine- peddlers as long as you're in port."

"The *Sea Girl*'s due tomorrer, thank gosh," I replied. "But right now I got to sew up some cuts on Mike."

"My car's outside," said D'Arcy. "Let's take him up to my rooms. I've had quite a bit of practice at such things and we'll fix him up ship-shape."

"It's a dirty deal he's had," I growled. "And when I catch Johnnie Blinn I'm goin' kick his ears off. But," I added, swelling out my chest seven or eight inches, "I don't reckon I'll have to lick no more saps for sayin' that Ritchie's Terror is the champeen of all fightin' dogs in the Asiatics. Mike and me is the fightin'est pair of scrappers in the world."

THE END

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CHAMP OF THE FORECASTLE

By Robert E. Howard

I DON'T HAVE to have a man tell me he craves war. I can tell it by the set of his jaw, the glare in his eyes. So, when Sven Larson raised his huge frame on his bunk and accused me of swiping his tobaccer, I knowed very well what his idee was. But I didn't want to fight Sven. Havin' licked the big cheese three or four times already, I seen no need in mauling him any more. So somewhat to the surprise of the rest of the crew, I said:

"Sven, that's purty crude. You didn't need to think up no lie to pick a fight with me. I know you crave to be champion of the *Sea Girl*, but they ain't a chance, and I don't want to hurt you--"

I got no further, because with a bull's beller he heaved hisself offa his bunk and come for me like a wild man. Gosh, what a familiar scene that was--the fierce, hard faces ringing us, the rough bunks along the wall, the dim light of the lantern swinging overhead, and me standing in the middle, barefooted and stripped to the waist, holding my only title against all comers! They ain't a inch of that forecastle floor that I ain't reddened with my blood. They ain't a edge of a upper bunk that I ain't had my head smashed against. And since I been a man grown they ain't a sailor on the Seven Seas that can say he stood up to me in that forecastle and beat me down.

The lurching of the ship and the unsteady footing don't bother me none, nor the close space and foul, smoke-laden air. That's my element, and if I couldst fight in the ring like I can in the forecastle, with nothing barred, I'd be champion of something besides a tramp wind-jammer.

Well, Sven come at me with his old style--straight up, wide open, with a wild swinging right. I ducked inside it and smashed my left under his heart, following instantly with a blasting right hook to the jaw as he sagged. He started falling and a lurch of the ship throwed him half under a opposite bunk. They's no mercy ast, give or expected in a forecastle fight; it's always to the finish. I was right after him, and no sooner hadst he got to his feet than I smashed him down again before he could get his hands up.

"Let's call it a day, Sven," I growled. "I don't want to punch you no more."

But he come weaving up, spitting blood and roaring in his own tongue. He tried to clinch and gouge, but another right hook to the jaw sent him down and out. I shook the sweat outa my eyes and glared down at him in some irritation, which was mixed with the satisfaction of knowing that again I hadst proved my right to the title of champion of the toughest ship afloat. Maybe you think that's a mighty small thing, but it's the only title I got and I'm proud of it.

But I couldn't get onto Sven. Me and him was good friends ordinarily, but ever so often he'd get the idee he couldst lick me. So the next day I looked him up between watches and found him sulking and brooding. I looked over his enormous frame and shook my head in wonder to think that I hadst gotten no further in the legitimate ring than I have, when I can lay out such incredible monsters as Sven so easy.

Six feet four he was in his socks, and his two hundred and forty-five pounds was all muscle. I can bend coins between my fingers, tear up decks of cards and twist horseshoes in two, but Sven's so much stronger'n me they's no comparison. But size and strength ain't everything.

"Sven," said I, "how come you forever got to be fightin' me?"

Well, at first he wouldn't say, but at last it come out.

"AYE BANE GOT girl at Stockholm. She bane like me purty good, but they bane another faller. His name bane Olaf Ericson and he own fishing smack. Always when Aye go out with my girl, he bane yump on me and he always lick me. Aye tank if Aye ever lick you, Aye can lick Olaf."

"So you practice on me, hey?" I said. "Well, Sven, you never will lick me nor Olaf nor any man which can use his hands unless you change your style. Oh, uh course, you're a bear-cat when it comes to fightin' ignorant dock-wallopers and deck-hands which never seen a glove and can't do nothin' but bite and gouge. But you see what happens when you get up against a real fightin' man. Sven," said I on a sudden impulse, like I usually do, "far be it from me to see a deep water seaman get beat up regular by a Baltic fish-grabber. It's a reflection on the profession and on the ship. Sven," said I, "I'm goin' to train you to lick this big cheese."

Well, I hadn't never give much thought to Sven before, only in a general way--you can't pay close attention to every square-head which comes and goes aboard a trading ship--but in the weeks which followed I done my best to make a fighting man of him. I rigged up a punching bag for him and sparred with him between watches. When him or me wasn't doing our trick at the wheel or holystoning the deck, or scraping the cable or hauling on a rope, or trimming sail or exchanging insults with the mates, I tried to teach him all I knowed.

Understand, I didn't try to make no boxing wizard outa him. The big slob couldn't of learned even if I could of taught him. And I didn't know how myself. I ain't a clever boxer. I'm a rough and willing mixer in the ring, but compared to such rough-house scrappers as Sven, I'm a wonder. The simple ducking, slipping and blocking, which even the crudest slugger does in the ring, is beyond the ken of the average untrained man, and as for scientific hitting, they never heard of it. They just draw back the right and let it go without any aim, timing nor nothing. Well, I just taught Sven the fundamentals--to stand with his left foot forward and not get his legs crossed, to lead with his left and to time and aim a little. I got him outa the habit of swinging wild and wide open with his right all the time, and by constant drilling I taught him the knack of hooking and hitting straight. I also give him a lot of training to harden his body muscles, which was his weak spot.

Well, the big Swede took to it like a duck takes to water, and after I'd explained each simple move upwards of a thousand times, he'd understand it and apply it and he wouldn't forget. Like lots of square-heads, he was slow to learn, but once he had learned, he remembered what he'd learned. And his great size and strength was a big asset.

Bill O'Brien says, "Steve, you're trainin' the big sap to take your title away from you." But I merely laughed with great merriment at the idee.

Sven had a wallop like a mule's kick in either hand, and when he learned to use it, he was dangerous to any man. He was pretty tough, too, or got so before I got through with him. He wasn't very fast, and I taught him a kind of deep defensive crouch like Jeffries used. He took to it natural and developed a surprising left for the body.

After six months of hard work on him, I felt sure that he could lick the average alley-fighter easy. And about this time we was cruising Baltic waters and headed for Stockholm.

As we approached his native heath, Sven grew impatient and restless. He had a lot more self-confidence now and he craved another chance at Olaf, the demon rival. Sven wasn't just a big unwieldy slob no more. Constant sparring with me and Bill O'Brien had taught him how to handle hisself and how to use his bulk and strength. A few days outa Stockholm he had a row with Mushy Hansen, which was two hundred pounds of fighting man, and he knocked the Dane so cold it took us a hour and a half to bring him to.

Well, that cheered Sven up considerable and when we docked, he said to me: "Aye go see Segrida, my girl, and find out if Olaf bane in port. He bane hang out at dey Fisherman's Tavern. Aye go past with Segrida and he come out and yump on me, like usual. Only diss time Aye bane lick him."

Well, at the appointed time me and Bill and Mushy was loafing around the Fisherman's Tavern, a kind of bar where a lot of tough Swedish fishermen hung out, and pretty soon, along come Sven.

He had his girl with him, all right, a fine, big blonde girl--one of these tall, slender yet well-built girls which is overflowing with health and vitality. She was so pretty I was plumb astounded as to what she seen in a big boob like Sven. But women is that way. They fall for the dubs and pass up the real prizes--like me, for instance.

Segrida looked kind of worried just now and as they neared the Tavern, she cast a apprehensive eye that way. Well, they was abreast of the door when a kind of irritated roar sounded from within and out bulged what could of been nobody but Olaf the Menace, hisself, in person.

THERE WAS A man for you! He was fully as tall as Sven, though not as heavy. Tall, lithe and powerful he was, like a big, blond tiger. He was so handsome I couldst easily see why Segrida hesitated between him and Sven--or rather I couldn't see why she hesitated at all! Olaf looked like one of these here Vikings you read about which rampaged around in old times, licking everybody. But he had a hard, cruel eye, which I reckon goes with that kind of nature.

He had some fellers with him, but they stayed back in the doorway while he swaggered out and stopped square in front of Sven. He had a most contemptuous sneer and he said something which of course I couldn't understand, but as Mushy later translated the conversation to me, I'll give it like Mushy told to me and Bill.

"Well, well," said Olaf, "looking for another licking, eh? Your deep sea boy friend is back in port looking for his usual trouncing, eh, Segrida?"

"Olaf, please," said Segrida, frightened. "Don't fight, please!"

"I warned you what would happen to him," said Olaf, "if you went out with him--"

At this moment Sven, who had said nothing, shocked his bold rival by growling: "Too much talk; put up your hands!"

Olaf, though surprised, immediately done so, and cut Sven's lip with a flashing straight left before the big boy couldst get in position. Segrida screamed but no cops was in sight and the battle was on.

Olaf had learned boxing some place, and was one of the fastest men for his size I ever seen. For the first few seconds he plastered Sven plenty, but from the way the big fellow hunched his shoulders and surged in, I hadst no doubt about the outcome.

Sven dropped into the deep, defensive crouch I'd taught him, and I seen Olaf was puzzled. He hisself fought in the straight-up English sparring position and this was the first time he'd ever met a man who fought American style, I could see. With Sven's crouch protecting his body and his big right arm curved around his jaw, all Olaf couldst see to hit was his eyes glaring over the arm.

He battered away futilely at Sven's hard head, doing no damage whatever, and then Sven waded in and drove his ponderous left to the wrist in Olaf's midriff. Olaf gasped, went white, swayed and shook like a leaf. He sure couldn't take it there and I yelled for Sven to hit him again in the same place, but the big dumb-bell tried a heavy swing for the jaw, half straightening out of his crouch as he swung and Olaf ducked and staggered him with a sizzling right to the ear. Sven immediately went back into his shell and planted another battering-ram left under Olaf's heart.

Olaf broke ground gasping and his knees trembling, but Sven kept right on top of him in his plodding sort of way. Olaf jarred him with a dying-effort swing to the jaw, but them months of punching hadst toughened Sven and the big fellow shook his head and leaned on a right to the ribs.

That finished Olaf; his knees give way and he started falling, grabbing feebly at Sven as he done so. But Sven, with one of the few laughs I ever heard him give, pushed him away and crashed a tremendous right-hander to his jaw. Olaf straightened out on the board-walk and he didn't even quiver.

A LOW RUMBLE of fury warned us and we turned to see Olaf's amazed but wrathful cronies surging towards the victor. But me and Bill and Mushy and Mike kind of drifted in between and at the sight of three hard-eyed American seamen and a harder-eyed Irish bulldog, they stopped short and signified their intention of merely taking Olaf into the Tavern and bringing him to.

At this Sven, grinning placidly and turning to Segrida with open arms, got the shock of his life. Instead of falling on to his manly bosom, Segrida, who hadst stood there like she was froze, woke up all at once and bust into a perfect torrent of speech. I would of give a lot to understand it. Sven stood gaping with his mouth wide open and even the rescue party which had picked up Olaf, stood listening. Then with one grand burst of oratory, she handed Sven a full-armed, open-handed slap that cracked like a bull-whip, and busting into tears, she run forward to help with Olaf. They vanished inside the Tavern.

"What'd she say? What's the idee?" I asked, burnt up with curiosity.

"She say she bane through with me," Sven answered dazedly. "She say Aye bane a brute. She say she ain't bane want to see me no more."

"Well, keel-haul me," said I profanely. "Can ya beat that? First she wouldn't choose Sven because he got licked by Olaf all the time; now she won't have him because he licked Olaf. Women are all crazy."

"Never mind, old timer," said Bill, slapping the dejected Sven on the back. "Anyway, you licked Olaf to a fare-you-well. Come along, and we'll buy you a drink."

But Sven just shook his head sullen-like and moped off by hisself; so after arguing with him unsuccessfully, me and Bill and Mushy betook ourselves to a place where we couldst get some real whiskey and not the stuff they make in them Scandinavian countries. The barkeep kicked at first because I give my white bulldog, Mike, a pan-full of beer on the floor, but we overcome that objection and fell to talking about Sven.

"I don't savvy dames," I said. "If she gives Sven the bounce for beatin' up Olaf, whyn't she give Olaf the bounce long ago for beatin' up Sven so much?"

"It's Olaf she really loves," said Mushy.

"Maybe," said Bill. "And maybe he's just persistent. But women is kind-hearted. They pities a poor boob which has just got punched in the nose, and as long as Sven was gettin' licked all the time, he got all her pity. But now her pity and affections is transferred to Olaf, naturally."

Well, we didn't see no more of Sven till kind of late that night, when in come one of our square-head ship-mates named Fritz to the bar where me and Bill and Mushy was, and said he: "Steve, Sven he say maybeso you bane come down to a place on Hjolmer Street; he bane got something to show you."

"Now what could that Swede want now?" said Bill testily, but I said, "Oh well, we got nothin' else to do." So we went to Hjolmer Street, a kind of narrow street just out of the waterfront section. It wasn't no particularly genteel place--kind of dirty and dingy for a Swedish street, with little crumby shops along the way, all closed up and deserted that time of night. The square-head, Fritz, led us to a place which was lighted up, though the shutters was closed. He knocked on the door and a short fat Swede opened it and closed it behind us.

To my surprise I seen the place was a kind of third-rate gymnasium. They was a decrepit punching bag, a horizontal bar and a lot of bar-bells, dumb-bells, kettle bells--in fact, all the lifting weights you couldst imagine. They was also a rastling mat and, in the middle of the floor, a canvas covered space about the size of a small ring. And in the middle of this stood Sven, in fighting togs and with his hands taped.

"Who you goin' to fight, Sven?" I asked curiously.

He scowled slightly, flexed his mighty arms kind of embarrassed-like, swelled out his barrel chest and said: "You!"

You could of bowled me over with a jib boom.

"Me?" I said in amazement. "What kind of joke is this?"

"It bane no yoke," he answered stolidly. "Mine friend Knut bane own diss gym and teach rastlin' and weight liftin'. He bane let us fight here."

Knut, a stocky Swede with the massive arms and pot belly of a retired weight lifter, give me a kind of apologetic look, but I glared at him.

"But what you want to fight me for?" I snarled in perplexity. "Ain't I taught you all you know? Didn't I teach you to lick Olaf? You ungrateful--"

"Aye ain't got no grudge for you, Steve," the big cheese answered placidly. "But Aye tank Aye like be champion of dass *Sea Girl.* Aye got to lick you to be it, ain't it? Sure!"

Bill and Mushy was looking at me expectantly, but I was all at sea. After you've worked six months teaching a man your trade and built him up and made something outa him, you don't want to undo it all by rocking him to sleep.

"Why're you so set on bein' champ of the *Sea Girl*?" I asked irritably.

"Well," said the overgrown heathen, "Aye tank Aye lick you and then Aye can lick Olaf, and Segrida she like me. But Aye lick Olaf, and Segrida she give me dass gate. Dass bane your fault, for teach me to lick Olaf. But Aye ain't blame you. Aye like you fine, Steve, but now Aye tank Aye be champ of dass *Sea Girl.* Aye ain't got no girl no more, so Aye got to be something. Aye lick Olaf so Aye can lick you. Aye lick you and be champ and we be good friends, ya?"

"But I don't want to fight you, you big mutton-head!" I snarled in wrathful perplexity.

"Then Aye fight you on the street or the fo'c's'le or wherever Aye meet you," he said cheerfully.

At that my small stock of temper was plumb exhausted. With a blood thirsty howl I ripped off my shirt. "Bring on the gloves, you square-headed ape!" I roared. "If I got to batter some sense into your solid ivory skull I might as well start now!"

A FEW MINUTES later I was clad in a dingy pair of trunks which Knut dragged out of somewhere for me, and we was donning the gloves a set lighter than the standard weight, which Knut hadst probably got as a present from John L. Sullivan or somebody.

We agreed on Bill as referee, but Sven being afraid of Mike, made me agree to have Mushy hold him, though I assured him Mike wouldn't interfere in a glove fight. They was no ropes around the canvas space, no stools nor gong. However, as it happened, they wasn't needed.

As we advanced toward each other I realized more'n ever how much of a man Sven was. Six feet four--245 pounds--all bone and muscle. He towered over me like a giant, and I musta looked kinda small beside him, though I'm six feet tall and weigh 190 pounds. Under his white skin the great muscles rolled and billowed like flexible iron, and his chest looked more like a gorilla's than a human's.

But size ain't everything. Old Fitz used to flatten men which outweighed him over a hundred pounds, and lookit what Dempsey and Sharkey used to do to such like giants--and I'm as tough as Sharkey and can hit as hard as either of them other palookas, even if I ain't quite as accurate or scientific.

No, I hadst no worries about Sven, but I'd got over being mad at him and I seen his point of view. Sven wasn't sore at me, nor nothing. He just wanted to be champ of his ship, which was a natural wish. Since his girl give him the air, he wanted to more'n ever to kind of soothe his wounded vanity, as they say.

No, I cooled down and kind of sympathized with Sven's point of view which is a bad state of mind to enter into any kind of a scrap. They ain't nothing more helpful than a good righteous anger and a feeling like the other bird is a complete rascal and absolutely in the wrong.

As we come together, Sven said: "No rounds, Steve; we fight to dass finish, yes?"

"All right," I said with very little enthusiasm. "But, Sven, for the last time--have you just got to fight me?"

His reply was a left which he shot for my jaw so sudden like I just barely managed to slip it. I come back with a slashing right which he blocked, clumsy but effective. He then dropped into the deep crouch I'd taught him and rammed his left for my wind. But I knowed the counter to that, having seen pictures of the second Fitzsimmons-Jeffries riot. I stepped around and inside his ramming left, slapping a left uppercut inside the crook of his right arm, to his jaw, cracking his teeth together and rocking his head up and back for a right hook which I opened a gash on his temple with.

He give a deafening roar and immediately abandoned his defensive posture and come for me like a mad bull. I figured, here's where I end this scrap quick, like always. But in half a second I seen my error.

Sven didn't rush wide open, flailing wild, like he used to. He come plunging in, bunched in a compact bulk of iron muscles and fighting fury; he hooked and hit straight, and he kept his chin clamped down on his hairy chest and his shoulders hunched to guard it, half crouching to protect his body. Even the rudiments of boxing science he'd learned, coupled with his enormous size and strength made him plenty formidable to any man.

I don't know how to tin-can and back pedal. If Jeffries hisself was to rush me, all I'd know to do wouldst be to stand up to him and trade punches until I went out cold. I met Sven with a right smash that was high, but stopped him in his tracks. Blood spattered and he swayed like a big tree about to crash, but before I could follow up, he plunged in again, hitting with both hands. He hit and he hit--and--he--hit!

He throwed both hands as fast as he could drive one after the other and every blow had all his weight behind it. Outa the depths of his fighting fit he'd conjured up amazing speed. It happens some time. I never seen a man his size hit that fast before or since. It was just like being in a rain of sledge-hammers that never quit coming. All I couldst see was his glaring eyes, his big shoulders hunched and rocking as he hit--and a perfect whirlwind of big glove-covered clubs.

He wasn't timing or aiming much--hitting too fast for that. But even when he landed glancing-like, he shook me, with that advantage of fifty-five pounds. And he landed solid too often to suit me.

Try as I would, I couldn't get in a solid smash under the heart, or on the jaw. He kept his head down, and my vicious uppercuts merely glanced off his face, too high to do much good. Black and blue bruises showed on his ribs and shoulders, but his awkward half crouch kept his vitals protected.

It's mighty hard to hammer a giant like him out of position--especially when you're trying to keep him from tearing off your head at the same time. I bored in close, letting Sven's blows go around my neck while I blasted away with both hands. No--they was little science used on either side. It was mostly a wild exchange of sledge-hammer wallops.

In one of our rare clinches, Sven lifted me off my feet and throwed me the full width of the room where I hit the wall--wham!--like I was going on through. This made Bill, as referee, very mad at Sven and he cussed him and kicked him heartily in the pants, but the big cheese never paid no attention.

I WAS LANDING the most blows and they rocked Sven from stem to stern, but they wasn't vital ones. Already his face was beef. One eye was closed, his lips were pulped and his nose was bleeding; his left side was raw, but, if anything, he seemed to be getting stronger. My training hadst toughened him a lot more than I'd realized!

Blim! A glancing slam on my jaw made me see plenty of stars. Wham! His right met the side of my head and I shot back half-way across the room to crash into the wall. Long ago we'd got off the canvas; we was fighting all over the joint.

Sven was after me like a mad bull, and I braced myself and stopped him in his tracks with a left hook that ripped his ear loose and made his knees sag for a second. But the Swede had worked hisself into one of them berserk rages where you got to mighty near kill a man to stop him. His right, curving up from his hip, banged solid on my temple and I thought for a second my skull was caved in like an egg-shell.

Blood gushed down my neck when he drawed his glove back, and, desperate, I hooked my right to his body with everything I had behind it. I reckon that was when I cracked his rib, because I heard something snap and he kind of grunted.

Both of us was terrible looking by this time and kind of in a dream like, I saw Knut wringing his hands and begging Bill and Mushy and Fritz to stop it--I reckon he'd never saw a real glove battle before and it was so different from lifting weights! Naturally, they, who was clean goggle-eyed and yelling theirselves deaf and dumb, paid no attention to him at all, and so in a second Knut turned and run out into the street like he was going for the cops.

But I paid no heed. For the first time in many a day I was fighting with my back to the wall against one of my own crew. Sven was inhuman--it was like fighting a bull or an elephant. He was landing solid now, and even if them blows was clumsy, with 245 pounds of crazy Swede behind them, they was like the blows of a pile-driver.

He knowed only one kind of footwork--going forward. And he kept plunging and hitting, plunging and hitting till the world was blind and red. I shook my head and the blood flew like spray. The sheer weight of his plunges hurtled me back in spite of myself.

Once more I tried to rock his head up for a solid shot to the jaw. My left uppercut split his lips and rattled his teeth, but his bowed neck was like iron. In desperation I banged him square on the side of the head where his skull was hardest.

Blood spurted like I'd hit him with a hand spike, and he swayed drunkenly--then he dropped into a deep crouch and shot his left to my midriff with all his weight behind it. Judas! It was so unexpected I couldn't get away from it. I was standing nearly upright and that huge fist sank into my solar-plexus till I felt it banged against my spine. I dropped like a sack and writhed on the floor like a snake with a busted back, fighting for air. Bill said later I was purple in the face.

Like I was looking through a thick fog, I seen Bill, dazed and white-faced, counting over me. I dunno how I got up again. I was sick--I thought I was dying. But Sven was standing right over me, and looking up at him, a lot of thoughts surged through my numbed and battered brain in a kind of flash.

The new champion of the *Sea Girl*, I thought, after all these years I've held my title against all comers. After all the men I've fought and licked to hold the only title I got. All the cruel punishment I've took, all the blood I've spilt, now I lose my only title to this square-head that I've licked half a dozen times. Like a dream it all come back--the dim-lighted, smelly, dingy forecastle, the yelling, cursing seamen--and me in the middle of it all--the bully of the forecastle. And now--never no more to defend my title--never to hear folks along the docks say: "That's Steve Costigan, champ of the toughest ship afloat!"

WITH A KIND of gasping sob, I grabbed Sven's legs and climbed up, up, till I was on my feet, leaning against him chest to chest, till he shook me off and smashed me down like he was driving a nail into the floor. I reeled up just as Bill began to count, and this time I ducked Sven's swing and clinched him with a grip even he couldn't break.

And as I held on and drew in air in great racking gasps, I looked over his straining shoulder and seen Knut come rushing in through the door with a white-faced girl behind him--Segrida. But I was too near out to even realize that Sven's ex-girl was there.

Sven pushed me away finally and dropped me once more with a punch that was more a push than anything else. This time I took the count of nine, resting, as my incredible vitality, the wonder of manys the sporting scribe, began to assert itself.

I rose suddenly and beat Sven to the punch with a wild right that smashed his nose. Like most sluggers, I never lose my punch, no matter how badly beaten I am. I'm dangerous right to the last second, as better men than Sven Larson has found out.

Sven wasn't going so strong hisself as he had been. He moved stiff and mechanical and swung his arms awkwardly, like they was dead. He walked in stolidly and smashed a club-like right to my face. Blood spattered and I went back on my heels, but surged in and ripped my right under the heart, landing square there for the first time.

Another right smashed full on Sven's already battered mouth, and, spitting out the fragments of a tooth, he crashed a flailing left to my body, which I distinctly felt bend my ribs to the breaking point.

I ripped a left to his temple, and he flattened my ear with a swinging right, rocking drunkenly like a tall ship in the Trades with all sails set. Another right glanced offa the top of my head as I ducked and for the first time I seen his unguarded jaw as he loomed above me where I crouched.

I straightened, crashing my right from the hip, with every ounce of my weight behind it, and all the drive they was in leg, waist, shoulder and arm. I landed solid on the button with a jolt that burst my glove and numbed my whole arm--I heard a scream--I seen Sven's eyes go blank--I seen him sway like a falling mast--I seen him pitching forward--bang! The lights went out.

I WAS PROPPED up in a chair and Bill was sloshing me with water. I looked around at the dingy gym; then I remember. A queer, sad, cold feeling come over me. I felt old and worn out. After all, I wasn't a boy no more. All the hard, bitter years of fighting the sea and fighting men come over me and settled like a cold cloud on my shoulders. All the life kind of went out of me.

"Believe me, Steve," said Bill, slapping at me with his towel, "that fight sure set Sven solid with Segrida. Right now she's weepin' over his busted nose and black eye and the like, and huggin' him and kissin' him and vowin' everlastin' love. I knowed I was right all the time. Knut run after her to get her to stop the bout. Gosh, the Marines couldn't a stopped it! Mushy clean chawed Mike's collar in two, he was that excited! Say, would you uh thought a slob like Sven coulda made the fightin' man he has in six months?"

"Yeah," I said listlessly, scratching Mike's ear as he licked my hand. "Well, he had it comin'. He worked hard enough. And he was lucky havin' somebody to teach him. All I know, I learned for myself in cruel hard battles. But, Bill, I can't stay on the *Sea Girl* now; I just can't get used to bein' just a contender on a ship where I was champion."

Bill dropped his towel and glared at me: "What you talkin' about?"

"Why, Sven's the new champ of the *Sea Girl*, lickin' me this way. Strange, what a come-back he made just as I thought he was goin' down."

"You're clean crazy!" snorted Bill. "By golly, a rap on the dome has a funny effect on some skates. Sven's just now comin' to. Mushy and Fritz and Knut has been sloshin' him with water for ten minutes. You knocked him stiff as a wedge with that last right hook."

I come erect with a bound! "What? Then I licked Sven? I'm still champion? But if he didn't knock me out, who did?"

Bill grinned. "Don't you know no man can hit you hard enough with his fist to knock you out? Swedish girls is impulsive. Segrida done that--with a iron dumb-bell!"

THE END

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CIRCUS FISTS
By Robert E. Howard

ME AND THE Old Man had a most violent row whilst the _*Sea Girl*_ was tied up at the docks of a small seaport on the West Coast. Somebody put a pole-cat in the Old Man's bunk, and he accused me of doing it. I denied it indignantly, and asked him where he reckoned I would get a pole-cat, and he said well, it was a cinch _somebody_ had got a pole-cat, because there it was, and it was his opinion that I was the only man of the crew which was low-down enough to do a trick like that.

This irritated me, and I told him he oughta know it wasn't me, because I had the reputation of being kind to animals, and I wouldn't put a decent skunk where it would have to associate with a critter like the Old Man.

This made him so mad that he busted a bottle of good rye whiskey over my head. Annoyed at such wanton waste of good licker, I grabbed the old walrus and soused him in a horse-trough--us being on the docks at the time.

The Old Man ariz like Neptune from the deep, and, with whiskers dripping, he shook his fists at me and yelled, "Don't never darken my decks again, Steve Costigan. If you ever try to come aboard the _*Sea Girl*,_ I'll fill you fulla buckshot, you mutineerin' pirate!"

"Go set on a marlin-spike," I sneered. "I wouldn't sail with you again for ten bucks a watch and plum duff every mess. I'm through with the sea, anyhow. You gimme a bad taste for the whole business. A landman's life is the life for me, by golly. Me and Mike is goin' to fare forth and win fame and fortune ashore."

And so saying, I swaggered away with my white bulldog, follered clean outa sight by the Old Man's sincere maledictions.

Casting about for amusement, I soon come onto a circus which was going full blast at the edge of town. I seen a side-show poster which said, _Battling Bingo, Champion of the West Coast._ So I went in and they was considerable of a crowd there and a big dumb-looking mutt in tights standing up in a ring, flexing his arms and showing off his muscles.

"Gents," yelled the barker, a flashy-dressed young feller with a diamond horse-shoe stick-pin, "the management offers fifty dollars to any man which can stay four rounds with this tiger of the ring! Five minutes ago I made the same offer on the platform outside, and some gent took me up. But now he seems to have got cold feet, and is nowhere to be found. So here and now I again make the original proposition--fifty round, bright iron men to any guy which can stay four rounds with this man-killin' terror, this fire-breathin' murderer, this iron-fisted man-mountain, Battling Bingo, the Terror of the Rockies!"

The crowd whooped, and three or four fellers made a move like they was going to take up the challenge, but I brushed 'em scornfully aside and bellered, "I'll take that dough, mate!"

I bounced into the ring, and the barker said, "You realize that the management ain't responsible for life or limb?"

"Aw, stow that guff and gimme them gloves," I roared, ripping off my shirt. "Get ready, champeen. I'm goin' to knock your crown off!"

The gong sounded, and we went for each other. They wasn't no canvas stretched across the back of the ring where Bingo couldst shove me up against to be blackjacked by somebody behind it, so I knowed very well he had a iron knuckle-duster on one of his hands, and, from the way he dangled his right, I knowed that was the hand. So I watched his right, and, when he throwed it, I stepped inside of his swing and banged him on the whiskers with a left and a right hook which tucked him away for the evening.

The crowd roared in huge approval, and I jerked the wad of greenbacks outa the barker's hand and started away when he stopped me.

"Say," he said, "I reckernize you now. You're Sailor Costigan. How'd you like to take this tramp's place? We'll pay you good wages."

"All I got to do is flatten jobbies?" I said, and he said it was. So that's how I come to start working in Flash Larney's Gigantic Circus and Animal Show.

Each night I'd appear in fighting tights before the multitude, and the barker, Joe Beemer, wouldst go through the usual ballyhoo, and then all I had to do was to knock the blocks offa the saps which tried to collect the fifty. I wouldn't use the knuckle-duster. I wouldn't of used it even if I'd of needed it, which I didn't. If I can't sock a palooka to sleep, fair and above-board, with my own personal knuckles, then they ain't no use in trying to dint him with a load of iron.

WE WORKED UP and down the West Coast and inland, and it was mostly easy. The men which tried to lick me was practically all alley-fighters--big strong fellers, but they didn't know nothing. Mostly farmers, blacksmiths, sailors, longshoremen, miners, cowpunchers, bar-room bouncers. All I had to do was to hit 'em. More'n once I knocked out three or four men in one night.

I always got action because the crowd was always against me, just like they was against Battling Bingo when I flattened him. A crowd is always against the carnival fighter, whether they know his opponent or not. And when the opponent is some well-known local boy, they nearly have hydrophobia in their excitement.

You oughta heered the cheers they'd give their home-town pride, and the dirty remarks they'd yell at me. No matter how hard I was fighting, I generally found time to reply to their jeers with choice insults I had picked up all over the seven seas, with the result that the maddened mob wouldst spew forth more raging sluggers to be slaughtered. Some men can't fight their best when the crowd's against 'em, but I always do better, if anything. It makes me mad, and I take it out on my opponent.

When I wasn't performing in the ring, I was driving stakes, setting up or taking down tents, and fighting with my circus-mates. Larney's outfit had the name of being the toughest on the Coast, and it was. The fights I had in the ring wasn't generally a stitch to them I had on the lot.

Well, I always makes it a point to be the champeen of whatever outfit I'm with, and I done so in this case. The first day I was with the show I licked three razor-backs, the lion-tamer and a side-show barker, and from then on it was a battle practically every day till them mutts realized I was the best man on the lot.

Fighting all the time like I was, I got so hard and mean I surprised myself. They wasn't a ounce of flesh on me that wasn't like iron, and I believe I could of run ten miles at top speed without giving out. The Dutch weight-lifter figgered to give me a close scrimmage, but he was way too slow. The toughest scrap I had was with a big Japanese acrobat. We fought all over the lot one morning, and everybody postponed the parade for a hour to watch. I was about all in when I finally put the heathen away, but, with my usual recuperative powers, I was able to go on that night as usual, and flatten a farm-hand, a piano-mover and a professional football player.

Some trouble was had with Mike, which always set in my corner and bit anybody which tried to hit me through the ropes, as often happened when the local boy started reeling. Larney wanted to shave him and tattoo him and put him in a sideshow.

"The tattooed dog!" said Larney. "That would draw 'em! A novelty! Can't you see the crowds flockin' through the gates for a look at him?"

"I can see me bustin' you in the snoot," I growled. "You let Mike alone."

"Well," said Larney, "we got to make him more presentable. He looks kinda crude and uncultured alongside our trained poodles."

So the lion-trainer bathed Mike and combed him and perfumed him, and put on a little fool dog-blanket with straps and gilt buckles, and tied a big bow ribbon on his stump tail. But Mike seen himself in a mirror and tore off all that rigging and bit the lion-tamer.

Well, they had a old decrepit lion by the name of Oswald which didn't have no teeth, and Mike got to sleeping in his cage. So they fixed a place where Mike couldst get in and out without Oswald getting out, and made a kind of act out of it.

Larney advertised Mike as the dog which laid down with the lion, and wouldst have Mike and Oswald in the cage together, and spiel about how ferocious Oswald was, and how unusual it was for a friendship to spring up between such natural enemies. But the reason Mike slept in the cage was that they put more straw in it than they did in the other cages on account of Oswald being old and thin-blooded, and Mike liked a soft bed.

Larney was afraid Mike would hurt Oswald, but the only critters Mike couldn't get along with was Amir, a big African leopard which had already kilt three men, and Sultan, the man-eating tiger. They was the meanest critters in the show, and was always trying to get out and claw Mike up. But he wasn't afeard of 'em.

WELL, I WAS having a lot of fun. I thrives in a rough environment like that, though I'll admit I sometimes got kinda homesick for the _*Sea Girl*_ and the sea, and wondered what Bill O'Brien and Mushy Hanson and Red O'Donnell was doing. But I got my pride, and I wouldn't go back after the Old Man had pratically kicked me out to shift for myself.

Anyway, it was a lot of fun. I'd stand out on the platform in front of the tent with my massive arms folded and a scowl on my battered face, whilst Joe Beemer wouldst cock his derby back on his head and start the ballyhoo.

He'd whoop and yell and interjuice me to the crowd as "Sailor Costigan, the Massive Man-mauler of the Seven Seas!" And I'd do strong-man stunts--twisting horse-shoes in two and bending coins between my fingers and etc. Then he'd rare back and holler, "Is they any man in this fair city courageous enough to try and stay four rounds with this slashin' slugger? Take a chance, boys--he's been drivin' stakes all day and maybe he's tired and feeble--heh! heh! heh!"

Then generally some big ham wouldst jump outa the crowd and roar, "I'll fight the so-and-so." And Joe wouldst rub his hands together and say under his breath, "Money, roll in! I need groceries!" And he'd holler, "Right this way, gents! Right through the door to the left. Ten cents admission--one dime! See the battle of the century! Don't crowd, folks. Don't crowd."

The tent was nearly always packed with raging fans which honed at the top of their voices for their local hope to knock my iron skull off. However small a tank-town might be, it generally had at least one huge roughneck with a reputation of some kind.

One time we hit a town in the throes of a rassling carnival. Nobody couldst be found to box with me, but a big Polack came forward claiming to be the rassling champeen of the West--I ain't never seen a rassler which wasn't champeen of something--and wanted me to rassle him. Beemer refused, and the crowd hissed, and the rassler said I was yeller.

I seen red and told him I wasn't no rassler but I'd give him more'n he could tote home. He figgered I was easy, but he got fooled. I don't know a lot about scientific rassling, but I know plenty rough-and-tumble, and I was so incredibly hard and tough, and played so rough that I broke his arm and dislocated his shoulder. And after that nobody ast me to rassle.

IT WASN'T LONG after that when we blowed into a mining town by the name of Ironville, up in the Nevada hills, and from the looks of the populace I figgered I'd have plenty of competition that night. I wasn't fooled none, neither, believe me.

Long before we was ready to start the show, a huge crowd of tough-looking mugs in boots and whiskers was congregated around the athaletic tent, which wasn't showing no interest whatever in the main-top nor the freaks nor the animals.

Joe hadn't hardly got started on his ballyhoo when through the crowd come a critter which looked more like a grizzly than a man--a big black-headed feller with shoulders as broad as a door, and arms like a bear's paw. From the way the crowd all swarmed around him, I figgered he was a man of some importance in Ironville.

I was right.

"You don't need to say no more, pard," he rumbled in a voice like a bull. "I'll take a whirl at yore tramp!"

Joe looked at the black-browed giant, and he kinda got cold feet for the first time in his career.

"Who are you?" he demanded, uneasily.

The big feller grinned wolfishly and said, "Who, me? Oh, I'm just a blacksmith around here." And the crowd all whooped and yelled and laughed like he'd said something very funny.

"Somethin's fishy about this, Steve," whispered Joe to me. "I don't like the looks of it."

About that time the crowd begun to hiss and boo, and the big feller said nastily, "Well, what's the matter--you hombres gettin' yeller?"

I seen red. "Get into this tent, you black-muzzled palooka!" I roared. "I'll show you who's yeller! Shut up, Joe. Ain't I always said I barred nobody? What's the matter with you, anyhow?"

"I tell you, Steve," he said, wiping his forehead with his bandanner, "I seen this big punk somewheres, and if he's a simple blacksmith I'm a Bohemian!"

"Gahhh!" I snorted disgustfully. "When I get through with him, he'll look like a carpet. Have I lost you a penny since I joined the show? Naw! Come on!"

And so saying, I swaggered into the tent and bounded into the ring while the crowd gathered around, packing the place solid, applauding their man and howling insults at me, which I returned with interest, that being a game at which I ain't no amateur myself.

JOE STARTED TO lead the big feller to the dressing-room which was partitioned off with a curtain in one corner of the tent, but he snorted and began ripping off his clothes then and there, revealing ring togs under 'em. Ah, thought I, he come here with the intention of going on with me. Some local battler, no doubtless.

When he clumb into the ring, they was several men with him--one a tall cold-faced man which looked like a high-class gambler, and who they called Brelen, and three or four tough mugs which was to act as seconds. They had the game writ all over their flat noses and tin ears. In fact, it looked to me like the big feller had a right elaborate follering, even if he was a local white hope.

"Who referee's?" asked Brelen, the poker-faced gent.

"Oh, I referee," said Joe.

"Not this time you don't," said Brelen. "The crowd chooses a referee who'll give my boy a square deal, see?"

"It's against the rules of the management--" began Joe, and the crowd rumbled and begun to surge forward. "All right, all right," said Joe, hurriedly. "It's okay with me."

Brelen grinned kinda thin-like, and turned to the crowd and said, "Well, boys, who do you want to referee?"

"Honest Jim Donovan!" they roared, and pushed forward a bald-headed old sea-lion which had the crookedest face I ever seen on a human. Joe give him a look and clasped his head and groaned. The crowd was nasty--itching for trouble. Joe was kinda white around the gills, and my handlers was uneasy. I was glad I'd locked Mike up in Oswald's cage before the show started, being suspicious of the customers. Mike ain't got much discretion; when the crowd starts throwing things at me, he's likely to go for 'em.

"Gents," yelled Joe, who, being a natural-born barker, couldn't keep his mouth shut if he swung for it, "you are now about to witness the battle of the centu-ree, wherein the Fighting Blacksmith of your fair city endeavors to stay four actual rounds with Sailor Costigan, the Terror of the Seven Seas--"

"Aw, shut up and get out of this ring," snarled Brelen. "Let the massacre commence!"

THE GONG SOUNDED and the Blacksmith come swinging outa his corner. Jerusha, he was a man! He stood six feet one and a quarter and weighed not less than two hundred and ten pounds to my six feet and one ninety. With a broad chest matted with black hair, arms knotted with muscles like full-sized cables, legs like trees, a heavy jutting jaw, a broad fighting face with wicked gray eyes glittering from under thick black brows, and a shock of coarse black hair piled up on top of his low, broad forehead--I wanta tell you I ain't never seen a more formidable-looking fighter in my life!

We rushed together like a pair of mad bulls. _Bang!_ In a shower of stars I felt myself flying through the air, and I landed on my shoulders with a jolt that shook the ring. Zowie! I sprawled about, almost petrified with dumfoundment. The crowd was whooping and cheering and laughing like all get-out.

I glared in wild amazement at the black-headed giant which was standing almost over me, with a nasty grin on his lips. A light dawned.

"Blacksmith my eye!" I roared, leaping up at him. "They ain't but one man in the world can hit a lick like that--_Bill Cairn!"_

I heard Joe's despairing howl as I slashed into my foe. _Wham! Wham!_ I was on the resin again before I even got a chance to connect. The yells sounded kinda jumbled this time, and I shook my head violently, cussing fervently as I got my feet under me. Ironville. I oughta knowed--Bill Cairn, which they called the Ironville Blacksmith, the hardest hitter in the game! This was his home town, and this was him!

Fighting mad, I bounded up, but Cairn was so close to me that he reached me with one of his pile-driving left hooks before I was balanced, and down I went again. Now the yelling was kinda dim and the lights was quaking and rocking. I crouched, taking a count which Honest Jim was reeling off a lot faster than necessary. Bill Cairn! The kayo king of the heavyweights, with thirty or forty knockouts in a row, and never been socked off his feet, himself. He was in line for a crack at the champ--and I was supposed to flatten this grizzly in four rounds!

I was up at nine, and, ducking a savage drive for the face, I clinched. By golly, it was like tying up a grizzly. But I ain't no chicken myself. I gripped him in a desperate bear-hug whilst him and the referee cussed and strained, and the crowd begged him to shake me loose and kill me.

"You side-show rat!" he gritted between his teeth. "Leggo whilst I rip yore head off! How can I show my best stuff with you hangin' on like a leech?"

"This is cheap stuff for a headliner like you!" I snarled, red-eyed.

"Givin' my home town folks a free show," he grinned, nastily. "It was just my luck to have a mug like you blow in whilst I was visitin' back home."

Oh, I see the idee all right. It was a big joke with him to knock me off and give his friends a treat--show off before the home-folks! He was laughing at me and so was all them Ironville lubbers. Well, I thought, grinding my teeth with red rage, they's many a good man punched hisself into fistic oblivion on my iron jaw.

I let go of Cairn and throwed my right at his jaw like it was a hammer. He pulled away from it and--_bang!_ It mighta been a left hook to the head. It felt like a handspike. And the next instant, whilst my eyes was still full of stars, I felt another jolt like a concentrated earthquake.

Purty soon I heered somebody say, "Seven!" and I instinctively clumb up and looked about for my foe. I didn't locate him, as he was evidently standing behind me, but I did locate a large gloved mauler which crashed under my ear and nearly unjinted my neck. I done a beautiful dive, ploughing my nose vigorously into the resin, whilst the crowd wept with delight, and then I heered a noise like a sleigh-bell and was aware of being dragged to my corner.

A SNIFTER OF ammonia brung me to myself, and I discovered I was propped on my stool and being worked over by my handlers and Joe, who was bleeding from a cut over the temple.

"How'd you get that?" I asked groggily.

"One of these eggs hit me with a bottle," he said. "They claim I jerked the gong too soon. Listen at 'em! Toughest crowd I ever seen."

They sure was. They was rumbling and growling, just seething for a scrap, but stopping now and then to cheer Cairn, which was bowing and smirking in his corner.

"I knew I'd seen him," said Joe, "and Ace Brelen, his manager. The lousy chiselers! You ain't got a chance, Steve--"

At this moment a rough-whiskered mug stuck his head through the ropes and waved a coil of rope at Joe.

"We're on to you, you rat!" he bellered. "None of your side-show tricks, understand? If you try anything dirty, we'll stretch your neck. And that goes for you, too, you tin-eared gorilla!"

"So's your old man!" I roared, kicking out with all my might. My heel crunched solid on his jaw, and he shot back into the first row amongst a tangle of busted seats and cussing customers, from which he emerged bleeding at the mouth and screaming with rage. He was fumbling for a gun in his shirt, but just then the gong sounded and me and Cairn went for each other.

I come in fast, and figgered on beating him to the punch, but he was too quick for me. He wasn't so clever, but he moved like a big cat, and the very power of his punches was a swell defense. No man couldst keep his balance under them thundering smashes, even if they didn't land on no vital spot. Just trying to block 'em numbed my arms.

Zip! His left whizzed past my jaw like a red-hot brick. _Zinggg!_ His right burned my ear as it went by. I seen a opening and shot my right with everything I had. But I was too eager; my arm looped over his shoulder and he banged his left into my ribs, which I distinctly felt bend almost to the breaking point as my breath went outa me in a explosive grunt.

I throwed my arms about him in a vain effort to clinch, but he pushed me away and slammed a full-armed right to my jaw. _Crash!_ I felt myself turning a complete somersault in the air, and I landed on my belly with my head sticking out under the ropes and ogling glassily down at the ecstatic customers. One of these riz up and slashed his thigh with his hat and, sticking his face almost into mine, yelled, "Well, you carnival punk, how do you like _those?"_

"Like this!" I roared, catching him on the whiskers with a unexpected bash that sunk his nose in the sawdust. I then rolled over on my back and, observing that the referee had rapidly counted up to nine, I ariz and, abandoning my scanty boxing skill, started slugging wild and ferocious in the hope of landing a haymaker.

But that was Cairn's game; he blocked my punches for a second or so, then _bang!_ he caught me square on the chin with one of them thunderbolt rights which shot me back into the ropes, and I rebounded from 'em square into a whistling left hook that dropped me face-down in the resin.

I couldst dimly hear the crowd yelling like wolves. When the average man falls face-first he's through, but nobody never accused me of being a average man. At nine I was up as usual, reeling, and Cairn approached me with a look of disgust on his brutal face.

"Will you stay down?" he gritted, and, measuring me with a left, he crashed his right square into my mouth, and I went down like a pole-axed ox.

"That finishes him!" I heered somebody yelp, and evidently Cairn thought so too, because he give a scornful laugh and started toward his corner where his manager was getting his bathrobe ready. But I got my legs under me and at nine I staggered up, as is my habit.

"Come back here, you big sissy!" I roared groggily, spitting out fragments of a tooth. "This fight ain't over by a devil of a ways!"

The mob screamed with amazement, and Cairn, swearing ferociously, turned and rushed at me like a tiger. But though I reeled on buckling knees, I didn't go down under his smashing left hooks.

"Why don't you get a ax, you big false-alarm?" I sneered, trying to shake the blood outa my eyes. "What you got in them gloves--powder puffs?"

At that he give a roar which made the ring lights shimmy, and brought one up from the canvas which hung me over the top rope just as the gong sounded. Joe and his merry men untangled my limp carcass and held me on the stool while they worked despairingly over me.

"Drop it, Steve," urged Joe. "Cairn will kill you."

"How many times was I on the canvas that round?" I asked.

"How should I know?" he returned, peevishly, wringing the gore out of my towel. "I ain't no adding machine."

"Well, try to keep count, willya?" I requested. "It's important; I can tell how much he's weakenin' if you check up on the knockdowns from round to round."

Joe dropped the sponge he was fixing to throw into the ring.

"Ye gods! Are you figgerin' on continuin' the massakree?"

"He can't keep this pace all night," I growled. "Lookit Brelen talkin' to his baby lamb!"

Ace was gesticulating purty emphatic, and Cairn was growling back at him and glaring at me and kneading his gloves like he wisht it was my goozle. I knowed that Brelen was telling him this scrap was getting beyond the point of a joke, and that it wasn't helping his reputation none for me to keep getting up on him, and for him to make it another quick kayo. Ha, ha, thought I grimly, shaking the blood outa my mangled ear, let's see how quick a kayo Bill Cairn can make where so many other iron-fisted sluggers has failed.

At the gong I was still dizzy and bleeding copiously, but that's a old story to me.

CAIRN, INFURIATED AT not having finished me, rushed outa his corner and throwed over a terrible right, which I seen coming like a cannonball, and ducked. His arm looped over my shoulder and his shoulder rammed into my neck with such force that we both crashed to the canvas.

Cairn untangled hisself with a snarl of irritation, and, assisted by the fair-minded referee, arose, casually kicking me in the face as he done so. I ariz likewise, and, enraged by my constant position on the canvas, looped a whistling left at his head that would of undoubtedly decapitated him hadst it landed--but luck was against me as usual. My foot slipped in a smear of my own blood, my swing was wild, and I run smack into his ripping right.

I fell into Cairn, ignoring an uppercut which loosened all my lower teeth, and tied him up.

"Leggo, you tin-eared baboon!" he snarled, heaving and straining. "Try to show me up, wouldja? Try to make a monkey outa me, wouldja?"

"Nature's already attended to that, you lily-fingered tap-dancer," I croaked. "A flapper with a powder-puff couldst do more damage than you can with them chalk-knuckled bread-hooks."

"So!" he yelled, jerking away and crashing his right to my jaw with every ounce of his huge frame behind it. I revolved in the air like a spin-wheel, felt the ropes scrape my back, and realized that I was falling through space. _Crash!_ My fall was cushioned by a mass of squirming, cussing fans, else I would of undoubtedly broke my back.

I looked up, and high above me, it seemed, I seen the referee leaning over the ropes and counting down at me. I began to kick and struggle, trying to get up, and a number of willing hands--and a few hob-nailed boots--hoisted me offa the squawking fans, and I grabbed the ropes and swung up.

Somebody had a grip on my belt, and I heard a guy growl. "You're licked, you fool! Take the count. Do you want to get slaughtered?"

"Leggo!" I roared, kicking out furiously. "I ain't never licked!"

I tore loose and crawled through the ropes--it looked like I'd never make it--and hauled myself up just as the referee was lifting his arm to bring it down on "Ten!" Cairn didn't rush this time; he was scowling, and I noticed that sweat was streaming down his face, and his huge chest was heaving.

Some of the crowd yelled, "Stop it!" but most of 'em whooped, "Now you got him, Bill. Polish him off!"

Cairn measured me, and smashed his right into my face. The top-rope snapped as I crashed back against it, but I didn't fall. Cairn swore in amazement, and drawed back his right again, when the gong sounded. He hesitated, then lemme have it anyway--a pile-driving smash that nearly lifted me offa my feet. And the crowd cheered the big egg. My handlers jostled him aside and, as they pulled me offa the ropes, Cairn sneered and walked slowly to his corner.

SUPPORTED ON MY stool, I seen Joe pick up a sponge stealthily.

"Drop that sponge!" I roared, and Joe, seeing the baleful light in my one good eye, done so like it was red-hot.

"Lemme catch you throwin' a sponge in for me!" I growled. "Gimme ammonia! Dump that bucket of water over me! Slap the back of my neck with a wet towel! One more round to go, and I gotta save that fifty bucks!"

Swearing dumfoundedly, my handlers did as they was bid, and I felt better and stronger every second. Even they couldn't understand how I couldst take such a beating and come back for more. But any slugger which depends on his ruggedness to win his fights understands it. We got to be solid iron--and we are.

Besides, my recent rough-and-ready life hadst got me into condition such as few men ever gets in, even athaletes. This, coupled with my amazing recuperative powers, made me just about unbeatable. Cairn could, and had, battered me from pillar to post, knocked me down repeatedly, and had me groggy and glassy-eyed, but he hadn't sapped the real reservoir of my vitality. Being groggy and being weak is two different things. Cairn hadn't weakened me. The minute my head cleared under the cold water and ammonia, I was as good as ever. Well, just about, anyhow.

So I come out for the fourth round raring to go. Cairn didn't rush as usual. In fact, he looked a little bit sick of his job. He walked out and lashed at my head with his left. He connected solid, but I didn't go down. And for the first time I landed squarely. _Bang._ My right smashed under his ear, and his head rocked on his bull's neck.

With a roar of fury, he come back with a thundering right to the head, but it only knocked me to my knees, and I was up in a instant. I was out-lasting him! His blows was losing their dynamite! This realization electrified me, and I bored in, slashing with both hands.

A left to the face staggered but didn't stop me, and I ripped a terrific left hook under his heart. He grunted and backed away. He wasn't near as good at taking punishment as he was at handing it out. I slashed both hands to his head, and the blood flew. With a deafening roar, he sunk his right mauler clean outa sight in my belly.

I thought for a second that my spine was broke, as I curled up on the canvas, gasping. The referee sprang forward and began counting, and I looked for Cairn, expecting to see him standing almost astraddle of me, as usual, waiting to slug me down as I got up. He wasn't; but was over against the ropes, holding onto 'em with one mitt whilst he wiped the blood and sweat outa his eyes with the other'n. And I seen his great chest heaving, his belly billowing out and in, and his leg muscles quivering.

Grinning wolfishly, I drawed in great gulps of air and beat the count by a second. Cairn lurched offa the ropes at me, swinging a wide left, but I went under it and crashed my right to his heart. He rolled like a ship in a heavy gale, and I knowed I had him. That last punch which had floored me had been his dying effort. He'd fought hisself clean out on me, as so many a man had didst. Strategy, boy, strategy!

I went after him like a tiger after a bull, amid a storm of yells and curses and threats. The crowd, at first dumfounded, was now leaping up and down and shaking their fists and busting chairs and threatening me with torture and sudden death if I licked their hero. But I was seeing red. Wait'll you've took the beating I'd took and then get a chance to even it up! I ripped both hands to Cairn's quivering belly and swaying head, driving him to the ropes, off of which he rolled drunkenly.

I HEERED A gong sounding frantically; Brelen hadst knocked the time-keeper stiff with a blackjack and was trying to save his man. Also the referee was grabbing at me, trying to push me away. But I give no heed. A left and right under the heart buckled Cairn's knees, and a blazing right to the temple glazed his eyes. He reeled, and a trip-hammer left hook to the jaw that packed all my beef sent him crashing to the canvas, just as the crowd come surging into the ring, tearing down the ropes. I seen Joe take it on the run, ducking out under the wall of the tent, and yelling, "Hey, Rube!"

Then me and the handlers was engulfed. Half a hundred hands grabbed at me, and fists, boots and chairs swung for me. But I ducked, ripping off my gloves, and come up fighting like a wild man.

I swung my fists like they was topping-mauls, and ribs snapped and noses and jaw-bones cracked, whilst through the melee I caught glimpses of Brelen and his men carrying out their battered gladiator. He was still limp.

Just as the sheer number of maddened citizens was dragging me down, a gang of frothing razor-backs come through the tent like a whirlwind, swinging pick handles and tent-stakes.

Well, I ain't seen many free-for-alls to equal that 'un! The circus war-whoop of "Hey, Rube!" mingled with the blood-thirsty yells of the customers. The Iron-villians outnumbered us, but we give 'em a bellyful. In about three seconds the ring was tore to pieces and the storm of battle surged into the tent-wall, which collapsed under the impact.

Knives was flashing and a few guns barking, and all I wonder is that somebody wasn't kilt. The athaletic tent was literally ripped plumb to ribbons, and the battle surged out onto the grounds and raged around the other tents and booths.

Then a wild scream went up: "Fire!" And over everything was cast a lurid glow. Somehow or other the main top hadst caught in the melee--or maybe some fool set it on fire. A strong wind was fanning the flames, which mounted higher each second. In a instant the fight was abandoned. Everything was in a tumult, men running and yelling, children squalling, women screaming. The circus-people was running and hauling the cages and wagons outa the animal tent, which was just catching. The critters was bellering and howling in a most hair-raising way, and I remembered Mike in Oswald's cage. I started for there on the run, when there riz a most fearful scream above all the noise: "The animals are loose!"

EVERYBODY HOLLERED AND tore their hair and ran, and here come the elephants like a avalanche! They crashed over wagons and cages and booths, trumpeting like Judgment Day, and thundered on into the night. How they got loose nobody never exactly knowed. Anything can happen in a fire. But, in stampeding, they'd bumped into and busted open some more cages, letting loose the critters inside.

And here _they_ come roaring--Sultan, the tiger, and Amir, the leopard, killers both of 'em. A crowd of screaming children rushed by me, and right after them come that striped devil, Sultan, his eyes blazing. I grabbed up a heavy tent-stake and leaped betweenst him and the kids. He roared and leaped with his talons spread wide, and I braced my feet and met him in mid-air with a desperate smash that had every ounce of my beef behind it. The impact nearly knocked me offa my feet, and the stake splintered in my hand, but Sultan rolled to the ground with a shattered skull.

And almost simultaneously a terrible cry from the people made me wheel just in time to see Amir racing toward me like a black shadder with balls of fire for eyes. And, just as I turned, he soared from the ground straight at my throat. I didn't have time to do nothing. He crashed full on my broad breast, and his claws ripped my hide as the impact dashed me to the earth. And at the same instant I felt another shock which knocked him clear of me.

I scrambled up to see a squat white form tearing and worrying at the limp body of the big cat. Again Mike had saved my worthless life. When Amir hit me, he hit Amir and broke his neck with one crunch of his iron jaws. He'd squoze out between the bars of Oswald's cage and come looking for me.

He lolled out his tongue, grinning, and vibrated his stump tail, and all to once I heered my name called in a familiar voice. Looking around, I seen a battered figger crawl out from under the ruins of a band-wagon, and, in the lurid light of the burning tents, I reckernized him.

"Jerusha!" I said. "The Old Man! What you doin' under that wagon?"

"I crawled under there to keep from bein' trampled by the mob," he said, working his legs to see if they was broke. "And it was a good idee, too, till a elephant run over the wagon. By gad, if I ever get safe to sea once more I'll never brave the perils of the land again, I wanta tell ya!"

"Did you see me lick Bill Cairn?" I asked.

"I ain't see nothin' but a passel of luneyticks," he snapped. "I arrived just as the free-for-all was ragin'. I don't mind a rough-house, but when they drags in a fire and a stampede of jungle-critters, I'm ready to weigh anchor! And you!" he added, accusingly. "A merry chase you've led me, you big sea-lion! I've come clean from Frisco, and it looked for a while like I wouldn't never find this blame circus."

"What you wanta find it for?" I growled, the thought of my wrongs renewing itself.

"Steve," said the Old Man, "I done you a injustice! It was the cabin-boy which put that pole-cat in my bunk--I found it out after he jumped ship. Steve, as champeen of the old *_Sea Girl,_* I asks you--let bygones be gone-byes! Steve, me and the crew has need of your mallet-like fists. At Seattle, a few weeks ago, I shipped on a fiend in human form by the name of Monagan, which immediately set hisself up as the bully of the fo'c'le. I had to put in Frisco because of shortage of hands. Even now, Mate O'Donnell, Mushy Hanson and Jack Lynch lies groanin' in their bunks from his man-handlin', and he has likewise licked Bill O'Brien, Maxie Heimer and Sven Larsen. He has threatened to hang me on my own bow-sprit by my whiskers. I dast not fire him, for fear of my life. Steve!" the Old Man's voice trembled with emotion, "I asks you--forgive and forget! Come back to the *_Sea Girl_* and demonstrate the eternal brotherhood of man by knockin' the devil outa this demon Monagan before he destroys us all! Show the monster who's the real champeen of the craft!"

"Well," I said, "I got some money comin' to me from Larney--but let it go. He'll need it repairin' his show. Monagan, of Seattle--bah! I hammered him into a pulp in Tony Vitello's poolroom three years ago, and I can do it again. Calls hisself champeen of the *_Sea Girl,_* huh? Well, when I kick his battered carcass onto the wharf, he'll know who's champeen of the craft. They never was, and they ain't now, and they never will be but one champeen of her, and that's Steve Costigan, A.B. Let's go! I wasn't never cut out for no peaceful landlubber's existence, nohow."

THE END

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CUPID VS. POLLUX
By Robert E. Howard

As I am coming up the steps of the fraternity house, I meet Tarantula Soons, a soph with an ingrown disposition and a goggle eye.

"You're lookin' for Spike, I take it?" said he, and upon me admittin' the fact, he gives me a curious look and remarks that Spike is in his room.

I go up, and all the way up the stairs, I hear somebody chanting a love song in a voice that is incitement to justifiable homicide. Strange as it seems, this atrocity is emanating from Spike's room, and as I enter, I see Spike himself, seated on a divan, and singing somethin' about lovers' moons and soft, red lips. His eyes are turned soulfully toward the ceiling and he is putting great feeling in the outrageous bellow which he imagines is the height on melody. To say I am surprized is putting it mildly and as Spike turns and says "Steve, ain't love wonderful?" you could have knocked me over with a pile-driver. Besides standing six feet and seven inches and scaling upwards of 270 pounds, Spike has a map that makes Firpo look like and ad for the fashionable man, and is neitherto about as sentimental as a rhinoceros.

"Yeh? And who is he?" I ask sarcastically, but he only sighs amorously and quotes poetry. At that I fizz over.

"So that's why you ain't to the gym training!" I yawp. "You big chunka nothin', the tournament for the intercollegiate boxin' title comes off tomorrow and here you are, you overgrown walrus, sentimentaliin' around like a three year old yearlin' calf."

"G'wan," says he, tossin' a haymakin' right to my jaw in an absentminded manner, "I can put over any them palukas without no trainin'."

"Yes," I sneers, climbin' to my wobbling' feet, "and when you stack up against Monk Gallranan you won't need any trainin'. That's a cinch."

"Boxin'," says the infatuated boob, "is degradin'. I bet she thinks so. I don't know whether I'll even enter the tourneyment or not."

"Hey!" I yells. "After all the work I've done getting' you in shape. You figurin' on throwin' the college down?"

"Aw, go take a run around the block," says Spike, drawing back his lip in an ugly manner.

"G'wan, you boneheaded elephant!" says I, drivin' my left to the wrist in his solar plexus and the battle was on. Anyway, at the conclusion, I yelled up to him from the foot of the stairs "where the college will be too small for you."

His sole answer was to slam the door so hard that he shook the house but the next day when I was lookin' for a substitute for the heavyweight entries, the big yam appears, with a smug and self satisfied look on his map.

"I've decided to fight, Steve," he says grandly. "She will have a ringside seat and women adore physical strength and power allied to manly beauty."

"All right," says I, "get into your ring togs. Your bout is the main event of the day and will come last."

This managing a college boxing a show is no cinch. If things go wrong, the manager gets the blame and if things don't, the fighters get the hand. I remember once I even substituted for a welterweight entry who didn't show up. Just to give the fans a run for their money, I lowered my guard the third round and invited my antagonist to hit me--he did--they were four hours bringing me to and the fact that it was discovered he had a horseshoe concealed inn his glove didn't increase my regard for the game. They've got the horseshoe in the museum now, but it isn't much to look at as a horseshoe, being bent all out of shape where it came in contact with my jaw.

But to get back to the tournament. The college Spike and I represented had indifferent fortune in the first bouts; our featherweight entry won the decision on points and our flyweight tied with a fellow from St. Janice's. As usual, heavyweights being scarce, Spike and Monk Gallranan from Burke's University were the only entries. This gorilla is nearly as tall and heavy as Spike, and didn't make the football team on account of his habit of breaking the arms and legs of the team in practice scrimmage. He is even more prehistoric looking than Spike, so you can imagine what those two cavemen looked like when they squared off together. Spike was jubilant, however, at the chance of distinguishing himself in an athletic way, he having always been too lazy to come out for football and the like. And this girl was there in a seat on the front row. The bout didn't last long so I don't know a better way than to give it round by round. What those two saps didn't know about the finer points of boxin' would fill several encyclopedias, but I'd had a second rate for giving Spike some secret instructions on infightin', and I expected him to win by close range work, infightin' bein' a lost art to the average amateur.

Round 1

Spike missed a left for the head and Monk sent a left to the body. Spike put a right to the face and got three left jabs to the nose in return. They traded rights to the body, and Monk staggered Spike with a sizzlin' left to the wind. Monk missed with a right and they clinched. Spike nailed Monk with a straight right to the jaw at the break. Monk whipped a left to the head and a right to the body and Spike rocked him back on his heels with a straight left to the face.

Round 2

Monk missed a right but slammed a left to the jaw. They clinched and Spike roughed in close. Monk staggered Spike on the break with a right to the jaw. Monk drove Spike across the ring with lefts and rights to head and body. Spike covered up, then kicked through with a right uppercut to the jaw that nearly tore Monk's head off. Monk clinched and Spike punished him with short straight rights to the body. Just at the gong Spike staggered Monk with a left hook to the jaw.

Round 3

Monk blocked Spike's left lead and uppercut him three times to the jaw. Spike swung wild and Monk staggered him with a straight right to the jaw. Another straight right started him bleeding at the lips. Spike came out of it with a fierce rally and drove Monk to the ropes with a series of short left hooks to the wind and head. Monk launched an attack of his own and battered Spike to the middle of the ring where they stood toe to toe, trading smashes to head and body. Monk started a fierce rush and a straight left for the jaw. Spike ducked, let the punch slide over his shoulder, and crossed his right to Monk's jaw, and Monk hit the mat. Just as the referee reached "Nine" the gong sounded.

Monk's seconds worked over him but he was still groggy as he came out for the fourth round. I shouted for Spike to finish him quick, but be careful.

Spike stepped up, warily; they sparred for a second, then Spike stepped in and sank his left to the wrist in Monk's solar plexus, following up with a right to the button that would have knocked down a house. Monk hit the mat and lay still.

Then Spike, the boob, turns his back on his fallen foeman and walks over to the ropes smilin' and bowin'. He opens his mouth to say somethin' to his girl-and Monk, who has risen meanwhile, beating the count, lifts his right from the floor and places it squarely beneath Spike's sagging jaw. The referee could have counted a million.

But afterwards Spike says to me, sitting on the ring floor, still in his ring togs, he says, "Steve, girls is a lotta hokum. I'm offa 'em," he says.

Says I, "Then if you've found that out, it's worth the soakin' you got," I says.

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DARK SHANGHAI

By Robert E. Howard

THE FIRST MAN I MET, when I stepped offa my ship onto the wharfs of Shanghai, was Bill McGlory of the Dutchman, and I should of took this as a bad omen because that gorilla can get a man into more jams than a Chinese puzzle. He says: "Well, Steve, what do we do for entertainment--beat up some cops or start a free-for-all in a saloon?"

I says: "Them amusements is low. The first thing I am goin' to do is to go and sock Ace Barlow on the nose. When I was in port six months ago somebody drugged my grog and lifted my wad, and I since found out it was him."

"Good," said Bill. "I don't like Ace neither and I'll go along and see it's well done."

So we went down to the Three Dragons Saloon and Ace come out from behind the bar grinning like a crocodile, and stuck out his hand and says: "Well, well, if it ain't Steve Costigan and Bill McGlory! Glad to see you, Costigan."

"And I'm glad to see you, you double-crossin' polecat," I says, and socked him on the nose with a peach of a right. He crashed into the bar so hard he shook the walls and a demijohn fell off a shelf onto his head and knocked him stiff, and I thought Bill McGlory would bust laughing.

Big Bess, Ace's girl, give a howl like a steamboat whistle.

"You vilyun!" she squalled. "You've killed Ace. Get out of here, you murderin' son of a skunk!" I don't know what kind of knife it was she flashed, but me and Bill left anyway. We wandered around on the waterfront most of the day and just about forgot about Ace, when all of a sudden he hove in view again, most unexpectedly. We was bucking a roulette wheel in Yin Song's Temple of Chance, and naturally was losing everything we had, including our shirts, when somebody tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around and it was Ace. I drawed back my right mauler but he said: "Nix, you numb-skull--I wanta talk business with you."

His nose was skinned and both his eyes was black, which made him look very funny, and I said: "I bet you went and blowed your nose--you shouldn't never do that after bein' socked."

"I ain't here to discuss my appearance," he said annoyedly. "Come on out where we can talk without bein' overheard."

"Foller you out into the alley?" I asked. "How many thugs you got out there with blackjacks?"

At this moment Bill lost his last dime and turned around and seen Ace and he said: "Wasn't one bust on the snoot enough?"

"Listen, you mugs," said Ace, waving his arms around like he does when excited, "here I got a scheme for makin' us all a lot of dough and you boneheads stand around makin' smart cracks."

"You're goin' to fix it so we make dough, hey?" I snorted. "I may be dumb, Ace Barlow, but I ain't that dumb. You ain't no pal of our'n."

"No, I ain't!" he howled. "I despises you! I wisht you was both in Davy Jones's locker! But I never lets sentiment interfere with business, and you two saps are the only men in Shanghai which has got guts enough for the job I got in mind."

I LOOKED AT BILL AND Bill looked at me, and Bill says: "Ace, I trusts you like I trusts a rattlesnake--but lead on. Them was the honestest words I ever heard you utter."

Ace motioned us to foller him, and he led us out of the Temple of Chance into the back of his grog-shop, which wasn't very far away. When we had set down and he had poured us some licker, taking some hisself, to show us it was on the level, he said: "Did you mutts ever hear of a man by the name of John Bain?"

"Naw," I said, but Bill scowled: "Seems like I have--naw--I can't place the name--"

"Well," said Ace, "he's a eccentric milyunaire, and he's here in Shanghai. He's got a kid sister, Catherine, which he's very fond of--"

"I see the point," I snapped, getting up and sticking the bottle of licker in my hip pocket. "That's out, we don't kidnap no dame for you. C'mon, Bill."

"That's a dirty insult!" hollered Ace. "You insinyouatin' I'd stoop so low as to kidnap a white woman?"

"It wouldn't be stoopin' for you," sneered Bill. "It would be a step upwards."

"Set down, Costigan," said Ace, "and put back that bottle, les'n you got money to pay for it.... Boys, you got me all wrong. The gal's already been kidnapped, and Bain's just about nuts."

"Why don't he go to the police?" I says.

"He has," said Ace, "but when could the police find a gal the Chineeses has stole? They'd did their best but they ain't found nothin'. Now listen--this is where you fellers come in. I know where the gal is!"

"Yeah?" we said, interested, but only half believing him.

"I guess likely I'm the only white man in Shanghai what does," he said. "Now I ask you--are you thugs ready to take a chance?"

"On what?" we said.

"On the three-thousand-dollar reward John Bain is offerin' for the return of his sister," said Ace. "Now listen--I know a certain big Chinee had her kidnapped outa her 'rickshaw out at the edge of the city one evenin'. He's been keepin' her prisoner in his house, waitin' a chance to send her up-country to some bandit friends of his'n; then they'll be in position to twist a big ransome outa John Bain, see? But he ain't had a chance to slip her through yet. She's still in his house. But if I was to tell the police, they'd raid the place and get the reward theirselves. So all you boys got to do is go get her and we split the reward three ways."

"Yeah," said Bill bitterly, "and git our throats cut while doin' it. What you goin' to do?"

"I give you the information where she is," he said. "Ain't that somethin'? And I'll do more--I'll manage to lure the big Chinee away from his house while you go after the gal. I'll fake a invitation from a big merchant to meet him somewheres--I know how to work it. An hour before midnight I'll have him away from that house. Then it'll be pie for you."

ME AND BILL MEDITATED.

"After all," wheedled Ace, "she's a white gal in the grip of the yeller devils."

"That settles it," I decided. "We ain't goin' to leave no white woman at the mercy of no Chinks."

"Good," said Ace. "The gal's at Yut Lao's house--you know where that is? I'll contrive to git him outa the house. All you gotta do is walk in and grab the gal. I dunno just where in the house she'll be, of course; you'll have to find that out for yourselves. When you git her, bring her to the old deserted warehouse on the Yen Tao wharf. I'll be there with John Bain. And listen--the pore gal has likely been mistreated so she don't trust nobody. She may not wanta come with you, thinkin' you've come to take her up-country to them hill-bandits. So don't stop to argy--just bring her along anyhow."

"All right," we says and Ace says, "Well, weigh anchor then, that's all."

"That ain't all, neither," said Bill. "If I start on this here expedition I gotta have a bracer. Gimme that bottle."

"Licker costs money," complained Ace as Bill filled his pocket flask.

"Settin' a busted nose costs money, too," snapped Bill, "so shut up before I adds to your expenses. We're in this together for the money, and I want you to know I don't like you any better'n I ever did."

Ace gnashed his teeth slightly at this, and me and Bill set out for Yut Lao's house. About half a hour to midnight we got there. It was a big house, set amongst a regular rat-den of narrow twisty alleys and native hovels. But they was a high wall around it, kinda setting it off from the rest.

"Now we got to use strategy," I said, and Bill says, "Heck, there you go makin' a tough job outa this. All we gotta do is walk up to the door and when the Chinks open it, we knock 'em stiff and grab the skirt and go."

"Simple!" I said sourcastically. "Do you realize this is the very heart of the native quarters, and these yeller-bellies would as soon stick a knife in a white man as look at him?"

"Well," he said, "if you're so smart, you figger it out."

"Come on," I said, "we'll sneak over the wall first. I seen a Chinee cop snoopin' around back there a ways and he give us a very suspicious look. I bet he thinks you're a burglar or somethin'."

Bill shoved out his jaw. "Does he come stickin' his nose into our business, I bends it into a true-lover's knot."

"This takes strategy," I says annoyedly. "If he comes up and sees us goin' over the wall, I'll tell him we're boardin' with Yut Lao and he forgot and locked us out, and we lost our key."

"That don't sound right, somehow," Bill criticized, but he's always jealous, because he ain't smart like me, so I paid no heed to him, but told him to foller me.

WELL, WE WENT DOWN a narrow back-alley which run right along by the wall, and just as we started climbing over, up bobbed the very Chinese cop I'd mentioned. He musta been follering us.

"Stop!" he said, poking at me with his night-stick. "What fella monkey-business catchee along you?"

And dawgoned if I didn't clean forget what I was going to tell him!

"Well," said Bill impatiently, "speak up, Steve, before he runs us in."

"Gimme time," I said snappishly, "don't rush me--lemme see now--Yut Lao boards with us and he lost his key--no, that don't sound right--"

"Aw, nuts!" snorted Bill and before I could stop him he hit the Chinee cop on the jaw and knocked him stiff.

"Now you done it!" said I. "This will get us six months in the jug."

"Aw, shut up and git over that wall," growled Bill. "We'll git the gal and be gone before he comes to. Then with that reward dough, I'd like to see him catch us. It's too dark here for him to have seen us good."

So we climbed into the garden, which was dark and full of them funny-looking shrubs the Chineeses grows and trims into all kinds of shapes like ships and dragons and ducks and stuff. Yut Lao's house looked even bigger from inside the wall and they was only a few lights in it. Well, we went stealthily through the garden and come to a arched door which led into the house. It was locked but we jimmied it pretty easy with some tools Ace had give us--he had a regular burglar's kit, the crook. We didn't hear a sound; the house seemed to be deserted.

We groped around and Bill hissed, "Steve, here's a stair. Let's go up."

"Well," I said, "I don't hardly believe we'll find her upstairs or nothin'. They proberly got her in a underground dunjun or somethin'."

"Well," said Bill, "this here stair don't go no ways but up and we can't stand here all night."

So we groped up in the dark and come into a faintly lighted corridor. This twisted around and didn't seem like to me went nowheres, but finally come onto a flight of stairs going down. By this time we was clean bewildered--the way them heathens builds their houses would run a white man nuts. So we went down the stair and found ourselves in another twisting corridor on the ground floor. Up to that time we'd met nobody. Ace had evidently did his job well, and drawed most everybody outa the house.

All but one big coolie with a meat cleaver.

WE WAS JUST CONGRATULATING ourselves when swish! crack! A shadow falling acrost me as we snuck past a dark nook was all that saved my scalp. I ducked just as something hummed past my head and sunk three inches deep into the wall. It was a meat cleaver in the hand of a big Chinee, and before he could wrench it loose, I tackled him around the legs like a fullback bucking the line and we went to the floor together so hard it knocked the breath outa him. He started flopping and kicking, but I would of had him right if it hadn't of been for Bill's carelessness. Bill grabbed a lacquered chair and swung for the Chinee's head, but we was revolving on the floor so fast his aim wasn't good. Wham! I seen a million stars. I rolled offa my victim and lay, kicking feebly, and Bill used what was left of the chair to knock the Chinaman cold.

"You dumb bonehead," I groaned, holding my abused head on which was a bump as big as a goose-egg. "You nearly knocked my brains out."

"You flatters yourself, Steve," snickered Bill. "I was swingin' at the Chinee--and there he lays. I always gits my man."

"Yeah, after maimin' all the innocent bystanders within reach," I snarled. "Gimme a shot outa that flask."

We both had a nip and then tied and gagged the Chinee with strips tore from his shirt, and then we continued our explorations. We hadn't made as much noise as it might seem; if they was any people in the house they was all sound asleep. We wandered around for a while amongst them dark or dim lighted corridors, till we seen a light shining under a crack of a door, and peeking through the keyhole, we seen what we was looking for.

On a divan was reclining a mighty nice-looking white girl, reading a book. I was plumb surprised; I'd expected to find her chained up in a dunjun with rats running around. The room she was in was fixed up very nice indeed, and she didn't look like her captivity was weighing very heavy on her; and though I looked close, I seen no sign of no chain whatever. The door wasn't even locked.

I opened the door and we stepped in quick. She jumped up and stared at us.

"Who are you?" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Shhhhh!" I said warningly. "We has come to rescue you from the heathen!"

To my shocked surprise, she opened her mouth and yelled, "Yut Lao!" at the top of her voice.

I GRABBED HER AND CLAPPED my hand over her mouth, whilst goose-flesh riz up and down my spine.

"Belay there!" I said in much annoyance. "You wanta get all our throats cut? We're your friends, don't you understand?"

Her reply was to bite me so viciously that her teeth met in my thumb. I yelped involuntarily and let her go, and Bill caught hold of her and said soothingly, "Wait, Miss--they's no need to be scared--ow!" She hauled off and smacked him in the eye with a right that nearly floored him, and made a dart for the door. I pounced on her and she yanked out my hair in reckless handfuls.

"Grab her feet, Bill," I growled. "I come here to rescue this dame and I'm goin' to do it if we have to tie her hand and foot."

Well, Bill come to my aid and in the end we had to do just that--tie her up, I mean. It was about like tying a buzz-saw. We tore strips offa the bed-sheets and bound her wrists and ankles, as gentle as we could, and gagged her likewise, because when she wasn't chawing large chunks out of us, she would screech like a steamboat whistle. If they'd been anybody at large in the house they'd of sure heard. Honest to gosh, I never seen anybody so hard to rescue in my life. But we finally got it done and laid her on the divan.

"Why Yut Lao or anybody else wants this wildcat is more'n I can see," I growled, setting down and wiping the sweat off and trying to get my wind back. "This here's gratitude--here we risks our lives to save this girl from the clutches of the Yeller Peril and she goes and bites and kicks like we was kidnappin' her ourselves."

"Aw, wimmen is all crazy," snarled Bill, rubbing his shins where she had planted her French heels. "Dawgone it, Steve, the cork is come outa my flask in the fray and alt my licker is spillin' out."

"Stick the cork back in," I urged. And he said, "You blame fool, what you think I'd do? But I can't find the cork."

"Make a stopper outa some paper," I advised, and he looked around and seen a shelf of books. So he took down a book at random, tore out the fly-leaf and wadded it up and stuck it in the flask and put the book back. At this moment I noticed that I'd carelessly laid the girl down on her face and she was kicking and squirming, so I picked her up and said, "You go ahead and see if the way's clear; only you gotta help me pack her up and down them stairs."

"No need of that," he said. "This room's on the ground floor, see? Well, I bet this here other door opens into the garden." He unbolted it and sure enough it did.

"I bet that cop's layin' for us," I grunted.

"I bet he ain't," said Bill, and for once he was right. I reckon the Chinee thought the neighborhood was too tough for him. We never seen him again.

WE TOOK THE OPPOSITE side from where we come in at, and maybe you think we had a nice time getting that squirming frail over the wall. But we finally done it and started for the old deserted warehouse with her. Once I started to untie her and explain we was her friends, but the instant I started taking off the gag, she sunk her teeth into my neck. So I got mad and disgusted and gagged her again.

I thought we wouldn't never get to the warehouse. Tied as she was, she managed to wriggle and squirm and bounce till I had as soon try to carry a boa-constrictor, and I wisht she was a man so I could sock her on the jaw. We kept to back alleys and it ain't no uncommon sight to see men carrying a bound and gagged girl through them twisty dens at night, in that part of the native quarters, so if anybody seen us, they didn't give no hint. Probably thought we was a couple of strong-arm gorillas stealing a girl for some big mandarin or something.

Well, we finally come to the warehouse, looming all silent and deserted on the rotting old wharf. We come up into the shadder of it and somebody went, "Shhhh!"

"Is that you, Ace?" I said, straining my eyes--because they wasn't any lamps or lights of any kind anywheres near and everything was black and eery, with the water sucking and lapping at the piles under our feet.

"Yeah," came the whisper, "right here in this doorway. Come on--this way--I got the door open."

We groped our way to the door and blundered in, and he shut the door and lit a candle. We was in a small room which must have been a kind of counting or checking room once when the warehouse was in use. Ace looked at the girl and didn't seem a bit surprised because she was tied up.

"That's her, all right," he says. "Good work. Well, boys, your part's did. You better scram. I'll meet you tomorrer and split the reward."

"We'll split it tonight," I growled. "I been kicked in the shins and scratched and bit till I got tooth-marks all over me, and if you think I'm goin' to leave here without my share of the dough, you're nuts."

"You bet," said Bill. "We delivers her to John Bain, personal."

ACE LOOKED INCLINED to argy the matter, but changed his mind and said, "All right, he's in here--bring her in."

So I carried her through the door Ace opened, and we come into a big inner room, well lighted with candles and fixed up with tables and benches and things. It was Ace's secret hangout. There was Big Bess and a tall, lean feller with a pale poker-face and hard eyes. And I felt the girl stiffen in my arms and kind of turn cold.

"Well, Bain," says Ace jovially, "here she is!"

"Good enough," he said in a voice like a steel rasp. "You men can go now."

"We can like hell," I snapped. "Not till you pay us."

"How much did you promise them?" said Bain to Ace.

"A grand apiece," muttered Ace, glancing at us kind of uneasy, "but I'll tend to that."

"All right," snapped Bain, "don't bother me with the details. Take off her gag."

I done so, and untied her, watching her nervously so I could duck if she started swinging on me. But it looked like the sight of her brother wrought a change in her. She was white and trembling.

"Well, my dear," said John Bain, "we meet again."

"Oh, don't stall!" she flamed out. "What are you going to do to me?"

Me and Bill gawped at her and at each other, but nobody paid no attention to us.

"You know why I had you brought here," said Bain in a tone far from brotherly. "I want what you stole from me."

"And you stole it from old Yuen Kiang," she snapped. "He's dead--it belongs to me as much as it does to you!"

"You've hidden from me for a long time," he said, getting whiter than ever, "but it's the end of the trail Catherine, and you might as well come through. Where's that formula?"

"Where you'll never see it!" she said, very defiant.

"No?" he sneered. "Well, there are ways of making people talk--"

"Give her to me," urged Big Bess with a nasty glint in her eyes.

"I'll tell you nothing!" the girl raged, white to the lips. "You'll pay for persecuting an honest woman this way--"

John Bain laughed like a jackal barking. "Fine talk from you, you snake-in-the-grass! Honest? Why, the police of half a dozen countries are looking for you right now!"

John Bain jumped up and grabbed her by the wrist, but I throwed him away from her with such force he knocked over a table and fell across it.

"Hold everything!" I roared. "What kind of a game is this?"

JOHN BAIN PULLED HISSELF up and his eyes was dangerous as a snake's.

"Get out of here and get quick!" he snarled. "Ace can settle with you for this job out of the ten thousand I'm paying him. Now get out, before you get hurt!"

"Ten thousand!" howled Bill. "Ace is gettin' ten thousand? And us only a measly grand apiece?"

"Belay everything!" I roared. "This is too blame complicated for me. Ace sends us to rescue Bain's sister from the Chinks, us to split a three-thousand-dollar reward--now it comes out that Ace gets ten thousand--and Bain talks about his sister robbin' him--"

"Oh, go to the devil!" snapped Bain. "Barlow, when I told you to get a couple of gorillas for this job, I didn't tell you to get lunatics."

"Don't you call us looneyticks," roared Bill wrathfully. "We're as good as you be. We're better'n you, by golly! I remember you now--you ain't no more a milyunaire than I am! You're a adventurer--that's what old Cap'n Hurley called you--you're a gambler and a smuggler and a crook in general. And I don't believe this gal is your sister, neither."

"Sister to that swine?" the girl yelped like a wasp had stung her. "He's persecuting me, trying to get a valuable formula which is mine by rights, in case you don't know it--"

"That's a lie!" snarled Bain. "You stole it from me--Yuen Kiang gave it to me before he got blown up in that experiment in his laboratory--"

"Hold on," I ordered, slightly dizzy, "lemme get this straight--"

"Aw, it's too mixed up," growled Bill. "Let's take the gal back where we got her, and bust Ace on the snoot."

"Shut up, Bill," I commanded. "Leave this to me--this here's a matter which requires brains. I gotta get this straight. This girl ain't Bain's brother--I mean, he ain't her sister. Well, they ain't no kin. She's got a formula--whatever that is--and he wants it. Say, was you hidin' at Yut Lao's, instead of him havin' you kidnapped?"

"Wonderful," she sneered. "Right, Sherlock!"

"Well," I said, "we been gypped into doin' a kidnappin' when we thought we was rescuin' her; that's why she fit so hard. But why did Ace pick us?"

"I'll tell you, you flat-headed gorilla!" howled Big Bess. "It was to get even with you for that poke on the nose. And what you goin' to do about it, hey?"

"I'll tell you what we're goin' to do!" I roared. "We don't want your dirty dough! You're all a gang of thieves! This girl may be a crook, too, but we're goin' to take her back to Yut Lao's! An' right off."

Catherine caught her breath and whirled on us.

"Do you mean that?" she cried.

"You bet," I said angrily. "We may look like gorillas but we're gents. They gypped us, but they ain't goin' to harm you none, kid."

"But it's my formula," snarled John Bain. "She stole it from me."

"I don't care what she stole!" I roared. "She's better'n you, if she stole the harbor buoys! Get away from that door! We're leavin'!"

THE REST WAS KIND OF like a explosion--happened so quick you didn't have much time to think. Bain snatched up a shotgun from somewhere but before he could bring it down I kicked it outa his hands and closed with him. I heard Bill's yelp of joy as he lit into Ace, and Catherine and Big Bess went together like a couple of wildcats.

Bain was all wire and spring-steel. He butted me in the face and started the claret in streams from my nose, he gouged at my eye and he drove his knee into my belly all before I could get started. But I finally lifted him bodily and slammed him head-first onto the floor, though, and that finished Mr. John Bain for the evening. He kind of spread out and didn't even twitch.

Well, I looked around and seen Bill jumping up and down on Ace with both feet, and I seen Catherine was winning her scrap, too. Big Bess had the advantage of weight but she was yeller. Catherine sailed into her, fist and tooth and nail, and inside of a minute Big Bess was howling for mercy.

"What I want to know," gritted Catherine, sinking both hands into her hair and setting back, "is why you and that mutt Barlow are helping Bain!"

"Ow, leggo!" squalled Big Bess. "Ace heard that Bain was lookin' for you, and Ace had found out you was hidin' at Yut Lao's. Bain promised us ten grand to get you into his hands--Bain stood to make a fortune outa the formula--and we figgered on gyppin' Costigan and McGlory into doin' the dirty work and then we was goin' to skip on the early mornin' boat and leave 'em holdin' the bag!"

"So!" gasped Catherine, getting up and shaking back her disheveled locks, "I guess that settles that!"

I looked at Bain and Ace and Big Bess, all kind of strewn around on the floor, and I said I reckon it did.

"You men have been very kind to me," she said. "I understand it all now."

"Yeah," I said, "they told us Yut Lao had you kidnapped."

"The skunks!" she said. "Will you do me just one more favor and keep these thugs here until I get a good start? If I can catch that boat that sails just at dawn, I'll be safe."

"You bet," I said, "but you can't go through them back-alleys alone. I'll go back with you to Yut Lao's and Bill can stay here and guard these saps."

"Good," she said. "Let me peek outside and see that no one's spying."

So she slipped outside and Bill picked up the shotgun and said, "Hot dawg, will I guard these babies! I hope Ace will try to jump me so I can blow his fool head off!"

"Hey!" I hollered, "be careful with that gun, you sap!"

"Shucks," he says, very scornful, "I cut my teeth on a gun--"

Bang! Again I ducked complete extinction by such a brief hair's breadth that that charge of buckshot combed my hair.

"You outrageous idjit!" I says, considerably shooken. "I believe you're tryin' to murder me. That's twice tonight you've nearly kilt me."

"Aw don't be onreasonable, Steve," he urged. "I didn't know it had a hair-trigger--I was just tryin' the lock, like this, see--"

I took the death-trap away from him and throwed it into the corner.

"Gimme a nip outa the flask," I said. "I'll be a rooin before this night's over."

I took a nip which just about emptied the flask, and Bill got to looking at the wadded-up fly-leaf which was serving as a stopper.

"Lookit, Mike," he said, "this leaf has got funny marks on it, ain't it?"

I glanced at it, still nervous from my narrer escape; it had a lot of figgers and letters and words which didn't mean nothing to me.

"That's Chinese writin'," I said peevishly. "Put up that licker; here comes Miss Deal."

She run in kind of breathless. "What was that shot?" she gasped.

"Ace tried to escape and I fired to warn him," says Bill barefacedly.

I told Bill I'd be back in a hour or so and me and the girl went out into those nasty alleys. I said, "It ain't none of my business, but would you mind tellin' me what this formula-thing is?"

"It's a new way to make perfume," she said.

"Perfume?" I snift. "Is that all?"

"Do you realize millions of dollars are spent each year on perfume?" she said. "Some of it costs hundreds of dollars an ounce. The most expensive kind is made from ambergris. Well, old Yuen Kiang, a Chinese chemist, discovered a process by which a certain chemical could be substituted for ambergris, producing the same result at a fraction of the cost. The perfume company that gets this formula will save millions. So they'll bid high.

"Outside of old Yuen Kiang, the only people who knew of its existence were John Bain, myself, and old Tung Chin, the apothecary who has that little shop down by the docks. Old Yuen Kiang got blown up in some kind of an experiment, he didn't have any people, and Bain stole the formula. Then I lifted it off of Bain, and have been hiding ever since, afraid to venture out and try to sell it. I've been paying Yut Lao plenty to let me stay in his house, and keep his mouth shut. But now it's all rosy! I don't know how much I can twist out of the perfume companies for the formula, but I know it'll run up into the hundred thousands!"

We'd reached Yut Lao's house and I went in through a side-gate--she had a key--and went into her room the same I way me and Bill had brung her out.

"I'm going to pack and make that boat," she said. "I haven't much time. Steve--I trust you--I'm going to show you the formula. Yut Lao knows nothing about it--I wouldn't have trusted him if he'd known why I was hiding--he thinks I've murdered somebody.

"The simplest place to hide anything is the best place. I destroyed the original formula after copying it on the flyleaf of a book, and put the book on this shelf, in plain sight. No one would ever think to look there--they'd tear up the floor and the walls first--"

And blamed if she didn't pull down the very book Bill got to make his stopper! She opened it and let out a howl like a lost soul.

"It's gone!" she screeched. "The leaf's been torn out! I'm robbed!"

At this moment a portly Chinee appeared at the door, some flustered.

"What catchee?" he squalled. "Too much monkey-business!"

"You yellow-bellied thief!" she screamed. "You stole my formula!"

And she went for him like a cat after a sparrow. She made a flying leap and landed right in his stummick with both hands locked in his pig-tail. He squalled like a fire-engine as he hit the floor, and she began grabbing his hair by the handfuls.

A BIG CLAMOR RIZ in some other part of the house. Evidently all Yut Lao's servants had returned too. They was jabbering like a zoo-full of monkeys and the clash of their knives turned me cold.

I grabbed Catherine by the slack of her dress and lifted her bodily offa the howling Yut Lao which was a ruin by this time. And a whole passel of coolies come swarming in with knives flashing like the sun on the sea-spray. Catherine showed some inclination of going to the mat with the entire gang--I never see such a scrapping dame in my life--but I grabbed her up and racing across the room, plunged through the outer door and slammed it in their faces.

"Beat it for the wall while I hold the door!" I yelled, and Catherine after one earful of the racket inside, done so with no more argument. She raced acrost the garden and begun to climb the wall. I braced myself to hold the door and crash! a hatchet blade ripped through the wood a inch from my nose.

"Hustle!" I yelled in a panic and she dropped on the other side of the wall. I let go and jumped back; the door crashed outwards and a swarm of Chineeses fell over it and piled up in a heap of squirming yeller figgers and gleaming knives. The sight of them knives lent wings to my feet, as the saying is, and I wish somebody had been timing me when I went acrost that garden and over that wall, because I bet I busted some world's speed records.

Catherine was waiting for me and she grabbed my hand and shook it.

"So long, sailor," she said. "I've got to make that boat now, formula or not. I've lost a fortune, but it's been lots of fun. I'll see you some day, maybe."

"Not if I see you first, you won't," I said to myself, as she scurried away into the dark, then I turned and run like all get-out for the deserted warehouse.

I was thinking of the fly-leaf Bill McGlory tore out to use for a stopper. Them wasn't Chinese letters--them was figgers--technical symbols and things! The lost formula! A hundred thousand dollars! Maybe more! And since Bain stole it from Yuen Kiang which was dead and had no heirs, and since Catherine stole it from Bain, then it was as much mine and Bill's as it was anybody's. Catherine hadn't seen Bill tear out the sheet; she was lying face down on the divan.

I gasped as I run and the sweat poured off me. A fortune! Me and Bill was going to sell that formula to some perfume company and be rich men!

I didn't keep to the back-alleys this time, but took the most direct route; it was just getting daylight. I crossed a section of the waterfront and I seen a stocky figger careening down the street, bellering, "Abel Brown the sailor." It was Bill.

"Bill McGlory." I said sternly, "you're drunk!"

"If I wasn't I'd be a wonder!" he whooped hilariously. "Steve, you old sea-horse, this here's been a great night for us!"

"Where's Ace and them?" I demanded.

"I let 'em go half an hour after you left," he said. "I got tired settin' there doin' nothin'."

"Well, listen, Bill," I said, "where abouts is that--"

"Haw! Haw! Haw!" he roared, bending over and slapping his thighs. "Lemme tell you somethin'! Steve, you'll die laughin'! You knew old Tung Chin which runs a shop down on the waterfront, and stays open all night? Well, I stopped there to fill my flask and he got to lookin' at that Chineese writin' on that paper I had stuffed in it. He got all excited and what you think? He gimme ten bucks for it!"

"Ten bucks!" I howled. "You sold that paper to Tung Chin?"

"For ten big round dollars!" he whooped. "And boy, did I licker up! Can you imagine a mutt payin' good money for somethin' like that? What you reckon that sap wanted with that fool piece of paper? Boy, when I think how crazy them Chineese is--"

And he's wondering to this day why I hauled off and knocked him stiffer than a red-brick pagoda.

THE END

Contents

FIST AND FANG

by Robert E. Howard

I'VE FOUGHT ALL my life; sometimes for money, sometimes for fun--once in a while for my life. But the deadliest, most vicious fight I ever fought wasn't for none of them things; no, sir, I was fighting wild and desperate for the privilege of getting a bullet through my brain!

Stand by and I'll tell you why I was fighting so me and my best friend would get shot.

I'm the heavyweight champion of the *Sea Girl*, merchant ship, my name being Steve Costigan. The Old Man is partial to warm waters and island trade, see? Well, we was cruising through the Solomons on our way to Brisbane, taking our time because the Old Man practically growed up in the South Sea trade and knows all the old traders and native chiefs and the like, and is always on the lookout for bargains in pearls and such like.

Well, we hove to at a small island by the name of Roa-Toa which had a small trading post on it. This post was run by the only white man on the islands, a fellow named MacGregor, and him being an old friend of the captain's, we run in for a visit.

The minute the Old Man had stepped onto the ramshackle wharf, Bill O'Brien, my side kick, said to me, he said: "Steve, see that motor launch down there by the wharf? Let's grab it and chase over to Tamaru and see old Togo."

Tamaru was another little island so close to Roa-Toa you could see the top of the old dead volcano. Togo was the chief; that wasn't his name, but it was as near as we could come to pronouncing it. He was a wrinkled old scoundrel and was a terrible sot, but very friendly to the white men.

"The Old Man will likely stop at Tamaru," I said.

"He won't, either," said Bill. "Him and MacGregor will drink up all the whiskey we got on board before he ever weighs anchor from Roa-Toa. He won't stop by Tamaru because he won't have no liquor to give to or trade with old Togo. Come on," said Bill. "We can easy make it in that launch. If we hang around the mate will find somethin' for us to do. Let's get to that launch and scoot before the Old Man or MacGregor sees us. Mac wouldn't let us have it, like as not, if we asked him."

So in a very short time we was heading out to sea, me and Bill, and my white bulldog, Mike. I heard a kind of whooping above the sputter of the motor, and looked back to see the Old Man and MacGregor run out of the trading stores and they jumped up and down and shook their fists and hollered, but we waggled our fingers at them and kept on our course, full speed, dead ahead.

WELL, IN DUE time Tamaru grew up out of the ocean in front of us, all still and dark green, with its dead volcano, and the trees growing up the sides of the mountains.

Togo's village was right on the beach when we was there the year before, but now much to our surprise we found nothing but a heap of ruins. The huts was leveled, trees cut short close to the water's edge, and not a sign of human life.

While we was talking, four or five natives come slithering out of the jungle and approached us very friendly, with broad smiles. Mike bristled and growled, but I put it down to the fact that no white dog likes colored people. According to that, no black dog ought to like white people, but it don't work.

Anyway, these kanakas made us understand in their pidgin English that the village had been moved back in the jungle a way, and they signified for us to come with them.

"Ask 'em how come they moved the village," I told Bill, who could speak their language pretty well, and he said: "Aw, they say the salt water made the babies sick. Don't worry about that; they likely don't know theirselves why they moved. They don't often have no reason for what they do. Let's go see Togo."

"Ask 'em how Togo is," I said, and Bill did, and said: "They says he's as free from pain and sickness as a man can be."

The kanakas grinned and nodded. Well, we plodded after them, and Mike he come along and growled deep down in his throat till I asked him very irritably to please shut up. But he paid no attention.

After awhile we come on to a large open space and there was the village. Just now they wasn't a sign of life, except a few native dogs sleeping in the sun. A chill wiggled up and down my spine.

"Say," I said to Bill, "this is kind of queer; ask 'em where Togo is."

"Where at is Togo?" said Bill, and one of the natives grinned and pointed to a pole set in front of the biggest hut. At first I couldn't make out what he meant. Then I did, and I suddenly got sick at my stomach--and cold at the heart with fear. On top of that pole was a human head! It was all that was left of poor old Togo.

The next second two big kanakas had grabbed each of us from behind, and a couple hundred more came swarming out of the huts.

Bill, he give a yell and ducked, throwing one of his natives clean over his head, and he twisted half way round and knocked the other cold with a terrible biff on the jaw. Then the one on the ground grabbed Bill by the legs, and another hit him over the head with a club, laying his scalp open and knocking him to his knees.

MEANWHILE I WAS having my troubles. The minute them two grabbed me, Mike went for them, jerked one of them off me, got him down and nearly tore him apart. At the same instant I jammed my elbow backward, and by sheer luck connected with the other one's solar plexus. He grunted and loosened his hold, and I wheeled round to smash him, but as I did, I felt a sharp prick between my shoulders and knowed one of them was holding a spear at my back. I stopped short and stood still. The next minute me and Bill was tied hand and foot. I looked at Bill; he was bleeding plenty from the cut in his head, but he grinned.

Well, all that took something less than a minute. Three or four natives had went for Mike and pulled him off of his victim, which was howling and bleeding like a stuck hog. The said victim staggered away to the nearest hut, looking like a wreck on a lee shore, and the others danced and jumped around Mike trying to stab him with spears and hit him with clubs, without losing a leg at the same time; while Mike tried to eat his way through them to me.

Then while I watched with my heart in my mouth, crack! went a pistol and Mike went down, rolling over and over till he lay still with the blood oozing from his head. I give a terrible cry and began to rave and tear at my ropes; I struggled so wild and desperate that I jerked loose from the kanakas which was holding me, and fell on the ground, being tied up like I was.

Then they pulled me and Bill roughly around to face a big dark fellow who came swaggering up, a smoking pistol in his hand. At first glance it struck me I'd seen him before, but all I wanted to do now was get loose and tear his throat out with my bare hands for killing Mike.

This bezark stopped in front of us, twirling his gun on his forefinger and I looked close at him. If looks and wishes would kill, he would of dropped dead three times in succession. A big, tall, beautifully built native he was, but he didn't look like the rest. He had a kind of yellow tint to his skin, whereas they was golden brown. And his face wasn't open and good natured like theirs was in repose; it was cruel and slant-eyed and thin-lipped. Malay blood there, I quickly seen. A half breed, with the worst blood of both races. He was dressed in just a loin cloth, like the rest, but somewhere, I knowed, I'd seen him in different clothes and different surroundings. Well, if I hadn't been so grieved and mad on account of Mike, I guess I'd have knowed him right off.

"Well, Meestah Costigan," said the big ham, in a kind of throaty voice, "you visit my island, eh? You like my welcome, maybeso? Maybeso you stay a long time, eh? Glad you come, me; I rather see you than any other man in the world!"

He was still grinning, but when he said the last his heavy jaws come together like the snap of a alligator. And then Bill, who was glaring at him like he couldn't believe his eyes, yelled: "Santos!"

IT ALL COME back to me in a flash! And I would of fell over from sheer surprise, hadst I not been tied and held up. Sure, I remembered! And you ought to, too, if you keep up with even part of the fighters that comes and goes.

A couple of years ago I'd met Santos in a Frisco ring. Yeah! Battling Santos, the Borneo Tiger, that Abie Hussenstein had discovered slaughtering second-raters in Asiatic ports. Abie brought him to America after Santos had cleaned up everything in sight over there.

They is no doubt that the big boy was good. In America he went through his first rank of set-ups like a sickle through wheat. He was fast, fairly clever for a big man, and strong as a bull.

Well, his first first-rater was Tom York, you remember, and Tom outboxed him easy in the first round, but in the second Santos landed a crusher that broke Tom's nose and knocked out four teeth. From then on it was a butchery, and the referee stopped it in the fifth to keep York from being killed. After that the scribes raved over Santos more than ever, called him a second Firpo and said he couldn't miss being champion.

Abie was sparring for matches in the Garden and he sent Santos back to Frisco to pad his k.o. record and keep in trim by toppling some ham-and-eggers. Then, enter a dark man, the villain of the play--otherwise Steve Costigan.

Santos was matched to meet Joe Handler ten rounds in San Francisco. The very day of the fight, Handler sprained his ankle, and they substituted me the last minute. I needn't tell you I went into the ring on the short end of about a hundred to one, with no takers--except the *Sea Girl*'s crew, who seem to think I can lick anybody, simply because I've licked all of them.

Well, I reckon the praise and hurrah and all had went to Santos' head. He come out clowning and playing up to the crowd. He feinted at me with his big long brown arms and made faces and wise-cracks, as I come out of my corner. He dropped his gloves, stuck out his jaw and motioned me to hit him. This got a big laugh out of the crowd, and while he was doing that, with his mouth wide open, laughing, I hit him!

I reckon I was closer to him than he thought, for it was a wide open shot. I crashed my right from my knee, and I plunged in behind it with everything I had. I smashed solid on his sagging jaw so hard it numbed my whole arm. I don't see how I come not to tear his jaw clean off. Anyway, he hit the canvas like he figured on staying there indefinite, and they had to carry him to his dressing room to bring him to.

When everybody got their breath back, they yelled "fluke! fluke!" And it was, because Santos would of licked me, if he'd watched hisself. But it finished him; he'd lost his heart, or something.

His next start he dropped a decision to Kid Allison, and he lost two more fights in a row that way. Hussenstein give him the bounce and he dropped out of view. Santos had gone back to stoking, people supposed; the public had forgot all about him, and I had too, nearly. But here he was!

ALL THIS FLASHED through my brain as I stood and gawped at the big cheese. Say, if Santos had looked tigerish in the ring, in civilized settings, he looked deadly now.

He stuck the pistol back into his girdle and said, easy and lazy: "Well, Meestah Costigan, you remember me, eh?"

"Yeah, I do, you dirty half-breed!" I roared. "What you mean shootin' my dog? Lem'me loose, and I'll rip your heart out!"

He bared his white teeth in a kind of venomous smile and gestured lazily toward the pole where old Togo's head was.

"You come to see your old friend, eh? Well, there he is! What left of him. Now Santos is chief! The old man was fool; the young men, they follow Santos. Now we make palaver; you my guests!"

And with that he laughed in a cold deadly way and said something to the kanakas which was holding us. He turned his back and walked toward his hut, them dragging us along anyway. I looked back, though, and my heart give a jump. Old Mike got to his feet kind of groggy and glassy-eyed, and shook his head and looked around for me. He seen me and started toward me; then he seen Santos, and sneaked away among the trees. I give a sigh of relief. Must be the bullet just grazed him enough to knock him out; nobody had seen him get up and hide but me, and he was safe for the time being, at least--which was something me and Bill O'Brien wasn't--and I guess Bill felt the same way for he looked kind of white.

Santos sat down in a chair, which was one the Old Man had give poor old Togo, and we was propped up in front of him.

"Once we meet before, Costigan," he said, "in your country. Now we meet in mine. This my country. I born here. Big fool, me. I leave with white men on ship when very young. I scrub decks; then shovel coal. I fight with other stokers. I meet Hus'stein and fight for him. He take me to Australia--America; I lick everybody. Everybody yell when I come in ring."

The grin had faded off his map and a wild light was growing in his eyes; they was getting red.

"Then I meet you!" his voice had dropped to a kind of hiss. "They tell me you one big ham. Nothing in the head! I think make people laugh! I hold out my face, say: 'Hit me!' Then I think maybeso the roof fall on me."

He was snarling like a wild beast now; his chest was heaving with rage and his big hands was working like my throat was between them.

"After that, I not so good. People say dirty things now at me. They say: 'Yellow! Glass chin! Throw him out!' Hus'stein say: 'Get out! You no drawing card now!' I go to stoking again. I work my way back to my people; my island."

He give a short grim laugh. He hit his breast with his fist.

"Me king, now! Togo old fool; friend to white man! Bah! I say to young men: make me king! We kill white men, and take rum and cloth and guns like our people did long ago. So I kill Togo, and old men that follow him! And you--" His eyes burned into me.

"You make fool of me," he said slowly. "Aaahhh! I pay you back!" He looked like a madman, gnashing his teeth and rolling his eyes as he roared at us.

I LOOKED AT Bill, uncertain like, and Bill says, nervy enough, but in a kind of unsteady voice: "You don't dast harm a white man. You may be king of this one-horse hunk of mud, but you know blame well if you knock us off, you'll have a British gunboat on your neck."

Santos grinned like a ogre and sank back in his chair. If he'd ever been half way civilized, which I doubt, he had sure reverted back to type again.

"The British have come," said he. "They knocked our village to pieces and killed a few pigs. But we ran away into the jungle and they could no find us. They shoot some shells around and then steam away, the white swine! That was because we fire on a trading boat and kill a sailor."

"Well," said Bill, "the *Sea Girl*'s anchored off Roa-Toa and if you harm us, the crew won't leave nobody alive on this island. They won't shoot at you from long range. They'll land and mop up."

"Soon I go to Roa-Toa," said Santos, very placid. "I think I like to be king of Roa-Toa too; I kill MacGregor, and take his guns and all. If your ship come here, I take her, too. You think I no dare kill white man? Eh? Big fool, you."

"Well," I roared, the suspense being too much for me, "what you goin' to do with us, you yellow-bellied half-breed!"

"I kill you both!" he hissed, smiling and playing with his gun.

"Then do it, and get it over with," I snarled, being afraid I'd blow up if he dragged it out too long. "But, lem'me tell you somethin'--"

"Oh, no," he smiled, "not with the pistol. That is too easy, eh? I want you to suffer like I suffered."

"I don't get yuh," I growled. "It's all in the game. I don't see why you got it in for me. If you'd a-licked me, I wouldn't of kicked. Anyway, you got no cause to bump off Bill, too."

"I kill you all!" he shouted, leaping up again. "And you two--you will howl for death before I get through. Arrgh! You will scream to die--but you will no die till I am ready."

He came close to me and his wild beast eyes burned into mine.

"Slow you will die," he whispered. "Slow--slow! For that blow you strike me, you suffer--and for all I suffer at the hands of your people, you shall suffer ten times ten!"

He stopped and glared at me.

"The Death of a Thousand Cuts shall be yours," he purred. "You know that, eh? Ah, you been to China! I know you know it, because your face go white now!" I reckon mine did, all right. I knew what he meant, and so did Bill. "Me, I show them where to cut," went on Santos, "for I have seen the Chinese torture like those."

I felt froze solid and my clothes were damp with sweat; also I was mad, like a caged rat.

"All right, you black swine!" I yelled at him, kind of off my bat, I reckon. "Go ahead--do your worst! But remember one thing--remember that I licked you! I knocked you cold! Killin' me won't alter the fact that I'm the best man!"

He screamed like a maddened jungle cat and I thought he'd go clean nuts. I'd sure touched him to the quick there!

"You did no beat me!" he howled. "I was big fool! I let you hit me! White pig, I break you with my hands! I tear your heart out and give it to the dogs!"

"Well, why didn't you?" I asked bitterly. "You had your chance, and you sure muffed it! I licked you then, and I can lick you now. You wouldn't dare look at me crost-wise if my hands wasn't tied. I'll die knowin' that I licked you."

His eyes was red as a blood-mad tiger's now, and they glittered at me from under his thick black brows. He grinned, but they was no mirth in it.

"I fight you again," he whispered. "We fight before I kill you. I give you something to fight for, too: if I whip you, and no kill you--you die under the knives; and your friend, too. If I whip you, and kill you with my hands--your friend die under the cuts. But if you whip me, then I no torture you, but kill you both quick." He tapped his pistol.

Anything sounded better than the thousand cuts business, and, anyway, I'd have a chance to go out fighting.

"And suppose I kill you?" I asked.

He laughed contemptuously. "No chance. But if you do, my people shoot you quick."

"Take him up, Steve," said Bill. "It's the best of a bad bargain, any way you look at it."

"I'll fight you on your own terms," I said to Santos.

He grunted, yelled some orders in his own tongue, and the stage was set for the strangest battle I ever had.

In the open space between the huts, the natives made a big ring, standing shoulder to shoulder, about three deep, the men behind looking over the shoulders of those in front. The kids and women come out of the huts and tried to watch the fight between the men's legs.

A sort of oval-shaped space was left clear. At each end of this space stood a thick post, set deep in the ground. They tied Bill to one of these posts.

"I can't be in your corner this fight, old sea horse," said Bill, kind of drawn-faced, but still grinning.

"Well, in a way you are," I said. "You can't sponge my cuts and wave a towel, but you can yell advice when the goin's rough. Anyway," I said, "you got a good view of the fight."

"Sure," he grinned, "I got a ringside seat."

About that time the kanakas unfastened my ropes, and I worked my hands and fingers to get the circulation started again. Bill's hands was tied, so we couldn't shake hands, but I clapped him on the shoulder, and we looked at each other a second. Seafaring men ain't much on showing their emotions, and they ain't very demonstrative, but each of us knew how the other felt. We'd kicked around a good many years together--

Well, I turned around and walked to the middle of the oval, and waited. I didn't have to wait long. Santos came from the other end, his head lowered, his red eyes blazing, a terrible smile on his lips. All he wore was a loin cloth; all I had on was an old pair of pants. We was both bare-footed; and, of course, bare-handed.

I'D NEVER SEEN anything like this in my life before. They was no bright lights except the merciless tropic sun; they was no cheering crowds--nothing but a band of savages that wanted our blood; they was no seconds, no referee--only a hard-faced kanaka with gaudy feathers in his hair, holding Santos' pistol. They was no purse but death. A quick death if I won; a long, slow, terrible death if I lost.

Santos was rangy, big, tapering from wide shoulders to lean legs. Speed and power there was in them smooth, heavy muscles. He was six feet one and a half inch tall; heavier than when I first fought him, but the extra weight was hard muscle. I don't believe he had a ounce of fat on him. He must have weighed two hundred, which gave him about ten pounds on me.

For a second we moved in a half circle, wary and deadly, and then he roared and come lashing in like a tidal wave. He shot left and right to my head so fast that for a second I was too busy ducking and blocking to think. He was crazy to knock my head off; he was shipping everything he had in that direction. Well, it's hard to knock a tough man cold with bare-knuckled head punches. The raw 'uns cut and bruise, but they ain't got the numbing shock the padded glove has. You'll notice most of the knock-outs in the old bare-knuckle days was from blows to the body and throat.

The moment I had a breathing space, I hooked a wicked left to the belly. His ridged muscles felt like flexible steel bands under my knuckles, and he merely snarled and lashed back with a right-hander which bruised my forearm when I blocked it. He was fast and his left was chain lightning--he shot it straight, he uppercut, and he hooked, just like that--zip! blip! blam!

The hook flattened my right ear, and almost simultaneously he threw his right with everything he had. I ducked and he missed by a hair's lash. Jerusha! I heard that right sing past my head like a slung shot, and Santos spun off balance and went to his knees from the force of it. He was up like a cat, spitting and snarling, and I heard Bill yell: "For the love of Mike, Steve, watch that right, or he'll knock your head clean off!"

Well, I guess in a ring with ordinary stakes, Santos would have finished me; but this was different. I'm tough any time; now I was fighting for the privilege of me and my pard going out clean. The thought of them sharp little knives put steel in me.

Santos grinned like a devil as he came in again. This time he didn't rush, he edged craftily, left hand out, watching for a chance to shoot his deadly right over. That's once I wished I was clever! But I ain't, and I knew if I tried to box him, I wouldn't have a chance. So I come in sudden and wide open; his right swished through the air and looped around my neck as I ducked and I braced my feet and ripped both hands to his midriff--bam--bam! The next second his left chopped down on the back of my head. I went into a clinch, and his teeth snapped like a wolf's at my throat as I tied him up. He was snarling at me in his language as we worked out of the clinch, and he nailed me on the breakaway with a straight left to the mouth, which instantly began to bleed.

The sight of the blood maddened the kanakas, and they began to yell like jungle beasts. Santos laughed wild and fierce, and began swinging at my head again with both hands. To date he hadn't tried a single body blow. Three times he landed to the side of my head with a swinging left, and I dug my right into his midriff. His right came over, and I blocked it with my elbow, then shot my own right to his belly again. He'd give a kind of sway with his whole body as he let go the right to give it extra force, and his arm would snap through the air like a big steel spring released.

Crash! His left landed on the side of my head, and I seen ten thousand stars. Bam! His right followed, and I blocked it. But this time it landed flush on the upper arm instead of the elbow, and for a second I thought the bone was broke. The whole arm was numb, and, desperate, I crashed into close quarters and ripped short-arm rights to his belly, while he slashed at my head with short hooks. He wasn't so good in close; he didn't like it, and he broke away and backed off, spearing me with his long left as I followed.

BUT MY BLOOD was up now and I kept right on top of him. I slashed a left hook to his face, sank a straight right under his heart--wham! He brought up a left uppercut that nearly ripped my head off. He flailed in with a torrid right, and I hunched my left shoulder just in time to save my jaw. At the same time I shot my right for his jaw and landed solid, but a little high. He swayed like a tall tree, his eyes rolled, but he come back with a screech like a tree cat and flashed a vicious left to my already bleeding mouth. The right came in behind it like a thunderbolt and I done the only thing I could--ducked, and took it high on the front part of my head. Jerusha! It felt like my skull was unjointed! I heard Bill scream as I hit the ground so hard it nearly knocked the breath clean outa me.

It was just like being hit with a hammer. A stream of blood trickled down into my eyes from where the scalp had been laid open.

I dunno why Santos stepped back and let me get up. Force of habit, I guess. Anyway, as I scrambled up, shaking the blood outa my eyes, he give me a ferocious grin and said: "Now I kill you, white man!" And come slithering in to do it. He feinted his left, drew it back, and as he feinted again, I threw my right, wild and overhand, desperate like, and caught him under the cheek bone. Blood spurted and he went back on his heels. I ripped a left to his belly and he grabbed me and held on like a big python, clubbing me with his left till I tore loose.

He nailed me with the right as I went away from him, but it lacked the old jar. I got a hard skull. No man could of landed like he did without hurting his hand some, anyway. But his left was so fast it looked and felt like twins. He shot it at one of my eyes in straight jabs till I felt that eye closing, and then, as I stepped in with a slashing right to the ribs, he came back with a terrible left hook that split my other eyebrow wide open and the lid sagged down like a curtain halfway over the eye.

"Work in close, Steve!" I heard Bill yell, above the howling of the kanakas. "If he keeps you at long range, he'll kill you!"

I'd already decided that! I wrapped both arms around my head and plunged in till my forehead bumped his chin, and then I started ripping both hands to the belly and heart. His left was beating my right cauliflower to a pulp, but I kept blasting away with both hands till the whole world was blind and red; but he was softening. My fists were sinking deeper into his belly at every blow, and I heard him gasp. Then he wrapped his long, snaky arms around me and pinned me tight. As we tussled back and forth, with his breath hot in my ear, he sunk his teeth into my shoulder and worried it like a dog shaking a rat, growling deep in his throat till I tore away by main strength, and brought a stream of blood from his lips with a smashing right hook.

Then Santos went clean crazy. He howled like a wolf and began throwing punches wild and terrible, without aim or timing. He wasn't thinking about that sore right no more. It was like the air was full of flying sledge-hammers. Some he missed from sheer wildness; I blocked till my arms and shoulders ached. Plenty landed. I slashed a left to his face--and crack!--his right bashed into mine, smashing my nose flat. I heard the bones crackle and snap and a red mist waved in front of my eyes so I couldn't see. I felt faintly the impact of another blow, and then I felt the ground under my shoulders.

I lay there, counting to myself; my head was clearing fast. Nobody ever accused me of not being tough! Having my nose broke was a old story. I said to myself: "Nine!" and got to my feet, wrapping both arms around my head and crouching. Santos yelled and battered at my arms while I glared at him over them, and suddenly I unwound and sank my right to the wrist in his belly. Yes, he was getting soft from my continued batterings! His body muscles was getting too sore to contract hard and my fists sank in deep. Santos bent double, but came up with a punishing left uppercut to the jaw that dazed me and before I could recover, he ripped over that sledge-hammer right. It tore my left ear loose from my head and I felt it flap against my cheek.

I was out on my feet; just fighting from the old battle instinct, now. Some kind of a smash sent me back on my heels, and I felt myself falling backward and couldn't stop. Then I fell against something and heard a fierce voice in my ear: "Steve! He's weakening! Just one more smash, old sea horse, and he's yours!"

We had fought back to the end of the oval space and I was leaning against the post where Bill was tied. I made a desperate effort to right myself. Santos was watching me with his hands down and a nasty sneer on his face. He put his hands out and gripped my shoulders. He was marked pretty well hisself.

"You licked now," he said. "The little knives, now they feast! The Death of a Thousand Cuts, it is yours!"

AT THAT I went kind of crazy, too. I lunged away from the post, and missed with a wild right, and the slaughter recommenced. Santos was mad and bewildered. Well, he wasn't the first fighter who couldn't understand why I kept getting up. My eyes was full of blood and sweat; one was nearly closed, and the sagging lid nearly hid the other. My nose was busted flat, one ear was hanging loose and the other swole out of all proportions. My left shoulder and arm was so numbed from blocking Santos' terrible right, I couldn't lift it but a few inches above my waist line. My wind was giving out; I didn't know how long the fight had been going on; it seemed to me like we'd been fighting for centuries. I dunno what kept me on my feet; I dunno what kept me going. I'd almost got to where I didn't know nor care what they did to me. Sometimes I'd forget what we was fighting for. Sometimes I'd think it was because Santos had killed Mike, then again it would be Bill I'd think he'd killed. Once I thought we was back in the ring in Frisco.

Then I was down on my back, and Santos was kneeling on my chest, strangling me. I tore his hold loose and threw him off, and then we was standing toe to toe, trading slow, hard smashes. Then suddenly Santos shifted his attack for the first time and catapulted a blasting right to my body. Something snapped like a dead stick and I went to my knees with a red-hot knife cutting into my left side.

Santos standing over me, kicked at me with his big bare feet till I caught his legs, and as I clung on and he rained blows down at my head, I heard Bill's voice above the uproar: "You got his goat, Steve! Get up! Get up once and he's licked!"

I got up. I climbed that Malay devil's legs, paying no attention to the punches he showered on me, and as I leaned on his chest and our eyes glared into each other's, I saw a wild, terrible light had come into his--the light that's in a trapped tiger's--scared and bewildered, and dangerous as death. I'd fought him to a standstill--I had his number! And at them thoughts, strength flowed back into my arms. He flailed at me, but the kick was going from his blows; he was nearly punched out.

I stepped back and then drove in again. He was snarling between his teeth, and then he took a deep breath. The instant I saw his midriff go in, I sank my left in to the wrist, and as he bent forward I slugged him behind the ear, and he dropped to his knees. But he come up, gasping and wild. He'd forgot all the boxing he ever knowed, now. I stepped inside his wild swings and crashed my right under his heart, and though it was the most fearful agony to do it, brought up my left to his jaw. He went down on his haunches and I heard, in the deathly silence which had fell, Bill yelling for me to give him the boots. But I don't fight that way--even if I'd of had any boots on.

But Santos wasn't through. He was all savage now, and too primitive to be stopped by ordinary means. I'd fought him to a standstill; he was licked at this game. And he went clean back to the Stone Age. He leaped off the ground, howling and slavering at the mouth, and sprang at me with his fingers spread like talons; not to hit, but to strangle, tear, claw and gnash. And as he came in wide open, I met him with the same kind of punch I'd flattened him with once; a blasting right I brought up from my knee. Crack! I felt his jaw-bone and my hand give way as I landed, and he turned a complete somersault, heels over head, and crashed down on his back a dozen feet away. You'd think that would hold a man, wouldn't you? Well, it would--a man.

It's possible to break a man's jaw with your bare fist, and still not knock him unconscious. Any ordinary man wouldn't be able to do nothing more after that. But Santos wasn't a man, no more; he was a jungle varmint, and he'd gone mad.

BEFORE I COULD tell what he was going to do, he whirled and tore a long-handled battle-axe from the hand of a warrior in the front rank. He must have been on the point of collapse; he'd taken fearful punishment. Where he found strength for his last effort, I dunno. But it all happened in a flash. He had the axe and was looming over me like a black cloud of death before I could move. As he bounded in and swung up the thing above his head, I threw up my right arm. That saved my life; and the axe head missed the arm, but the heavy handle broke my forearm like a match, and knocked me flat on my shoulders.

Santos howled, swung up the axe and leaped again--and a white thunderbolt shot across me and met him in mid-air! Square on the Malay's chest Mike landed, and the impact knocked Santos flat on his back. One terrible scream he gave, and then Mike's iron jaws closed on his throat.

In a second it was the craziest confusion you ever seen. Kanakas whooping and yelling and running and falling over each other doing nothing, and Bill swearing something terrible and tearing at his bonds--and Mike making a bloody mess out of Santos in the middle of all of it. I tried to get up, but I was done. I got to my knees and slumped over again.

THE REST IS all like a dream. I saw the kanaka with the pistol shoot at Mike, and miss--and then, like an echo, come another shot--and the kanaka whooped, clapped his hand to the seat of his loin cloth, and scooted. I heard yelling in white men's voices, shots and a hurrah generally and then into my line of vision--considerably blurred--hove the Old Man, MacGregor, and Penrhyn, the mate, all cursing and whooping, with the whole crew behind them.

"Great Jupiter!" squawked the Old Man, red faced and puffing, as he leaned over me.

"They've kilt Steve! They've beat him to death with axes!"

"He ain't dead!" snarled Bill, twisting at his ropes. "He has just fit the toughest fight I ever seen--will some of you salt pork and biscuit eaters untie me from this post?"

"Rig a stretcher," said the Old Man. "If Steve ain't dead, he's the next thing to it. Hey, what the--!"

At this moment Mike came sauntering over and sat down beside me, licking my hand.

"Wh-who--who is--was--that?" asked the Old Man, kind of white-faced, pointing to what Mike had left.

"That there is what's left of Battlin' Santos, the Borneo Tiger," said Bill, stretching his arms with relish. "History repeats itself, and Steve has just handed him a most artistic trimmin'--are you goopin' swabs goin' to let Steve die here? Get him on board ship, will you?"

"Look about Mike first," I mumbled. "Santos shot him with a pistol."

"Just a graze," pronounced MacGregor, examining Mike's unusually hard head. "Shot him with a pistol, eh? Guess if he'd used a rifle the dawg would of slaughtered the whole tribe. Wait, don't put Costigan on the stretcher till I mop off some of his blood."

I felt his hands feeling around over me, and I cussed when he'd gouge me.

"He'll be all right," he pronounced, "soon's we've set his arm and this rib here, and stitched his ear back on, and took up a few more gashes. And that nose'll need some attention, though I ain't set many noses."

I kind of dimly remember being carried back to the ship, with Mike trotting alongside, and I heard Bill and the Old Man yappin' at each other back and forth.

"--and no sooner had Mac here got through tellin' me that Santos had killed old Togo and set hisself up as king, than we heard the motor launch sputter, and see you two prize jackasses scootin' away into the jaws uh death. We yelled and whooped but you was too smart to listen--"

"How in the name of seven dizzy mermaids did you expect us to hear you with the motor goin'?"

"--and I says, 'Mac,' I says, 'it ain't worth it to save their useless hides, but we got to do it.' And it bein' a well-known fact that a fast motor launch can make more speed than a sailin' vessel, includin' even the *Sea Girl*, which is all we had to rescue you in, we have just now arrove at the village. Hadst it not been for me--"

"Hadst it not been for Steve, you would of found only a few hunks of raw beef. Santos was goin' to carve us, and believe you me when I tell yuh Steve fought him to a standstill! Steve was licked to a frazzle, and didn't know it! Santos had everything, and he made Steve into the hash which now lies on that stretcher, but the old sea horse just naturally outgamed him. Accordin' to rights, Steve shoulda been knocked cold five times."

"Arrumph, arrumph!" growled the Old Man, but I could tell he was that proud he couldn't hardly keep his feet on the ground. "I'd of give the price of a cargo to see that fight. Well, we didn't do like the British gunboat did--anchor off-shore and shell a few huts. We went through that jungle like Neptune goes through the water, and all of the bucks was too interested to know we was comin' till we swarmed out on 'em.

"I'm tellin' you, we'd of scuppered a flock of them, if my crew wasn't the worst aggregation of poor shots on the Seven Seas--"

"Well, hey," said the crew, "we didn't notice you bringin' down nobody on the fly."

"Shut up!" roared the Old Man. "I'm boss here and I'll be respected."

"For cats' sake," I snarled through my pulped lips, "will you cock-eyed sea horses dry up and let a sufferin' man suffer in his own way?"

"Don't think you rate so high, just because you're a little bunged up," growled Bill; but they was a catch in his voice. From the way he gripped my hand, I knowed exactly how he felt.

THE END

Contents

GENERAL IRONFIST

By Robert E. Howard

AS I CLUMB into the ring that night in the Pleasure Palace Fight Club, on the Hong Kong waterfront, I was low in my mind. I'd come to Hong Kong looking for a former shipmate of mine. I'd come on from Tainan as fast as I could, even leaving my bulldog Mike aboard the *Sea Girl*, which wasn't due to touch at Hong Kong for a couple of weeks yet.

But Soapy Jackson, the feller I was looking for, had just dropped plumb out of sight. Nobody'd saw him for weeks, or knowed what had become of him. Meanwhile my dough was all gone, so I accepted a bout with a big Chinese fighter they called the Yeller Typhoon.

He was a favorite with the sporting crowd and the Palace was jammed with both white men and Chineses that night, some very high class. I noticed one Chinee in particular, whilst setting in my corner waiting for the bell, because his European clothes was so swell, and because he seemed to take such a burning interest in the goings on. But I didn't pay much attention to the crowd; I was impatient to get the battle over with.

The Yeller Typhoon weighed three hundred pounds and he was a head taller'n me; but most of his weight was around his waist-line, and he didn't have the kind of arms and shoulders that makes a hitter. And it don't make no difference how big a Chinaman is, he can't take it.

I wasn't in no mood for classy boxing that night. I just walked into him, let him flail away with both hands till I seen a opening, and then let go my right. He shook the ring when he hit the boards, and the brawl was over.

Paying no heed to the howls of the dumbfounded multitude, I hastened to my dressing-room, donned my duds, and then hauled a letter from my britches pocket and studied it like I'd done a hundred times before.

It was addressed to Mr. Soapy Jackson, American Bar, Tainan, Taiwan, and was from a San Francisco law firm. After Soapy left the *Sea Girl*, he tended bar at the American, but he'd been gone a month when the *Sea Girl* docked at Tainan again, and the proprietor showed me that letter which had just come for him. He said Soapy had went to Hong Kong, but he didn't know his address, so I took the letter and come on alone to find him, because I had a idea it was important. Maybe he'd been left a fortune.

But I'd found Hong Kong in turmoil, just like all the rest of China. Up in the hills a lot of bandits, which called themselves revolutionary armies, was raising hell, and all I couldst hear was talk about General Yun Chei, and General Whang Shan, and General Feng, which they said was really a white man. Folks said Yun and Feng had joined up against Whang, and some tall battling was expected, and the foreigners was all piling down out of the interior. It was easy for a white sailorman with no connections to drop out of sight and never be heard of again. I thought what if Soapy has got hisself scuppered by them bloody devils, just when maybe he was on the p'int of coming into big money.

Well, I stuck the letter in my pocket, and sallied forth into the lamp-lit street to look for Soapy some more, when somebody hove up alongside of me, and who should it be but that dapper Chinee in European clothes I'd noticed in the first row, ringside, at the fight.

"You are Sailor Costigan, are you not?" he said in perfect English.

"Yeah," I said, after due consideration.

"I saw you fight the Yellow Typhoon tonight," he said. "The blow you dealt him would have felled an ox. Can you always hit like that?"

"Why not?" I inquired. He looked me over closely, and nodded his head like he was agreeing with hisself about something.

"Come in and have a drink," he said, so I follered him into a native joint where they wasn't nothing but Chineses. They looked at me with about as much expression as fishes, and went on guzzling tea and rice wine out of them little fool egg-shell cups. The mandarin, or whatever he was, led the way into a room which the door was covered with velvet curtains and the walls had silk hangings with dragons all over 'em, and we sot down at a ebony table and a Chinaboy brung in a porcelain jug and the glasses.

The mandarin poured out the licker, and, whilst he was pouring mine, such a infernal racket arose outside the door that I turned around and looked, but couldn't see nothing for the curtains, and the noise quieted down all of a sudden. Them Chineses is always squabbling amongst theirselves.

So the mandarin said, "Let us drink to your vivid victory!"

"Aw," I said, "that wasn't nothin'. All I had to do was hit him."

But I drank, and I said, "This is funny tastin' stuff. What is it?"

"Kaoliang," he said. "Have another glass." So he poured 'em, and nigh upsot my glass with his sleeve as he handed it to me.

So I drank it, and he said, "What's the matter with your ears?"

"You oughta know, bein' a fight fan," I said.

"This fight tonight was the first I have ever witnessed," he confessed.

"I'd never thought it from the interest you've taken in the brawl," I said. "Well, these ears is what is known in the vernacular of the game as cauliflowers. I got 'em, also this undulatin' nose, from stoppin' gloves with human knuckles inside of 'em. All old-timers is similarly decorated, unless they happen to be of the dancin'-school variety."

"You have fought in the ring many times?" he inquired.

"Oftener'n I can remember," I answered, and his black eyes gleamed with some secret pleasure. I took another snort of that there Chinese licker out of the jug, and I begun to feel oratorical and histrionic.

"From Savannah to Singapore," I said, "from the alleys of Bristol to the wharfs of Melbourne, I've soaked the resin dust with my blood and the gore of my enermies. I'm the bully of the *Sea Girl*, the toughest ship afloat, and when I set foot on the docks, strong men hunt cover! I--"

I suddenly noticed my tongue was getting thick and my head was swimming. The mandarin wasn't making no attempt to talk. He was setting staring at me kinda intense-like, and his eyes glittered through a mist which was beginning to float about me.

"What the heck!" I said stupidly. Then I heaved up with a roar, and the room reeled around me. "You yeller-bellied bilge-rat!" I roared drunkenly. "You done doped my grog! You--"

I grabbed him by the shirt with my left, and dragged him across the table top, drawing back my right, but before I could bash him with it, something exploded at the base of my skull, and the lights went out.

I MUST OF been out a long time. Once or twice I had a sensation of being tossed and jounced around, and thought I was in my bunk and a rough sea running, and then again I kinda vaguely realized that I was bumping over a rutty road in a automobile, and I had a feeling that I ought to get up and knock somebody's block off. But mostly I just laid there and didn't know nothing at all.

When I did finally come to myself, the first thing I discovered was that my hands and feet was tied with ropes. Then I seen I was laying on a camp cot in a tent, and a big Chinaman with a rifle was standing over me. I craned my neck, and seen another man setting on a pile of silk cushions, and he looked kinda familiar.

At first I didn't recognize him, because now he was dressed in embroidered silk robes, Chinese style, but then I seen it was the mandarin. I struggled up to a sitting position, in spite of my bonds, and addressed him with poignancy and fervor.

"Why," I concluded passionately, "did you dope my licker? Where am I at? What've you done with me, you scum of a Macao gutter?"

"You are in the camp of General Yun Chei," he said. "I transported you hither in my automobile while you lay senseless."

"And who the devil are you?" I demanded.

He gave me a sardonic bow. "I am General Yun Chei, your humble servant," he said.

"The hell you are!" I commented with a touch of old-world culture. "You had a nerve, comin' right into Hong Kong."

"The Federalist fools are blind," he said. "Often I play my own spy."

"But what'd you kidnap me for?" I yelled with passion, jerking at my cords till the veins stood out on my temples. "I can't pay no cussed ransom."

"Have you ever heard of General Feng?" he asked.

"And what if I has?" I snarled, being in no mood for riddles.

"He is camped nearby," said he. "He is a white foreign-devil like yourself. You have heard his nickname--?"

"Well?" I demanded.

"He is a man of great strength and violent passions," said General Yun. "He has acquired a following more because of his personal fighting ability than because of his intellect. Whomever he strikes with his fists falls senseless to the ground. So the soldiers call him .

"Now, he and I have temporarily allied our forces, because our mutual enemy, General Whang Shan, is somewhere in the vicinity. General Whang has a force greater than ours, and he likewise possesses an airplane, which he flies himself. We do not know exactly where he is, but, on the other hand, he does not know our position, either, and we are careful to guard against spies. No one leaves or enters our camp without special permission.

"Though and myself are temporary allies, there is no love lost between us, and he constantly seeks to undermine my prestige with my men. To protect myself I must retaliate--not so as to precipitate trouble between our armies, but in such a way as to make him lose face.

"General Feng boasts that he can conquer any man in China with his naked fists, and he has frequently dared me to pit my hardiest captains against him for the sheer sport of it. He well knows that no man in my army could stand up against him, and his arrogance lowers my prestige. So I went secretly to Hong Kong to find a man who might have a fighting chance against him. I contemplated the Yellow Typhoon, but when you laid him low with a single stroke, I knew you were the man for whom I was looking. I have many friends in Hong Kong. Drugging you was easy. The first time a pre-arranged noise at the door distracted your attention. But that was not enough, so I contrived to dope your second drink under cover of my sleeve. By the holy dragon, you had enough drug in you to have overcome an elephant before you succumbed!

"But here you are. I shall present you to General Feng, before all the captains, and challenge him to make good his boast. He cannot with honor refuse; and if you beat him, he will lose face, and my prestige will rise accordingly, because you represent me."

"And what do I get out of it?" I demanded.

"If you win," he said, "I will send you back to Hong Kong with a thousand American dollars."

"And what if I lose?" I said.

"Ah," he smiled bleakly, "a man whose head has been removed by the executioner's sword has no need of money."

I burst into a cold sweat and sot in silent meditation.

"Do you agree?" he asked at last.

"I'd like to know what choice I got," I snarled. "Take these here cords offa me and gimme some grub. I won't fight for nobody on a empty belly."

He clapped his hands, and the soldier cut my cords with his bayonet, and another menial come in with a big dish of mutton stew and some bread and rice wine, so I fell to and lapped it all up in a hurry.

"As a token of appreciation," said General Yun, "I now make you a present of this unworthy trinket."

And he hauled out the finest watch I ever seen and give it to me.

"If the gift pleases you," he said, noting my gratification, "let it nerve your thews against ."

"Don't worry about that," I said, admiring the watch, which was gold with dragons carved on it. "I'll bust him so hard he'll be loopin' the loop for a week."

"Excellent!" beamed General Yun. "If you could contrive to deal him a fatal injury during the combat, it could simplify matters greatly. But come! I shall tangle General Feng in his own web!"

I FOLLERED HIM out of the tent, and seen a lot of other tents and ragged soldiers drilling amongst 'em, and off to one side another camp with more yeller-bellied gunmen in it. It was still kinda early in the morning, and I gathered it had tooken us all night to get there in Yun's auto. We was away up in the hills, and they was no sign of civilization anywheres.

General Yun headed straight for a big tent in the middle of the camp, and I follered him in. A lot of officers in all kinds of uniforms riz and bowed, except one big man who sot on a camp stool. He was a white man in faded khaki and boots and a sun helmet; his fists was as big as mauls, and his hairy arms was thick with muscles. His face and corded neck was burned brick-colored by the sun, and he wore a expression like he habitually hankered for somebody to give him a excuse to slug 'em.

"General Yun--" he begun in a harsh voice, then stopped and glared at me. "What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Joel Ballerin!" I said, staring at him. I might of knowed. Wherever they was war, you'd usually find Joel Ballerin right in the middle of it. He was from South Australia, and had a natural instinct for carnage. He was famed as a fighting man all over South Africa, Australia and the South Seas. Gunrunner, blackbirder, smuggler, pirate, pearler, or what have you, but always a scrapper from the word go, with a constant hankering to bounce his enormous fists offa somebody's conk. I'd never fit him, but I'd saw some of his handiwork. The ruin he could make of a human carcass was plumb appalling.

He glared at me with no love, because I got considerable reputation as a man-mauler myself, and fighting men is jealous of each other's fame. I couldst feel my own short hairs bristle as I glared at him.

"You have boasted much of your prowess with the clenched fist," said Yun Chei, softly. "You have repeatedly assured me that there was not a man in my army, including my unworthy self, whom you could not subdue with ease. I have here one of my followers whom I venture to back against you."

"That's Steve Costigan, an American sailor," snarled Ballerin. "He's no man of yours."

"On the contrary!" said General Yun. "Do you not see that he wears my dragon watch, entrusted only to my loyal henchmen?"

"Well," growled Ballerin, "there's something fishy about this. When you bring that cabbage-eared gorilla up here--"

"Hey!" I said indignantly. "You cease heavin' them insults around! If you ain't got the guts to fight, why, say so!"

"Why, you blasted fool!" he roared, jumping up off his stool like it was red hot. "I'll break your infernal head right here and now--"

General Yun got between us and smiled blandly and said, "Let us be dignified in all things. Let it be a public exhibition. I fear this tent would not prove a proper arena for two such gladiators. I shall have a ring constructed at once."

Ballerin turned away, grunting, "All right; fix it any way you want to." Then he wheeled back, his eyes flaming, and snarled at me, "As for you, you Yankee ape, you're going out of this camp feet-first!"

"Big talk don't bust no chins," I retorted. "I never did like you anyway, you nigger-stealin' pearl-thief!"

He looked like he was going to bust some blood-vessels, but he just give a ferocious snarl and plunged out of the tent. General Yun motioned me to foller him, and his officers tagged after us. The others follered General Feng. They didn't seem to be no love lost betwixt them two armies.

" is caught in his own snare!" gurgled General Yun, hugging hisself with glee. "He lusts for battle, but is furious and suspicious because I trapped him into it. All the men of both armies shall see his downfall. Call in the patrols from the hills! General Ironfist! Ha!"

GENERAL YUN DIDN'T take me back to his tent, but he put me in another'n and told me to holler if I wanted anything. He said I'd be guarded so's Ballerin couldn't have me bumped off, but I seen I was as good as a prisoner.

Well, I sot in there, and heard some men come marching up and surround the tent, and somebody give orders in broken Chinese, and cussed heartily in English, and I stuck my head out of the door and hollered, "Soapy!"

There he was, all right, commanding the guard, with a old British army coat three sizes too small for him, and a sword three sizes too big. He nigh dropped his sword when he seen me, and bellered, "Steve! What you doin' here?"

"I come up to lick Joel Ballerin for Yun Chei," I said. And he said, "So that's why they're buildin' that ring! Nobody but the highest officers knows what's goin' on."

"What you doin' here?" I demanded.

"Aw," he said, "I got tired tendin' bar and decided to become a soldier of fortune. So I skipped to Hong Kong and beat it up into the hills and joined Yun Chei. But Steve, the life ain't what it's cracked up to be. I don't mind the fightin' much, cause it's mostly yellin' and shootin' and little damage done, but marchin' through these hills is hell, and the food is lousy. We don't get paid regular, and no place to spend the dough when we do get it. For ten cents I'd desert."

"Well, lissen," I said, "I got a letter for you." I reached into my britches pocket, and then I give a yelp. "I been rolled!" I hollered. "It's gone!"

"What?" he said.

"Your letter," I said. "I was lookin' for you to give it to you. It come to the American Bar at Tainan. A letter from the Ormond and Ashley law firm, 'Frisco."

"What was in it?" he demanded.

"How should I know?" I returned irritably. "I didn't open it. I thought maybe somebody had left you a lot of dough, or somethin'."

"I've heard pa say he had wealthy relatives," said Soapy, doubtfully. "Look again, Steve."

"I've looked," I said. "It ain't here. I bet Yun Chei took it offa me whilst I was out. I'll go over and bust him on the jaw--"

"Wait!" hollered Soapy. "You'll get us both shot! You ain't supposed to leave this tent, and I got to guard you."

"Well," I said, "t'aint likely they was any money in the letter. Likely they was just tellin' you where to go to get the dough. I remember the address, and when I get back to Hong Kong, I'll write and tell 'em I got you located."

"That's a long time to wait," said Soapy, pessimistically.

"Not so long," I said. "As soon as I lick Ballerin, I'll start for Hong Kong--"

"No, you won't," said Soapy. "No ways soon, anyhow."

"What d'you mean?" I asked. "Yun said he'd send me back if I licked Ballerin."

"He didn't say when, did he?" inquired Soapy. "He ain't goin' to take no chance of you going back and talkin' and revealin' our position to Whang's spies. No, sir; he'll keep you prisoner till he's ready to change camp, and that may be six months."

"Me stay in this dump six months?" I exclaimed fiercely. "I won't do it!"

"Maybe you won't at that," he said cheeringly. "A lot of things can happen unexpected around a rebel Chinee camp. I see you're wearin' Yun Chei's dragon watch."

"Yeah," I said. "Ain't it a beaut? Yun Chei give it to me."

"Well" he said, "that watch has been give away before, but it has a way of comin' back to Yun Chei after the owner's demise, which is generally sudden and frequent. Four men that I know of has already been made a present of that watch, and none of 'em is now alive."

"The hell you say!" I said, beginning to perspire copiously. "This is a nice, friendly place I got into. Do you want to stay here?"

"No, I don't!" he replied bitterly. "I didn't want to before, and when I thinks they's maybe a million dollars waitin' somewhere for me to spend, I feels like throwin' down this fool sword and headin' for the coast."

"Well," I said, "I ain't goin' to spend no six months here. Yet I wants that thousand bucks. Let's us make a break tonight, after I collects."

"They'd run us down before we'd went far," he said despondently. "I got one of the few good horses in camp, but it couldn't carry us both at any kind of a clip. All the other nags are fastened up and guarded so nobody can desert and carry news of our whereabouts to General Whang, which would give a leg to know, so he could raid us. Yun Chei knows he can trust me not to, because Whang wants to cut off my head. I stole a batch of his eatin' chickens onst when we was fightin' him over near Kauchau."

"Well," I begun hotly, "I'll be derned if I'm goin' to--"

"Shhh!" he said. "We got to change guard now; here comes the other squad. I'm goin' off somewheres and think."

Another gang of Chinamen come up with a native officer in charge, and Soapy and his men marched off, and I sot and wound my dragon watch, and tried to think of something, but didn't have no success, as usual.

TIME DRAGGED SLOW, but finally about the middle of the afternoon, a mob of captains or something come and led me out of the tent and escorted me to the ring which had been built about halfway between the camps. They was already a solid bank of soldiers around it, Yun Chei's on one side and General Feng's on the other, with their rifles. The ring was just four posts stuck in the ground, with ropes stretched between 'em, and a bare floor of boards elevated maybe a yard or more. General Yun was setting in a camp chair on one side, with his officers around him, and a big Chinee, which was naked to the waist, was standing right behind him. The other officers and the common soldiers of both armies sot on the ground or stood up.

I didn't see Soapy nowheres, and they wasn't no seconds nor handlers. The Chineses didn't know nothing about such things. I clumb into the ring and examined the ropes, which was too loose, for one thing, and the floor, which was solid enough but none too even, and no padding of any kind on it. They had had sense enough to put camp stools in the corners, so I shed my cap, coat and shirt, and sot down. General Yun then riz and come over to me and smiled gently and said, "Smite the dog as you smote the Yellow Typhoon. If you lose the fight, you will lose your head in this very ring."

"I ain't goin' to lose," I snarled, being fed up on that kind of talk, and he smiled benevolently and retired to his chair. Just then somebody yanked my pants leg, and I looked down and seen Soapy. He was shaking with excitement.

"Don't talk, Steve!" he whispered. "Just lissen! Yun Chei thinks I'm encouragin' you for the battle. But lissen: I've fixed it! I got wind of a Federal army camped in a valley to the south. They don't know nothin' about us, but I found a man who swore I could trust him, and I smuggled him off on my horse. He'll guide 'em back here, and they'll break up this den of thieves. When the shootin' starts, we'll duck and run for the Federal lines. I sent my man right after I talked to you this mornin', so they oughta get here in maybe an hour or so."

"Well," I said, "I hope they don't get here too soon; I want to collect my thousand bucks from Yun Chei before I run."

"I'm goin' to snoop amongst Feng's men," he hissed, and just then the crowd on the opposite side of the ring divided, and here come Feng hisself, alias Joel Ballerin.

He was stripped to the waist, and he wore his fighting scowl. His short blond hair bristled, and his men sent up a cheer. He was big, and well built for speed and power. He had broad, square shoulders, a big arching chest, and a heavy neck, and his muscles fairly bulged under his sun-reddened skin with every move he made. He stood square on his wide-braced legs, and they showed plenty of power and drive. He was a fraction of a inch taller'n me, and weighed about 200 to my 190, all bone and muscle and hellfire.

Looking back on that fight, it was one of the strangest I ever mixed in. They wasn't no referee. They was a Chinaman who whanged a gong every now and then when he remembered to, but he wasn't no-ways consistent in his time-keeping. Some of the rounds lasted thirty seconds and some lasted nine or ten minutes. When one of us went down, they wasn't no counting. The idea was that we should just keep on battling till one of us wasn't able to get up at all. We hadn't no gloves. Bare knuckles don't jolt like the mitts, but they cut and bruise. It's hard to knock out a tough man in good condition with one lick or half a dozen licks of your bare maulers. You got to plumb butcher him.

They was few preliminaries. Ballerin vaulted into the ring, kicked his stool through the ropes, and yelled, "Hit that gong, Wu Shang!" Wu Shang hit it, and Ballerin come for me like a cross between a bucking bronco and a China typhoon.

We met in the center of the ring like a thunder-clap, and his first lick split my left cauliflower, and my first clout laid his jaw open to the bone. After that it was slaughter and massacre.

There wasn't nothing fancy about our battling. It was toe to toe, and breast to breast, bare knuckles crunching against muscle and bone. Before the first round was over we was slipping in smears of our own blood. In the second Ballerin nearly fractured my jaw with a blazing left hook that stretched me on the floor. But I was up and slugging like mad at the bell. We begun the third by rushing from our corners with such fury that we had a head-on collision which dumped us both to the boards nigh senseless. Ballerin's scalp was laid open, and my head had a bump on it as big as a egg. The Chineses screamed with amazement, seeing us both writhing on the floor, but we staggered up about the same time and begun swinging at each other when Wu Shang got rattled and hit the gong.

AT THE BEGINNING of the fourth I started bombarding Ballerin's mid-section whilst he pounded my head till my ears was ringing like all the ship bells in Frisco harbor, and the blood got in my eyes till I couldn't see and was hitting by instinct. I could hear him gasping and panting as my iron maulers sunk deeper and deeper into his suffering belly, and finally, with a maddened roar, he grappled me and throwed me, and, setting astraddle of me, begun pounding my head against the boards, to the great glee of his warriors.

As Wu Shang seemed inclined to let that round go on forever, I resorted to some longshoreman tactics myself, kicked lustily in the back of the head, arched my body and throwed him off of me, and pasted him beautifully in the eye as he riz.

This reduced his available sight by half, and didn't improve his temper none, as he proved by giving vent to a screech like a steam whistle, and letting go a hurricane swing that caught me under the ear and wafted me across the ring into the ropes. Them being too loose, I continued my flight unchecked and lit headfirst in the laps of the soldiers outside.

I riz and started to climb back through the ropes, necessarily tromping on my victims as I done so, and one would've stabbed me with his bayonnet by way of reprisal if I hadn't thoughtfully kicked him in the jaw first. Then I seen Ballerin crouching at the ropes, grinning fiercely at me as he dripped blood and weighed his huge fists, and I seen his intention of socking me as I clumb through. I said, "Get back from them ropes and let me in, you scum of the bilge!"

"That's up to you, you wind-jamming baboon!" he laughed brutally. So I unexpectedly reached through the ropes and grabbed his ankle and dumped him on his neck, and before he could rise, I was back in the ring. He riz ravening, and just then Wu Shang decided to hit the gong.

At the beginning of the fifth we came together and slugged till we was blind and deaf and dizzy, and when we finally heard the gong, we dropped in our tracks and lay there side by side, gasping for breath, till the gong announced the opening of the sixth, and we riz up and started in where we'd left off.

We was exchanging lefts and rights like a hail storm when he brung one up from the floor so fast I never seen it coming. The first part of me that hit the boards was the back of my head, and it nigh caved in the floor. I riz and tore into him, slugging with frenzied abandon, and battered him back across the ring, but I was so blind I missed him as he side-stepped, and fell into the ropes, and he smashed me three times behind the ear, and then, as I wheeled groggily, he caught me square on the button with a most awful right swing. Wham! I don't remember falling, but I must of, because the next thing I knowed I was down on the boards and Ballerin was stomping in my ribs with his boots. Away off I could hear Wu Shang banging his gong, but Ballerin give no heed, and I felt myself slipping into dreamland.

Then my blood-misted gaze, wandering at random, rested on General Yun in his camp chair. He smiled at me grimly, and that half-naked Chinaman behind him drawed a great curved sword and run his thumb along the edge.

With a howl of desperation I steadied my tottering brain, and I fought my way to my feet in spite of all Ballerin could do, and I pasted him with a left that tore his ear nearly off his head, and he went reeling into the ropes. He come back with a roar and a tremendous clout that missed me and splintered one of the ring posts, and I heaved my right under his heart with all my beef behind it. I heard a couple of his ribs crack under it, and I follered it with a hurricane of lefts and rights that drove him staggering before me like a ship in a typhoon. A thundering right to the head bent him back over the ropes, and then, just as I was setting myself for the finisher, I felt somebody jerking my pants leg and heard Soapy hollering to me amidst the roar of the mob, "Steve! Ballerin's got fifty rifles trained on you right now. If you drop him, you'll never leave that ring alive."

I SHOOK THE blood outa my eyes and cast a desperate glare over my shoulder. The front ranks of General Feng's warriors still leaned on their rifles, but behind 'em I caught a glimmer of black muzzles.

Ballerin pitched off the ropes, swinging a wild overhand right that missed by a yard, and he would of tumbled to the boards if I hadn't grabbed him and held him up.

"What'm I goin' to do?" I howled. "If I don't drop him, Yun Chei'll cut off my head, and if I do, his men'll shoot me!"

"Stall, Steve!" begged Soapy. "Keep it up as long as you can; somethin' might happen any minute now."

I cast a glance at the sun, and sweated with despair. But I held Ballerin up as long as I dared, and then I pushed him away from me and swung wide at him. He reeled and I tried to catch him, but he pitched face-first, and I ducked as I heard a click of rifle bolts. But he was trying to climb up again, and I never hoped to see a opponent rise like I hoped to see him rise. He grabbed the ropes and hauled hisself up, and stared around, one eye closed and t'other glassy.

He was out on his feet, but his fighting instinct kept him going. He come blundering out into the ring, swinging blind, and I swung wide, but he fell into it somehow, and I hit him in spite of myself. Soapy give a lamentable howl, and Ballerin pitched back into the ropes, and I was on him and locked him in a despairing grasp before he could fall. He was dead weight in my arms, out cold, his legs dragging, and I was so near out myself I wondered how long I couldst hold him up. Over his shoulder I see General Yun looking at me impatient; even a Chinese revolutionist could see that was ready for the cleaners. But I held on; if I let go, I knowed Ballerin wouldn't get up again, and his men would start target practice on me.

Then above the noise of the crowd I heard a low roar. I looked out over their heads, and beyond the ridge of a distant hill something come soaring. It was a airplane, and nobody but me had seen it. I wrestled my limp victim to the ropes, and gasped the news to Soapy. He was too smart to look, but he hissed, "Keep stallin'! Hold him up! The Federals have sent a plane to our rescue! Everything's jake!"

General Yun had got suspicious. He jumped up and shook his fist at me, and hollered, and his derned executioner grinned and drawed his sword again--and then, with a rush and zoom, the airplane swooped down on us like a hawk. Everybody looked up and yelled, and as it passed right over the ring, I seen something tumble from it and flash in the sun. And Soapy yelled, "Look out! There's a dragon painted on it! That ain't a Federal plane--that's Whang Shan!"

I throwed Ballerin bodily over the ropes as far as I could heave him, and div after him, and the next instant--blam!--the ring went up in smoke, and pieces flew every which way.

BOMBS WAS FALLING and crashing and tents going sky-high, and men yelling and shooting and running and falling over each other, and the roar of that cussed plane was in my ears as I headed for the tall timber. I was vaguely aware that Soapy was legging it alongside me, hollering, "That Chinaman of mine never went to the Federals, the dirty rat! I see it all now! He was one of Whang Shan's spies. No wonder he was so anxious to help! He wanted my horse--hey, Steve! This way!"

I seen Soapy do a running dive into General Yun's auto, which was setting in front of his tent, and I follered him. We went roaring away just as a bomb hit where the car had been a second before, and spattered us with dirt. I dunno where General Yun was, though I caught a glimpse of a silk-robed figure, which might of been him, scudding for the hills.

We went through that camp like a tornado, with all hell popping behind us. Whang was sure giving his enermies the works in that one plane of his'n. They was such punk shots they couldn't hit him with their rifles, and all he had to do was heave bombs into the thick of 'em.

I don't remember much about that ride. Soapy was hanging to the wheel and pushing the accelerator through the floor, and I was holding onto the seat and trying to stay with the derned craft which was bucking over that awful road like a skiff in a squall. Presently we hit a bump that throwed me clean over the seat into the back, and when I come up for air I had something clutched in my hand, at the sight of which I give a yell of joy--and bit my tongue savagely as we hit another bump.

I clumb back into the front seat like I was crawling along the cross-trees of the main-mast in a typhoon, and tried to tell Soapy what I'd found, but we was going so fast the wind blowed the words clean outa my mouth.

It wasn't till we had dropped down out of the higher hills along about sundown and was coasting along a comparatively better road amongst fields and mud huts that I got a chance to catch my breath.

"I found your letter," I said. "It was in the bottom of the car. It must of slipped outa my pocket whilst I was tied up."

"Read it to me," he requested, and I said, "Wait till I see is my watch intact. I didn't get my thousand bucks for lickin' Ballerin, and I want to be sure I got somethin, for goin' through what I been through."

So I looked at the watch, which must of been worth five hundred dollars anyway, and it was unscratched, so I opened the letter and read: "Ormond and Ashley, attorneys at law, San Francisco, California, U. S. A. Dear Mister Jackson: This is to inform you that you are being sued by Mrs. J. A. Lynch for a nine months board bill, amounting to exactly--"

Soapy give a ear-splitting yell and wrenched the wheel over.

"What you doin', you idjit?" I howled, as the car r'ared and skidded and lurched around like a skiff in a tide-rip.

"I'm goin' back to Yun Chei!" he screeched. "My expectations is bust! I thought I was a heiress, but I'm still a bum! I ain't got the--"

Crash! We left the road, rammed a tree, and went into a perfect tailspin.

The evening shadders was falling as I crawled out from under the debris and untangled one of the wheels from around my neck. I looked about for Soapy's remains, and seen 'em setting on a busted headlight, brooding somberly.

"You might at least ask if I'm hurt," I said resentfully.

"What of it?" he asked bitterly. "We're ruined. I ain't got not fortune."

"I was ruined when I first met a hoodoo like you," I said fiercely. "Anyway, I still got Yun Chei's watch." And I reached into my pocket. And then I gave a poignant shriek. That watch must of absorbed the whole jolt of the smash. I had a handful of metal scraps and wheels and springs which nobody could tell was they meant for a watch or what. Thereafter, a figure might have been seen flitting through the twilight, hotly pursued by another, bulkier figure, breathing threats of vengeance, in the general direction of the coast.

THE END

Contents

NIGHT OF BATTLE

By Robert E. Howard

I'M BEGINNING TO believe that Singapore is a jinx for me. Not that I don't always get a fight there; I do. But it looks, by golly, like a lot of dirty luck is always throwed in with the fight.

Rumination of them sort was in my mind as I clumb the rickety stairs of the Seaman's Deluxe Boarding House and entered my room, tightly gripping the fifty bucks which constituted my whole wad.

I'd just been down to see Ace Larnigan, manager of the Arena, and had got matched with Black Jack O'Brien for ten rounds or less, that night. And I was wondering where I could hide my roll. I had the choice of taking it with me and getting it stole outa my britches whilst I was in the ring, or leaving it in my room and getting it hooked by the Chino servants from which you couldn't hide nothing.

I set on my ramshackle bed and meditated, and I had about decided to let my white bulldog, Mike, hold the roll in his mouth while I polished off Black Jack, with a good chance of him swallering it in his excitement, when all of sudden I heered sounds of somebody ascending the stairs about six steps at a jump, and then running wildly down the hall.

I paid no heed; guests of the Deluxe is always being chased into the dump or out of it by the cops. But instead of running into his own room and hiding under the bed, as was the usual custom, this particular fugitive blundered headlong against my door, blowing and gasping like a grampus. Much to my annoyance, the door was knocked violently open, and a disheveled shape fell all over the floor.

I riz with dignity. "What kind of a game is this?" I asked, with my instinctive courtesy. "Will you get outa my room or will I throw you out on your ear?"

"Hide me, Steve!" the shape gasped. "Shut the door! Hide me! Give me a gun! Call the cops! Lemme under the bed! Look out the window and see if you see anybody chasing me!"

"Make up your mind what you want me to do; I ain't no magician," I said disgustedly, recognizing the shape as Johnny Kyelan, a good-hearted but soft-headed sap of a kid which should of been jerking soda back home instead of trying to tend bar in a tough waterfront joint in Singapore. Just one of them fool kids which is trying to see the world.

He grabbed me with hands that shook, and I seen the sweat standing out on his face.

"You got to help me, Steve!" he babbled. "I came here because I didn't know anybody else to go to. If you don't help me, I'll never live to see another sunrise. I've stumbled onto something I wasn't looking for. Something that it's certain death to know about. Steve, I've found out who The Black Mandarin is!"

I grunted. This is serious.

"You mean you know who it is that's been committin' all these robberies and murders, dressed up in a mask and Chinee clothes?"

"The same!" he exclaimed, trembling and sweating. "The worst criminal in the Orient!"

"Then why in heck don't you go to the police?" I demanded.

He shook like he had aggers. "I don't dare! I'd never live to get to the police station. They're watching for me--it isn't one man who's been doing all these crimes; it's a criminal organization. One man is the head, but he has a big gang. They all dress the same way when they're robbing and looting."

"How'd you get onto this?" I asked.

"I was tending bar," he shuddered. "I went into the cellar to get some wine--it's very seldom I go there. By pure chance, I came onto a group of them plotting over a table by a candle-light. I recognized them and heard them talking--the fellow who owns the saloon where I work is one of them--and I never had an inkling he was a crook. I was behind a stack of wine-kegs, and listened till I got panicky and made a break. Then they saw me. They chased me in and out among those winding alleys till I thought I'd die. I shook them off just a few minutes ago, and reached here. But I don't dare stir out. I don't think they saw me coming in, but they're combing the streets, and they'd see me going out."

"Who is the leader?" I asked.

"They call him the Chief," he said.

"Yeah, but who is he?" I persisted, but he just shook that much more.

"I don't dare tell." His teeth was chattering with terror. "Somebody might be listening."

"Well, gee whiz," I said, "you're in bad with 'em already--"

But he was in one of them onreasoning fears, and wouldn't tell me nothing.

"You'd never in the world guess," he said. "And I just don't dare. I get goose-pimples all over when I think about it. Let me stay with you till tomorrow morning, Steve," he begged, "then we'll get in touch with Sir Peter Brent, the Scotland Yard guy. He's the only man of authority I trust. The police have proven themselves helpless--nobody ever recognized one of that Mandarin gang and lived to tell about it. But Sir Peter will protect me and trap these fiends."

"Well," I said, "why can't we get him now?"

"I don't know where to reach him," said Johnny. "He's somewhere in Singapore--I don't know where. But in the morning we can get him at his club; he's always there early in the morning. For heavens' sake, Steve, let me stay!"

"Sure, kid," I said. "Don't be scairt. If any them Black Mandarins comes buttin' in here, I'll bust 'em on the snoot. I was goin' to fight Black Jack O'Brien down at the Arena tonight, but I'll call it off and stick around with you."

"No, don't do that," he said, beginning to get back a little of his nerve. "I'll lock the door and stay here. I don't think they know where I am; and, anyway, with the door locked they can't get in to me without making a noise that would arouse the whole house. You go ahead and fight Black Jack. If you didn't show up, some of that gang might guess you were with me; they're men who know us both. Then that would get you into trouble. They know you're the only friend I've got."

"Well," I said, "I'll leave Mike here to purteck you."

"No! No!" he said. "That'd look just as suspicious, if you showed up without Mike. Besides, they'd only shoot him if they came. You go on, and, when you come back, knock on the door and tell me who it is. I'll know your voice and let you in."

"Well, all right," I said, "if you think you'll be safe. I don't think them Mandarins would have sense enough to figger out you was with me, just because I didn't happen to show up at the Arena--but maybe you know. And say, you keep this fifty bucks for me. I was wonderin' what to do with it. If I take it to the Arena, some dip will lift it offa me."

So Johnny took it, and me and Mike started for the Arena, and, as we went down the stairs, I heered him lock the door behind us. As I left the Deluxe, I looked sharp for any slinking figgers hanging around watching the house, but didn't see none, and went on down the street.

THE ARENA WAS just off the waterfront, and it was crowded like it always is when either me or Black Jack fights. Ace had been wanting to get us together for a long time, but this was the first time we happened to be in port at the same time. I was in my dressing-room putting on my togs when in stormed a figger I knowed must be my opponent. I've heered it said me and Black Jack looked enough alike to be brothers; he was my height, six feet, weighed same as me, and had black hair and smoldering blue eyes. But I always figgered I was better looking than him.

I seen he was in a wicked mood, and I knowed his recent fight with Bad Bill Kearney was still rankling him. Bad Bill was a hard-boiled egg which run a gambling hall in the toughest waterfront district of Singapore and fought on the side. A few weeks before, him and O'Brien had staged a most vicious battle in the Arena, and Black Jack had been knocked cold in the fifth round, just when it looked like he was winning. It was the only time he'd ever been stopped, and, ever since, he'd been frothing at the mouth and trying to get Bad Bill back in the ring with him.

He give a snarling, blood-thirsty laugh as he seen me.

"Well, Costigan," he said, "I guess maybe you think you're man enough to stow me away tonight, eh? You slant-headed goriller!"

"I may not lick you, you black-jowled baboon," I roared, suspecting a hint of insult in his manner, "but I'll give you a tussle your great-grandchildren will shudder to hear about!"

"How strong do you believe that?" he frothed.

"Strong enough to kick your brains out here and now," I thundered.

Ace got in between us.

"Hold it!" he requested. "I ain't goin' to have you boneheads rooin'in' my show by massacreein' each other before the fight starts."

"What you got there?" asked O'Brien, suspiciously, as Ace dug into his pockets.

"Your dough," said Ace sourly, bringing out a roll of bills. "I guaranteed you each fifty bucks, win, lose or draw."

"Well," I said, "we don't want it now. Give it to us after the mill."

"Ha!" sneered Ace. "Keep it and get my pockets picked? Not me! I'm givin' it to you now. You two can take the responsibility. Here--take it! Now I've paid you, and you got no kick comin' at me if you lose it. If the dips get it offa you, that ain't my lookout."

"All right, you white-livered land-shark," sneered Black Jack, and turned to me. "Costigan, this fifty says I lays you like a carpet."

"I takes you!" I barked. "My fifty says you leaves that ring on a shutter. Who holds stakes?"

"Not me," said Ace, hurriedly.

"Don't worry," snapped Black Jack, "I wouldn't trust a nickel of my dough in your greasy fingers. Not a nickel. Hey Bunger!"

At the yell, in come a bewhiskered old wharf-rat which exuded a strong smell of trader's rum.

"What you want?" he said. "Buy me a drink, Black Jack."

"I'll buy you a raft of drinks later," growled O'Brien. "Here, hold these stakes, and if you let a dip get 'em, I'll pull out all your whiskers by the roots."

"They won't get it offa me," promised old Bunger. "I know the game, you bet."

Which he did, having been a dip hisself in his youth; but he had one virtue--when he was sober, he was as honest as the day is long with them he considered his friends. So he took the two fifties, and me and O'Brien, after a few more mutual insults, slung on our bathrobes and strode up the aisle, to the applause of the multitude, which cheered a long-looked-for melee.

The _*Sea Girl*_ wasn't in port--in fact, I'd come to Singapore to meet her, as she was due in a few days. So, as they was none of my crew to second me, Ace had provided a couple of dumb clucks.

He'd also give Black Jack a pair of saps, as O'Brien's ship, the _Watersnake,_ wasn't in port either.

THE GONG WHANGED, the crowd roared, and the dance commenced. We was even matched. We was both as tough as nails, and aggressive. What we lacked in boxing skill, we made up for by sheer ferocity. The Arena never seen a more furious display of hurricane battling and pile-driving punching; it left the crowd as limp as a rag and yammering gibberish.

At the tap of each gong we just rushed at each other and started slugging. We traded punches 'til everything was red and hazy. We stood head to head and battered away, then we leaned on each other's chest and kept hammering, and then we kept our feet by each resting his chin on the other's shoulder, and driving away with short-arm jolts to the body. We slugged 'til we was both blind and deaf and dizzy, and kept on battering away, gasping and drooling curses and weeping with sheer fighting madness.

At the end of each round our handlers would pull us apart and guide us to our corners, where they wouldst sponge off the blood and sweat and tears, and douse us with ice-water, and give us sniffs of ammonia, whilst the crowd watched, breathless, afeared neither of us would be able to come up for the next round. But with the marvelous recuperating ability of the natural-born slugger, we would both revive under the treatments, and stiffen on our stool, glaring red-eyed at each other, and, with the tap of the gong, it would begin all over again. Boy, that was a scrap, I'm here to tell you!

Time and again either him or me would be staggering on the ragged edge of a knockout, but would suddenly rally in a ferocious burst of battling which had the crowd delirious. In the eighth he put me on the canvas with a left hook that nearly tore my head off, and the crowd riz, screaming. But at "eight" I come up, reeling, and dropped him with a right hook under the heart that nearly cracked his ribs. He lurched up just before the fatal "ten," and the gong sounded.

The end of the ninth found us both on the canvas, but ten rounds was just too short a time for either of us to weaken sufficient for a knockout. But I believe, if it had gone five more rounds, half the crowd would of dropped dead. The finish found most of 'em feebly flapping their hands and croaking like frogs. At the final gong we was standing head to head in the middle of the ring, trading smashes you couldst hear all over the house, and the referee pulled us apart by main strength and lifted both our hands as an indication that the fight was a draw.

DRAWING ON HIS bathrobe, Black Jack come over to my corner, spitting out blood and the fragments of a tooth, and he said, grinning like a hyena, "Well, you owe me fifty bucks which you bet on lickin' me."

"And, by the same token, you owe me fifty," I retorted. "Your bet was you'd flatten me. By golly, I don't know when I ever enjoyed a scrap more! I don't see how Bad Bill licked you."

O'Brien's face darkened like a thunder-cloud.

"Don't mention that egg to me," he snapped. "I can't figger it out myself. You hit me tonight a lot harder'n he ever did. I'd just battered him clean across the ring, and he was reelin' and rockin'--then it happened. All I know is that he fell into me, and we in a sort of half-clinch--then _bing!_ The next thing I knowed, they was pourin' water on me in my dressin'-room. They said he socked me on the jaw as we broke, but I never seen the punch--or felt it."

"Well," I said, "forget it. Let's get our dough from old Bunger and go get a drink. Then I gotta go back to my room."

"What you turnin' in so soon for?" he scowled. "The night's young. Let's see if we can't shake up some fun. They's a couple of tough bouncers down at Yota Lao's I been layin' off to lick a long time--"

"Naw," I said, "I got business at the Deluxe. But we'll have a drink, first."

So we looked around for Bunger, and he wasn't nowhere to be seen. We went back to our dressing-rooms, and he wasn't there either.

"Now, where is the old mutt?" inquired Black Jack, fretfully. "Here's us famishin' with thirst, and that old wharf-rat--"

"If you mean old Bunger," said a lounger, "I seen him scoot along about the fifth round."

"Say," I said, as a sudden suspicion struck me, "was he drunk?"

"If he was, I couldn't tell it," said Black Jack.

"Well," I said, "I thought he smelt of licker."

"He always smells of licker," answered O'Brien, impatiently. "I defies any man to always know whether the old soak's drunk or sober. He don't ack no different when he's full, except you can't trust him with dough."

"Well," I growled, "he's gone, and likely he's blowed in all our money already. Come on; let's go hunt for him."

So we donned our street clothes, and went forth. Our mutual battering hadn't affected our remarkable vitalities none, though we both had black eyes and plenteous cuts and bruises. We went down the street and glanced in the dives, but we didn't see Bunger, and purty soon we was in the vicinity of the Deluxe.

"Come on up to my room," I said. "I got fifty bucks there. We'll get it and buy us a drink. And listen, Johnny Kyelan's up there, but you keep your trap shut about it, see?"

"Okay," he said. "If Johnny's in a jam, I ain't the man to blab on him. He ain't got no sense, but he's a good kid."

SO WE WENT up to my room; everybody in the house was either asleep or had gone out some place. I knocked cautious, and said, "Open up, kid; it's me, Costigan."

They wasn't no reply. I rattled the knob impatiently and discovered the door wasn't locked. I flang it open, expecting to find anything. The room was dark, and, I switched on the light. Johnny wasn't nowhere to be seen. The room wasn't mussed up nor nothing, and though Mike kept growling deep down in his throat, I couldn't find a sign of anything suspicious. All I found was a note on the table. I picked it up and read, "Thanks for the fifty, sucker! Johnny."

"Well, of all the dirty deals!" I snarled. "I took him in and perteckted him, and he does me outa my wad!"

"Lemme see that note," said Black Jack, and read it and shook his head. "I don't believe this here's Johnny's writin'," he said.

"Sure it is," I snorted, because I was hurt deep. "It's bad to lose your dough; but it's a sight worse to find out that somebody you thought was your friend is nothing but a cheap crook. I ain't never seen any of his writin' before, but who else would of writ it? Nobody but him knowed about my wad. Black Mandarins my eye!"

"Huh?" Black Jack looked up quick, his eyes glittering; that phrase brung interest to anybody in Singapore. So I told him all about what Johnny had told me, adding disgustedly, "I reckon I been took for a sucker again. I bet the little rat had got into a jam with the cops, and he just seen a chance to do me out of my wad. He's skipped; if anybody'd got him, the door would be busted, and somebody in the house would of heered it. Anyway, the note wouldn't of been here. Dawggonit, I never thought Johnny was that kind."

"Me neither," said Black Jack, shaking his head, "and you don't figger he ever saw them Black Mandarins."

"I don't figger they is any Black Mandarins," I snorted, fretfully.

"That's where you're wrong," said O'Brien. "Plenty of people has seen 'em--and others saw 'em and didn't live to tell who they was. I said all the time it was more'n any one man which was doin' all these crimes. I thought it was a gang--"

"Aw, ferget it," I said. "Come on. Johnny's stole my wad, and old Bunger has gypped the both of us. I'm a man of action. I'm goin' to find the old buzzard if I have to take Singapore apart."

"I'm with you," said Black Jack, so we went out into the street and started hunting old Bunger, and, after about a hour of snooping into low-class dives, we got wind of him.

"Bunger?" said a bartender, twisting his flowing black mustaches. "Yeah, he was here earlier in the evenin'. He had a drink and said he was goin' to Kerney's Temple of Chance. He said he felt lucky."

"Lucky?" gnashed Black Jack. "He'll feel sore when I get through kickin' his britches up around his neck. Come on, Steve. I oughta thought about that before. When he's lit, he always thinks he can beat that roulette wheel at Kerney's."

SO WE WENT into the mazes of the waterfront till we come to Kerney's Temple, which was as little like a temple as a critter couldst imagine. It was kinda underground, and, to get to it, you went down a flight of steps from the street.

We went in, and seen a number of tough-looking eggs playing the various games or drinking at the bar. I seen Smoky Rourke, Wolf McGernan, Red Elkins, Shifty Brelen, John Lynch, and I don't know how many more--all shady characters. But the hardest looking one of 'em was Bad Bill hisself--one of these square-set, cold-eyed thugs which sports flashy clothes, like a gorilla in glad rags. He had a thin, sneering gash of a mouth, and his big, square, hairy hands glittered with diamonds. At the sight of his enemy, Black Jack growled deep in his throat and quivered with rage.

Then we seen old Bunger, leaning disconsolately against the bar, watching the clicking roulette wheel. Toward him we strode with a beller of rage, and he started to run, but seen he couldn't get away.

"You old mud-turtle!" yelled Black Jack. "Where's our dough?"

"Boys," quavered old Bunger, lifting a trembling hand, "don't jedge me too harsh! I ain't spent a cent of that jack."

"All right," said Black Jack, with a sigh of relief. "Give it to us."

"I can't," he sniffled, beginning to cry. "I lost it all on this here roulette wheel!"

"What!" our maddened beller made the lights flicker.

"It was this way, boys," he whimpered. "Whilst I was watchin' you boys fight, I seen a dime somebody'd dropped on the floor, and I grabbed it. And I thought I'd just slip out and get me a drink and be back before the scrap was over. Well, I got me the drink, and that was a mistake. I'd already had a few, and this'n kinda tipped me over the line. When I got some licker in me, I always get the gamblin' craze. Tonight I felt onusual lucky, and I got the idea in my head that I'd beat it down to Kerney's, double or triple this roll, and be that much ahead. You boys would get back your dough, and I'd be in the money, too. It looked like a great idea, then. And I was lucky for a while, if I'd just knowed when to quit. Once I was a hundred and forty-five dollars ahead, but the tide turned, and, before I knowed it, I was cleaned."

"Dash-blank-the-blank-dash!" said Black Jack, appropriately. "This here's a sweet lay! I oughta kick you in the pants, you white-whiskered old mutt!"

"Aw," I said, "I wouldn't care, only that was all the dough I had, except my lucky half-dollar."

"That's me," snarled O'Brien. "Only I ain't got no half-dollar."

About this time up barged Bad Bill.

"What's up, boys?" he said, with a wink at the loafers.

"You know what's up, you louse!" snarled Black Jack. "This old fool has just lost a hundred bucks on your crooked roulette game."

"Well," sneered Bad Bill, "that ain't no skin offa your nose, is it?"

"That was our money," howled Black Jack. "And you gotta give it back!"

Kerney laughed in his face. He took out a roll of bills and fluttered the edges with his thumb.

"Here's the dough he lost," said Kerney. "Mebbe it was yours, but it's mine now. What I wins, I keeps--onless somebody's man enough to take it away from me, and I ain't never met anybody which was. And what you goin' to do about it?"

BLACK JACK WAS so mad he just strangled, and his eyes stood out. I said, losing my temper, "I'll tell you what we're goin' to do, Kerney, since you wanta be tough. I'm goin' to knock you stiff and take that wad offa your senseless carcass."

"You are, hey?" he roared, blood-thirstily. "Lemme see you try it, you black-headed sea-rat! Wanta fight, eh? All right. Lemme see how much man you are. Here's the wad. If you can lick me, you can have it back. I won it fair and square, but I'm a sport. You come around here cryin' for your money back--all right, we'll see if you're men enough to fight for it!"

I growled deep and low, and lunged, but Black Jack grabbed me.

"Wait a minute," he yelped. "Half that dough's mine. I got just as much right to sock this polecat as you has, and you know it."

"Heh! Heh!" sneered Kerney, jerking off his coat and shirt. "Settle it between yourselves. If either one of you can lick me, the dough's yours. Ain't that fair, boys?"

All the assembled thugs applauded profanely. I seen at a glance they was all his men--except old Bunger, which didn't count either way.

"It's my right to fight this guy," argued Black Jack.

"We'll flip a coin," I decided, bringing out my lucky half-dollar. "I'll take--"

"I'll take heads," busted in Black Jack, impatiently.

"I said it first," I replied annoyedly.

"I didn't hear you," he said.

"Well, I did," I answered pettishly. "You'll take tails."

"All right, I'll take tails," he snorted in disgust. "Gwan and flip."

So I flopped, and it fell heads.

"Didn't I say it was my lucky piece?" I crowed jubilantly, putting the coin back in my pocket and tearing off my shirt, whilst Black Jack ground his teeth and cussed his luck something terrible.

"Before I knock your brains out," said Kerney, "you got to dispose of that bench-legged cannibal."

"If you mean Mike, you foul-mouthed skunk," I said, "Black Jack can hold him."

"And let go of him so he can tear my throat out just as I got you licked," sneered Kerney. "No, you don't. Take this piece of rope and tie him up, or the scrap's off."

So, with a few scathing remarks which apparently got under even Bad Bill's thick hide, to judge from his profanity, I tied one end of the rope to Mike's collar and the other'n to the leg of a heavy gambling table. Meanwhile, the onlookers had cleared away a space between the table and the back wall, which was covered by a matting of woven grass. To all appearances, the back wall was solid, but I thought they must be a lot of rats burrowing in there, because every now and then I heered a kind of noise like something moving and thumping around.

WELL, ME AND Kerney approached each other in the gleam of the gas-lights. He was a big, black-browed brute, with black hair matted on his barrel chest and on his wrists, and his hands was like sledge-hammers. He was about my height, but heavier.

I started the scrap like I always do, with a rush, slugging away with both hands. He met me, nothing loath. The crowd formed a half-circle in front of the stacked-up tables and chairs, and the back wall was behind us. Above the thud and crunch of blows I couldst hear Mike growling as he strained at his rope, and Black Jack yelling for me to kill Kerney.

Well, he was tough and he could hit like a mule kicking. But he was fighting Steve Costigan. There, under the gas-lights, with the mob yelling, and my bare fists crunching on flesh and bone, I was plumb in my element. I laughed at Bad Bill as I took the best he could hand out, and come plunging in for more.

I worked for his belly, repeatedly sinking both hands to the wrists, and he began to puff and gasp and go away from me. My head was singing from his thundering socks, and the taste of blood was in my mouth, but that's a old, old story to me. I caught him on the ear and blood spattered. Like a flash, up come his heavy boot for my groin, but I twisted aside and caught him with a terrible right-hander under the heart. He groaned and staggered, and a ripping left hook to the body sent him down, but he grabbed my belt as he fell and dragged me with him.

On the floor he locked his gorilla arms around me, and spat in my eye, trying to pull my head down where he could sink his fangs in my ear. But my neck was like iron, and I pulled back, fighting mad, and, getting a hand free, smashed it savagely three times into his face. With a groan, he went slack. And just then a heavy boot crashed into my back, purty near paralyzing me, and knocking me clear of Kerney.

It was John Lynch which had kicked me, and even as I snarled up at him, trying to get up, I heered Black Jack roar, and I heered the crash of his iron fist under Lynch's jaw, and the dirty yegg dropped amongst the stacked-up tables and lay like a empty sack.

The thugs surged forward with a menacing rumble, but Black Jack turned on 'em like a maddened tiger, his teeth gleaming in a snarl, his eyes blazing, and they hesitated. And then I climbed on my feet, the effecks of that foul lick passing. Kerney was slavering and cursing and trying to get up, and I grabbed him by his hair and dragged him up.

"Stand on your two feet and fight like as if you was a man," I snarled disgustedly, and he lunged at me sudden and unexpected, trying to knee me in the groin. He fell into me, and, as I pulled out of a half-clinch, I heered Black Jack yell suddenly, _"Look out, Steve!_ That's the way he got me!"

And simultaneous I felt Kerney's hand at the side of my neck. Instinctively, I jerked back, and as I did, Kerney's thumb pressed cunning and savage into my neck just below the ear. Jiu-jitsu! Mighty few white men know that trick--the Japanese death-touch, they call it. If I hadn't been going away from it, so he didn't hit the exact nerve he was looking for, I'd of been temporarily paralyzed. As it was, my heavy neck muscles saved me, though for a flashing instant I staggered, as a wave of blindness and agony went all over me.

Kerney yelled like a wild beast, and come for me, but I straightened and met him with a left hook that ripped his lip open from the corner of his mouth to his chin, and sent him reeling backward. And, clean maddened by the dirty trick he had tried on me, I throwed every ounce of my beef into a thundering right swing that tagged him square on the jaw.

It was just a longshoreman's haymaker with my whole frame behind it, and it lifted him clean offa his feet and catapulted him bodily against the back wall. _Crash!_ The matting tore, the wood behind it splintered, and Kerney's senseless form smashed right on through!

THE FORCE OF my swing throwed me headlong after Kerney, and I landed with my head and forearms through the hole he'd made. The back wall wasn't solid! They was a secret room beyond it. I seen Kerney lying in that room with his feet projecting through the busted partition, and beyond I seen another figger--bound and gagged and lying on the floor.

"Johnny!" I yelled, scrambling up, and behind me rose a deep, ominous roar. Black Jack yelled, "Look out, Steve!" and a bottle whizzed past my ear and crashed against the wall. Simultaneous come the thud of a sock and the fall of a body, as Black Jack went into action, and I wheeled as Kerney's thugs come surging in on me.

Black Jack was slugging right and left, and men were toppling like ten-pins, but they was a whole room full of 'em. I saw old Bunger scooting for the exit, and I heered Mike roaring, lunging against his rope. I caught the first thug with a smash that near broke his neck, and then they swarmed all over me, and I cracked Red Elkins' ribs with my knee as we went to the floor.

I heered Black Jack roaring and battling, and I shook off my attackers and riz, fracturing Shifty Brelen's skull, and me and Black Jack stiffened them deluded mutts till we was treading on a carpet of senseless yeggs, but still they come, with bottles and knives and chair-legs, till we was both streaming blood.

Black Jack hadst just been felled with a table-leg, and half a dozen of 'em was stomping on my prostrate form, whilst I was engaged in gouging and strangling three or four I had under me, when Mike's rope broke under repeated gnawings and lunges. I heered him beller, and I heered a yegg yip as Mike's iron fangs met in his meat. The clump on me bust apart, and I lurched up, roaring like a bull and shaking the blood in a shower from my head.

Black Jack come up with the table-leg he'd been floored with, and he hit Smoky Rourke so hard they had to use a pulmotor to bring Smoky to. The battered mob staggered dizzily back, and scattered as Mike plunged and raged amongst them.

Spang! Wolf McGernan had broke away from the melee and was risking killing some of his mates to bring us down. They run for cover, screeching. Black Jack throwed the table-leg, but missed, and the three of us--him and Mike and me--rushed McGernan simultaneous.

His muzzle wavered from one to the other as he tried to decide quick which to shoot, and then _crack!_ Wolf yelped and dropped his gun; he staggered back against the wall, grabbing his wrist, from which blood was spurting.

The yeggs stopped short in their head-long fight for the exit, and me and Black Jack wheeled. A dozen policemen was on the stairs with drawed guns and one of them guns was smoking.

THE THUGS BACKED against the wall, their hands up, and I run into the secret room and untied Johnny Kyelan.

All he could say was, "Glug ug glug!" for a minute, being nearly choked with fear and excitement and the gag. But I hammered him on the back, and he said, "They got me, Steve. They sneaked into the hall and knocked on the door. When I stooped to look through the key-hole, as they figgered I'd do--its a natural move--they blew some stuff in my face that knocked me clean out for a few minutes. While I was lying helpless, they unlocked the door with a skeleton key and came in. I was coming to myself, then, but they had guns on me and I didn't dare yell for help.

"They searched me, and I begged them to leave your fifty dollars on the table because I knew it was all the money you had, but they took it, and wrote a note to make it look like I'd skipped out with the money. Then they blew some more powder in my face, and the next thing I knew I was in a car, being carried here.

"They were going to finish me before daylight. I heard the Chief Mandarin say so."

"And who's he?" we demanded.

"I don't mind telling you now," said Johnny, looking at the yeggs which was being watched by the cops, and at Bad Bill, who was just beginning to come to on the floor. "The Chief of the Mandarins is _Bad Bill Kerney!_ He was a racketeer in the States, and he's been working the same here."

An officer broke in: "You mean this man is the infamous Black Mandarin?"

"You're darn tootin'," said Johnny, "and I can prove it in the courts."

WELL, THEM COPS pounced on the dizzy Kerney like gulls on a fish, and in no time him and his gang, such as was conscious, was decorated with steel bracelets. Kerney didn't say nothing, but he looked black murder at all of us.

"Hey, wait!" said Black Jack, as the cops started leading them out. "Kerney's got some dough which belongs to us."

So the cop took a wad offa him big enough to choke a shark, and Black Jack counted off a hundred and fifty bucks and give the rest back. The cops led the yeggs out, and I felt somebody tugging at my arm. It was old Bunger.

"Well, boys," he quavered, "don't you think I've squared things? As soon as the roughhouse started, I run up into the street screamin' and yellin' till all the cops within hearin' come on the run!"

"You've done yourself proud, Bunger," I said. "Here's a ten spot for you."

"And here's another'n," said Black Jack, and old Bunger grinned all over.

"Thank you, boys," he said, ruffling the bills in his eagerness. "I gotta go now--they's a roulette wheel down at Spike's I got a hunch I can beat."

"Let's all get outa here," I grunted, and we emerged into the street and gazed at the street-lamps, yellow and smoky in the growing daylight.

"Boy, oh, boy!" said Johnny. "I've had enough of this life. It's me for the old U.S.A. just as soon as I can get there."

"And a good thing," I said gruffly, because I was so glad to know the boy wasn't a thief and a cheat that I felt kinda foolish. "Snappy kids like you got no business away from home."

"Well," said Black Jack, "let's go get that drink."

"Aw, heck," I said, disgustedly, as I shoved my money back in my pants, "I lost my good-luck half-dollar in the melee."

"Maybe this is it," said Johnny, holding it out. "I picked it up off the floor as we were coming out."

"Gimme it," I said, hurriedly, but Black Jack grabbed it with a startled oath.

"Good luck piece?" he yelled. "Now I see why you was so insistent on takin' heads. This here blame half-dollar is a trick coin, and it's got heads on both sides! Why, I hadn't a chance. Steve Costigan, you did me out of a fight, and I resents it! You got to fight me."

"All right," I said. "We'll fight again tonight at Ace's Arena. And now let's go get that drink."

"Good heavens," said Johnny, "It's nearly sun-up. If you fellows are going to fight again tonight, hadn't you better get some rest? And some of those cuts you both got need bandaging."

"He's right, Steve," said Black Jack. "We'll have a drink and then we'll get sewed up, and then we'll eat breakfast, and after that we'll shoot some pool."

"Sure," I said, "that's a easy, restful game, and we oughta take things easy so we can be in shape for the fight tonight. After we shoot some pool, we'll go to Yota Lao's and lick some bouncers you was talkin' about."

THE END

Contents

SAILORS' GRUDGE

By Robert E. Howard

I COME ASHORE AT Los Angeles for peace and quiet. Being heavyweight champion of the *Sea Girl*, whose captain boasts that he ships the toughest crews on the seven seas, ain't no joke. When we docked, I went ashore with the avowed intention of spending a couple of days in ease. I even went to the extent of leaving my white bulldog, Mike, on board. Not that I was intending to do Mike out of his shore leave, but we was to be docked a week at least, and I wanted a couple of days by myself to kinda soothe my nerves. Mike is always trying to remove somebody's leg, and then I have to either pay for the pants or lick the owner of the leg.

So I went ashore alone and drifted into the resident section along the beach. You know, where all them little summer cottages is that is occupied by nice people of modest means and habits.

I wandered up and down the beach watching the kids play in the sand and the girls sunning themselves, which many of them was knockouts, and I soon found I had got into a kind of secluded district where my kind seldom comes. I was dressed in good unassuming clothes, howthesomever, and could not understand the peculiar looks handed my way by the cottage owners.

It was with a start I heard someone say: "Oooh, sailor, yoo-hoo!"

I turned with some irritation. I am not ashamed of my profession, far from it, but I am unable to see why I am always spotted as a seaman even when I am not in my work clothes. But my irritation was removed instantly. A most beautiful little blonde flapper was coyly beckoning me and I lost no time starting in her direction. She was standing by a boat, holding a foolish little parasol over her curly head.

"Mr. Sailor, won't you row for me, please?" she cooed, letting her big baby blue eyes drift over my manly form. "I just adore sailors!"

"Miss," I said politely, rather dizzy from the look she gave me, "I will row you to Panama and back if you say the word!"

And with that I helped her in the boat and got in. That's me, always the perfect cavalier--I have lived a rough life but I always found time to notice the higher and softer things, such as courtesy and etiquette.

Well, we rowed all over the bay--leastways, I rowed, while she laid back under her little pink parasol and eyed me admiringly from under her long silky eyelashes.

We talked about such things as how hot the weather was this time of the year, and how nasty cold weather was when it was cold, and she asked me what ship I was on, and I told her and also told her my name was Steve Costigan, which was the truth; and she said her name was Marjory Harper, and she got me to tell her about my voyages and the like, like girls will. So I told her a lot of stories, most of which I got out of Mushy Hansen's dime novel library.

Being gifted with consideration, I did not tell her that I was a fighting man, well known in all ports as a tough man with the gloves, and the terror of all first mates and buckos afloat, because I could see she was a nice kid of genteel folks, and did not know nothing much about the world at large, though she was a good deal of a little flirt.

When we parted that afternoon I'll admit I had fell for her strong. She promised to meet me at the same place next day and I wended my way back to my hotel, whistling merrily.

THE NEXT MORNING found me back on the beach though I knowed I wouldn't see Marjory till afternoon. I was strolling by a shaded nook, where couples often go in to spoon, when I heard voices raised in dispute. I'm no eavesdropper, but I couldn't help but hear what was said--by the man, at least, because he had a strong voice and was using it. Some kid getting called down by her steady, I thought.

"--I told you to keep away from sailors, you little flirt!" he was saying angrily. "They're not your kind. Never mind how I know you were with some seagoing dub yesterday! That's all! Don't you talk back to me either. If I catch you with him, I'll spank you good. You're going home and stay there."

This was rather strong I ruminated, and took a dislike right away to this fellow because I despise to hear a man talking rough to a woman. But the next minute I was almost struck dead with surprise and rage. A girl and a man came out of the nook on the other side. Their backs were toward me, but I got a good look at the man's face when he turned his head for a minute, and I saw he was a big handsome young fellow, with a shock of curly golden hair--and the girl was Marjory Harper!

For an instant I stood rooted to the ground, as it were. The big ham! Forbidding a girl to go with me! Abusing sailors! Calling me a dub when he didn't even know me! I was also amazed and enraged at Marjory's actions; she comes along with him as meek as a child and didn't even talk back. Before I could get my scattered wits together, they got into a car and drove off.

Talk about seeing red! And I knowed from this young upstart's build and walk that he was a sailor, too. The hypocrite!

Well, promptly at the appointed time, I was at the place I'd met Marjory the day before, and I didn't much expect her to show up. But she did, looking rather downcast. Even her little parasol drooped.

"I just came to tell you," she said rather nervously, "that I couldn't go rowing today. I must go back home at once."

"I thought you told me you wasn't married," I said bitterly.

She looked rather startled. "I'm not!" she exclaims.

"Well," I said, "I might's well tell you: I heard you get bawled out this mornin' for bein' with me. And I don't understand how come you took it."

"You don't know Bert," she sighed. "He's a perfect tyrant and treats me like a child." She clenched her little fists angrily and tears come into her eyes. "He's a big bully! If I was a man, I'd knock his block off!"

"Where is this Bert now?" I asked with the old sinister calm.

"Over in Hollywood, somewhere," she answered. "I think he's got a small part in a movie. But I can't stay. I musn't let Bert know I've been out to see you."

"Well, ain't I ever goin' to see you again?" I asked plaintively.

"Oh, goodness, no!" she shivered, dabbing her eyes. "I wouldn't dare! It makes Bert furious for me to even look at a sailor."

I ground my teeth gently. "Ain't this boob a sailor hisself?" I asked mildly.

"Who? Bert? Yes, but he says as a rule they're no good for a nice girl to go with."

I restrained an impulse to howl and bite holes in the beach, and said with an effort at calmness: "Well, I'm goin' now. But remember, I'm comin' back to you."

"Oh, please don't!" she begged. "I'm terribly sorry, but if Bert catches us together, we'll both suffer."

Being unable to stand any more, I bowed politely and left for Hollywood at full speed. For a girl who seemed to have so much spunk, Bert sure had Marjory buffaloed. What kinda hold did he have over her, so he could talk to her like that? Why didn't she give him the gate? She couldn't love a ham like that, not with men like me around, and, anyway, if she'd loved him so much, she wouldn't have flirted with me.

I decided it must be something like I seen once in a movie called "The Curse of Rum," where the villain had so much on the heroine's old man that the heroine had to put up with his orneryness till the hero comes along and bumped him. I decided that Bert must have something on Marjory's old man, and was on the point of going back to ask her what it was, when I decided I'd make Bert tell me hisself.

WELL, I ARROVE in Hollywood and like a chump, started wandering around vaguely in the bare hopes I would run onto this Bert fellow. All to once I thought luck was with me. In a cafe three or four men was sitting talking earnestly and there was Bert! He was slicked up considerably, better dressed and even more handsome than ever. But I recognized that curly gold hair of his.

The next minute I was at the table and had hauled him out of the seat.

"Order my girl around, will ya?" I bellowed, aiming a terrible right at his jaw. He ducked and avoided complete annihilation by a inch, then to my utmost amazement he dived under the table, yelling for help. The next minute all the waiters in the world was on top of me but I flung 'em aside like chaff and yelled: "Come out from under that table, Bert, you big yellow-headed stiff! I'll show you--!"

"Bert--nothin'," howled a little short fat fellow hanging onto my right, "that's Reginald Van Veer, the famous movie star!"

At this startling bit of information I halted in amazement, and the aforesaid star sticking his frightened face out from under the table, I seen I had made a mistake. The resemblance between him and Bert was remarkable, but they wasn't the same man.

"My mistake," I growled. "Sorry to intrude on yuh." And so saying, I throwed one waiter under the table and another into the corner and stalked out in silent majesty. Outside I ducked into a alley and beat it down a side street because I didn't know but what they'd have the cops on my neck.

Well, the street lights was burning when I decided to give it up. About this time who should I bump into but Tommy Marks, a kid I used to know in 'Frisco, and we had a reunion over a plate of corned beef and a stein of near beer. Tommy was sporting a small mustache and puttees and he told me that he was a assistant director, yes man, or something in the Tremendous Arts Movie Corporation, Inc.

"And boy," he splurged, "we are filming a peach, a pip and a wow! Is it a knockout? Oh, baby! A prize-fight picture entitled 'The Honor of the Champion,' starring Reginald Van Veer, with Honey Precious for the herowine. Boy, will it pack the theayters!"

"Baloney!" I sniffed. "You mean to tell me that wax-haired Van Veer will stand up and be pasted for art's sake?"

"Well, to tell you the truth." admitted Tommy, "he wouldn't; anyway, the company couldn't take a chance on a right hook ruinin' his profile. By sheer luck and wonderful chance, we found a fellow which looks enough like Reggie to be his twin brother. He's a tough sailor and a real fightin' man and we use him in the fights. For close-ups we use Reggie, made up to look sweaty and bloody, in a clinch with the other dub, y'see. We'll work the close-ups in between the long shots and nobody'll be able to tell the difference."

"Who's this double?" I asked, smit by a sudden thought.

"I dunno. I picked him up over in Los Angeles. His first name is--"

"Bert!" I yelped.

Tommy looked kinda surprised. "Yeah, it is, come to think of it."

"Ayargh!" I gnashed my teeth. "I'll be around on the lot tomorrer. I got a few words to say to this here Bert."

"Hey!" hollered Tommy, knowing something of my disposition. "You lay off him till this picture is finished! For cat's sake! Tomorrow we shoot the big fight scene. The climax of the picture, see? We got a real fighter for Reggie's opponent--Terry O'Rourke from Seattle and we're payin' him plenty. If you spoil Reggie's double, we'll be out of luck!"

"Well," I snarled, "I'll be on the lot the first thing in the mornin', see? I don't reckon they'll let me in, but I'll be waitin' for Bert when he comes out."

THE NEXT MORNING found me at the Tremendous Arts studio before it was open. Yet, early as it was, I found a group of tough looking gents collected outside the casting office. They was four of them and one I recognized as Spike Monahan, A.B. mariner on the Hornswoggle, merchant ship, and as tough a nut as ever walked a deck.

"How come the thug convention, Spike?" I asked.

"Ain'tcha heard?" he responded. "Last night Terry O'Rourke broke his wrist swingin' at a bouncer in a night club and we're here to cop his job. Not that I care for the money so much," he ruminated, "but I want the job uh mussin' up Reggie Van Veer's beautiful countenance."

"Well, you're outa luck," I said, "because they're usin' a double."

"No matter," said all the tough birds, "we craves to bust into the movies."

"Boys," said I, taking off my coat, "consider the matter as closed. I've decided to take the job."

"Steve," said Spike, spitting in his hands, "I have nothin' agin' you. But it is my duty to the nation to put my map on the silver screen and rest the eyes of them fans which is tired of lookin' at varnished mugs like Reggie Van Veer's, and craves to gaze upon real he-men. Don't take this personal-like, Steve."

So saying, he shot over a right hook at my chin. I ducked and dropped him with an uppercut, blocked a swing from another thug and dropped him across Spike with a left hook to the stummick.

I then turned on the other two who was making war-like gestures, stopped a fist with my eye and crashed the owner of the fist with a left hook to the button.

The fourth man now raised a large lump on my head with a glancing blow of a blackjack, and slightly irritated, I flattened his nose with a straight left, jarred loose a couple of ribs with a right, and bringing the same hand up to his jaw, laid him stiff as a wedge.

Spike was now arising and noting the annoyance in his eye and the brass knuckles on his left hand, I did not wait for him to regain his feet but dropped my right behind his ear while he was still in a stooping position. Spike curled up with a cherubic smile on his frightful countenance.

I then threw my coat over my arm and went up to the door of the casting office and about this time it was opened by a small man in spectacles.

"Who are you?" he asked with some surprise, his gaze fixed on my fast blackening eye.

"I'm your new boxer," I answered gently, "takin' the place of Terry O'Rourke."

He looked puzzled.

"I know we sent the word out rather late last night," said he, "but I rather expected several men to be here, from which we could choose."

"They was four other fellers," I answered, "but they decided they wouldn't wait."

He looked past me to where the four galoots was weaving uncertainly off the lot, and he looked back at me and shuddered slightly.

"Come around next month," said he. "We're shooting a jungle picture then."

I didn't get him, but I said: "Well, you ain't tryin' to tell me I don't get this job, are you?"

"Oh, no," he said hastily. "Oh heavens, no! Come right in!"

I FOLLOWED HIM and after winding in and out among a lot of rooms and things I didn't know the use or meaning of, we come into a place which was fixed up like a big stadium, seats, ring and everything. It was still very early, but already swarms of extras was coming in and being arranged in the seats.

The head director come bustling up and looked me over. He acted like he was about half cuckoo and I don't wonder, what with all the noise and the confusion and fellows running up every second to ask him about lights, or sets or costumes or something.

"What's your name?" he snapped. "You look like a fighter. Where're you from?"

"Steve Costi--" I began.

"All right--listen to me. You're Battling O'Hanlon, champion of the British Isles, see? Reggie Van Veer is the champion of America and you're fighting for the title of the world, see? Of course we have a double for Reggie. After we shoot the fight, we'll take some close-ups of you and Reggie in the clinches and run them in at the proper places. Tommy, take this man to the dressing room and fix him up."

Tommy Marks come up on the run and when he seen me, he stopped short and turned pale. He motioned me to follow him, but when I started to speak to him he hissed: "Shut up! I don't know you! I can see where you crumb the deal some way and if it looks like we're friends, I'll lose my job! They'll think I put you up to it!"

Seeing his point, I said nothing and he led me into a dressing room, where I allowed him to smear some kind of goo on my face and touch up my eye brows. I couldn't see that it improved my looks any, but Tommy said it didn't do them any damage because nothing could. I put on the swellest pair of trunks I ever wore and Tommy knotted a British flag about my waist which struck me funny because while I'd often fought men wearing that flag, naturally I'd never thought I'd ever wear it myself. I tried to make him put the flag of the Irish Free State on me instead, but he said they didn't have one. He then give me a fine silk bath robe to put on and so accoutered I sallied forth.

I heard a wild roar as I opened the dressing room door and peeking carefully forth, I saw Reggie Van Veer striding majestically down the aisle, dressed even sweller than I was. Two cameras was grinding away and the director was howling his lungs out, and the crowd of extras in the seats was jumping and whooping just like a fight crowd does when the favorite comes down the aisle.

He clumb into the ring with a swarm of seconds and handlers, and then Tommy told me to go into the ring. I come swaggering down the other aisle with a bigger gang than his behind me, carrying enough towels and buckets to fit out a army. I was astonished at the pains the movie people had took to make things realistic. I don't know how many extras was being used, but I saw right off that I'd never fought before a bigger crowd even in the real game itself.

I climbed through the ropes, following the instructions which the director yelled at me. I was kind of surprised. I'd always thought they was a lot of rehearsing to do. The referee called us to the center of the ring and they took a close-up of Reggie shaking hands with me, then the cameras quit grinding and Reggie skipped out of the ring, and in come--Bert! He was dressed just like Reggie had been and I was again struck by their strange resemblance.

"Now, then," bellowed the director, "this is going to be one picture that's going to look real! That's why I haven't rehearsed you boys. Go in and fight like you want to, so long as it's a fight! We got the ring well covered and can take you at any angle, so don't worry about getting out of range. This is going to be something new in pictures!

"Now, forget you're actors for the time being. Get into your solid skulls that you're fighters, like you've always been! Make this real! Put everything you got into it for four rounds. Then, Bert, when I yell at you in the fifth round, you step back and shoot your left to the body. Steve, you drop your guard and then Bert, you crash the right to the jaw! And don't you pull the punch! I want this to be real. Steve, you drop when the right lands--"

I was thinking I'd be very likely to, anyway!

"I ain't going to have no knockout blows landing on the shoulder. The fight fans that see the shows have got so they spot 'em. This is going to appeal to those fans! If you boys get any teeth knocked out or noses broken, you get extra money. All right, get to your corners, and when the gong sounds, come out like they was a grudge between you!"

I COULD ASSURE him of that. I'd been watching Bert from under my lids while the director was talking. He stripped well and from his manner I knowed he was at home in a ring. He was broad-shouldered and lean-hipped and his muscles rolled beautifully. He was about six feet, one inch, and would weigh, I guess, a hundred and ninety-eight pounds, which was a inch taller and eight pounds heavier than me. Altogether he looked a lot like these Greek gods people rave about, but his firm square jaw and steely gray eyes told me I had my work cut out for me.

Well, the gong sounded and we went for each other. I wanted to give him fair warning, so I ducked his left and clinched.

"Never mind what that director cluck said," I snarled in his ear. "One of us is goin' out of here on a stretcher! I got your number, you big ham!"

"I don't even know you," he growled, jerking loose.

"You will!" I grinned savagely, throwing my right at his head with everything I had. He come back with a slashing left hook to the body and then we didn't have no more time for polite conversation.

This boy was fast, and cleverer than me, but he liked to mix it, too. He followed that left hook with a crashing right. I blocked it and landed hard under the eye, then went into a clinch and clubbed him with my right until the referee broke us.

We traded rights to the head and lefts to the body and he brought up a sizzling uppercut which might of tore my head off, hadst it landed. I buckled his knees with a right hook under the heart and he opened a cut under my left eye with a venomous straight right.

He then backed away, sparring and working for my wounded eye with a sharp-shooting left. Much annoyed, I followed him about the ring and suddenly dropped him to his knees with a smashing right cross to the side of the head. He bounced up without a count and flashed a straight left to my sore eye, following it instantly with a right uppercut to the body. I missed a looping right, landed with my left, took two straight rights in the face to sink my left hook into his belly, and he went into a clinch. We worked out of it and was fighting along the ropes at the gong.

By this time the extras was whooping in earnest and the director was dancing with joy and yelling for us to keep it up. I growled and flashed a meaningful look across at my dancing partner and from the way he bared his strong white teeth at me, I knowed that the director was going to have his wish.

He come out at the gong like a wildcat and had rammed a straight left to my wind and two straight rights to my face before I could get collected. I came back with a wicked right hook under the heart, and missed with the same hand for the jaw. He had evidently decided his straight right was his best ace, for he kept shooting it over my guard and inside my looping left hook. Enraged, I suddenly slipped it, let it go over my left shoulder, and crossed my left hard to his jaw.

He grunted, and I sank my right deep into his ribs before he could recover his balance. He fell into a desperate clinch and hung on, shaking his head to clear it. The referee broke us, and Bert, evidently infuriated, crashed a haymaking right swing to the side of my head which knocked me into the ropes on the opposite side of the ring. As I come out of them, still dizzy, he was on me like a enraged wildcat and lifted me clear off the floor with a slung-shot right uppercut. Now it was me that clinched and it took all the referee's strength to tear us apart.

Bert feinted a straight right again, then shot his left to my heart. I missed a right, got in a good left and then the gong sounded.

AS I SET on my stool and my handlers and seconds went through a lot of motions which wasn't needed, I glanced out over the crowd. My heart give a leap right up into my mouth! On the first row, ringside, sat Marjory!

She was staring at the ring, rather pale. I give her a grin to show she needn't worry about me, but she just looked back kind of frightened. Poor kid, I reckoned she wasn't used to such tough work and was afraid Bert would hurt me. I chuckled gayly at the thought and felt a deep feeling of satisfaction, that she should see me give the big ham the lamming he deserved.

The gong!

Bert come out kind of cautious. He feinted a left, swung his right at my head, missed and backed away. I followed him rather carelessly, ducking another right swing. I thought, the next time he does that I will block it with my left and step in with a right to the jaw. Well, he swung his left, then his right and mechanically I threw up my left to block it. Too late I noticed that he had changed his position in a curious manner and was a lot closer to me than he ought to be. Bam! I was on the canvas feeling like my midriff was caved in.

As I got my legs under me, I realized he'd played the old Fitzsimmons shift on me. As he swung his right for a feint, he'd stepped forward with the right leg which brought him inside my guard and in position to drive in a terrific left-hander to the solar plexus. Well, he done so, and it's a good thing for me he didn't land just where he wanted to, and that he didn't have old Fitz's trick of shooting in bone-crushers from a few inches. If he had, I'd still been out.

Well, I got up at nine, Bert rushing in eager-like to finish me. I snapped my right to his jaw and stopped him in his tracks, and followed with a left hook to the body which he partially blocked. Any man which had ever fought me could of told him that I, like most sluggers, was most dangerous when groggy. He seemed rather discouraged and played safe for the rest of the round, which was rather slow, as I wasn't in no mood to push things, myself.

On my stool I cast a jovial grin at Marjory but she didn't seem to be enjoying the game much. Poor kid, I thought, the sight of me on the canvas was too much for her tender little heart. I bet, thought I, that girl is as good as mine, right now.

So it was with visions of wedding rings and vine covered cottages dancing in my head that I went out for the fourth round. Almost instantly these beautiful visions was shook out of my head by a severe right hook and I settled down to the business at hand. Bert was inclined to end matters quick and we traded wallops toe to toe till the ring was swimming before my eyes and I could see from the glazed look in Bert's eyes that he wasn't in no better shape. We then went into a clinch and leaned on each other, shaking our heads till they was partly clear again.

Then Bert started working his old reliable straight right until I give a roar of rage, dived under it and sank my left hook into his midriff, bringing up a right from my knees that would of ended the fight had it landed. In a wild mix-up we both slipped to the canvas, but was up in a second, Bert closing my eye tight as a drum while I battered him with terrific body blows.

Baring his teeth at me, he shot a right to my bobbing head and suddenly bounded back from my return. We had got close to the ropes and he bounded right against them. The next thing he bounced off of them right into me. I'd never seen a heavyweight try that trick before and he caught me off my guard. His right crashed against my chest and I hit the canvas so hard my feet flew straight up and I thought I'd go on through the boards.

But it was the force and weight of the blow that knocked me down; I didn't fall because I was stunned or badly hurt. I was up at the count of nine and opened a cut over Bert's eye with a wild right. I didn't think he'd try that bouncing trick so quick again and he nearly fooled me there. This time he drew my left, jumped back, hit the ropes and came for me so quick I didn't have time to think. By instinct I side-stepped and met him in mid-air with a right hook to the jaw. Crash! He hit the canvas and rolled over and over. I ran back to the fartherest corner, but it didn't look like anybody could get up after a wallop like that. But this Bert was a tough baby. The crowd wasn't yelling now.

At seven he had his legs under him and at nine he come up, wobbly, rubber-legged and glass-eyed, still full of fight. I hesitated; I hated to hit him again, but then the thought come of what he'd said about me, and how he'd bullied poor little Marjory and the way he'd abused sailors. I heard the director yell as I shot across the ring, but I paid no heed.

Bert tried to clinch as I came in, but I dropped him face down with a right hook to the jaw. The crowd began to howl and bellow as I went back to the corner, and through the noise I heard the director, who was jumping up and down and tearing his hair. He was yelling: "Bert, get up! Hey, hey! Get up, for cat's sake! If you get knocked out, you'll rooin the picture."

Bert give no sign of obeying and the director howled: "Sound the gong and drag him to his corner! The round's half a minute to go, but the movie fans won't know the difference!"

This was done, much to my disgust and the director began to yell caustic remarks at me.

"Aw, shut up!" I growled. "You said make it real, didn't you?" So he shut up. Well, I was kind of bothered about hitting Bert and him so near helpless, but it's all in the game; he'd of done the same thing to me, and I remembered that he was blackmailing old man Harper and holding Marjory in the grip of his hand--or why else did she take so much off him? So I decided that I ought not to worry over a black hearted villain like Bert, but go out and knock his head off.

THEY GIVE AN extra long time between rounds, to give Bert time to recover and his handlers was working like mad over him. At last I saw him shake his head, then raise it and glare across the ring at me like a hungry tiger. The director was yelling instructions.

"All right now, remember! When I yell: 'Now!' Bert, you shoot the left to the body and you, Steve, drop your guard."

The gong! We rushed together and Bert clinched and gripped me like a gorilla.

"I want to know if you're going to flop this round according to schedule?" he hissed in my ear.

"Be yourself!" I snarled. "Forget that director cluck! This here's between me and you! I'm goin' to lay you like a rug!"

"But what you got it in for me for!" he snarled bewilderedly. "I never saw you before?"

"Aragh!" I roared, jerking loose and whizzing a terrible right past his jaw. He came back with a hard left to the body and another to the jaw while I planted a wicked right under the heart. He threw a right which went over my shoulder, and falling into me, clinched and tied me up.

"You see that little blonde in the first row?" I hissed. "I heard you abusin' and bullyin' her, and if you want to know, that's why I'm goin' to knock you into her lap!"

He shot a quick glance in the direction I jerked my head, and a bewildered look came over his face.

"Why, that girl--" he began, but just then the referee pulled us apart.

"Now, Bert!" howled the director, "shoot the left! Steve, be ready to flop!"

"Baloney!" I snarled over my shoulder, and stuck my own left into Bert's eye. He retaliated with a terrific right to the ribs and the director, sensing that something was going on which wasn't according to schedule, began to leap up and down and tear his hair and doin' other foolish things like cussing and weeping and screaming. But the cameras kept on grinding and we kept on slugging.

Following the right to the body, Bert swished a left which glanced from my head and I crashed a right under his heart. My continual body punching had begun to take the steam out of him, but he made one more rally, landing two blows to my one, but mine had much more kick behind them. Suddenly I threw everything I had into one ferocious burst of slugging. I snapped Bert's head back with a left uppercut I brought from my knees, and crashed my right under his heart. He staggered and I shot my right twice to his head--hooked a left under his heart and crashed another right flush to the jaw. They'd been coming so fast and hard that Bert, in his weakened condition, couldn't stop them. The last right lifted him off his feet and dropped him under the ropes, right in front of Marjory, who had leaped to her feet, with both her little hands pressed to her cheeks, and her pretty mouth wide open.

The referee mechanically started counting, but it was unnecessary. I strode over to my corner, took my bathrobe from the limp hands of a dumfounded handler and was about to climb out of the ring, when the director, who had thrown hisself on the ground and was biting the grass, come to life.

"Grab that idiot!" he howled. "Tie him up! Soak him! Get a cop! He's crazy! The picture's rooint! We're out heavy money! Grab him! If I got a friend in court, I'll send him up for life!"

"Aw, stand away!" I growled at the menials who approached me uncertainly, "this was a private matter between me and Bert."

"But it's going to cost us more than we can afford to pay!" wailed the director, plucking forth strands of his scanty locks and tossing them recklessly on the breeze. "Oh, why didn't you perform according to instructions? The first four rounds were pippins! But that finish--oh, that I should live to see this day!"

WELL, I FELT sorry for him and kind of wished that I'd waited and licked Bert outside, but I didn't see what I could do. Then up rushed Tommy Marks. He began yanking at the director's sleeve.

"Say, boss," he yelped, "I got a great idea! We'll cut that last round at the place where Bert got knocked down the last time! Then we'll start a scene with Reggie Van Veer, see? Splice the shots together--they can fix it in the cutting room, easy!"

"Yeah?" sniffed the director, wiping his eyes. "I should throw Reggie in with that man-eater. He's crazy; I think he's the maniac that tried to kill Reggie down-town yesterday."

"I thought he was Bert," I said.

"And listen," cried Tommy, "the shot will show Reggie getting up off the canvas slowly, with Steve waiting in his corner. Then Steve rushes out, Reggie meets him with a right to the jaw and Steve flops! A sensational k.o. at the end of the greatest fight ever filmed! See? Reggie won't even get hit at all. And nobody can tell the difference."

"Well, how'll I know this cave man won't take a notion to flatten Reggie when he gets him in the ring?"

"Aw, he's got nothin' against Reggie, have you, Steve? That was a private feud between him and Bert, wasn't it, Steve? You'll do it, won't you, Steve?"

"All right," muttered the director. "We'll try it, but don't rush at Reggie too ferociously or he'll jump clean out of the ring."

I had listened to this talk with much impatience. I wanted to square myself with the movie people and was willing to do what I could, but just now I had other business. I signified my willingness to do what they wanted me to do, then I hurried over to the seat where Marjory sat. She was not in it, and I seen her following close behind the handlers which was taking the still groggy blonde battler to his dressing room.

I hastened to her and laid a gentle hand on her little shoulder.

"Marjory," I said, "fear that big fellow no more! I have avenged us both! He will not be apt to bother you again! Tell your old man not to be afraid, no matter what this big flop has on him! Bert will not come between true lovers again, I bet you!"

To my utter amazement and horror, she turned on me with flashing eyes.

"What kind of gibberish are you talking?" she cried furiously. "You big brute! If you ever speak to me again, I'll call a policeman! How dare you speak to me after what you've done to poor Bert? You beast! You villain!"

And with that she swung her little hand and slapped me smack in the face, then with a stamp of her little foot and a burst of tears, she run forward and gently slipped one of Bert's arms about her slim shoulders, cooing to him gently.

I stood gaping after them like a fool, when Tommy pulled my sleeve.

"Hey, let's get on that shot, Steve."

"Say, Tommy," I said, a bit dazed as I followed him, "you see that little dame that belted me in the map just now? Well, what's that bozo, to her?"

"Him?" said Tommy, biting off a chew of tobacco. "Oh, nobody much--just only merely nobody but her big brother!"

At that I let out a howl that could of been heard in Labrador, and right after that I have to act as nurse to Tommy, he havin' swallowed his tobacco when he hears me yap.

Anyhow, I learned you never can tell when women is holdin' something out on you.

THE END

Contents

SLUGGERS ON THE BEACH

By Robert E. Howard

THE MINUTE I seen the man which was going to referee my fight with Slip Harper in the Amusement Palace Fight Club, Shanghai, I takes a vi'lent dislike to him. His name was Hoolihan, a fighting sailor, same as me, and he was a big red-headed gorilla with hands like hairy hams, and he carried hisself with a swagger which put my teeth on edge. He looked like he thought he was king of the waterfront, and that there is a title I aspires to myself.

I detests these conceited jackasses. I'm glad that egotism ain't amongst my faults. Nobody'd ever know, from my conversation, that I was the bully of the toughest ship afloat, and the terror of bucko mates from Valparaiso to Singapore. I'm that modest I don't think I'm half as good as I really am.

But Red Hoolihan got under my hide with his struttings and giving instructions in that fog-horn beller of his'n. And when he discovered that Slip Harper was a old shipmate of his'n, his actions growed unbearable.

He made this discovery in the third round, whilst counting over Harper, who hadst stopped one of my man-killing left hooks with his chin.

"Seven! Eight! Nine!" said Hoolihan, and then he stopped counting and said: "By golly, ain't you the Johnny Harper that used to be bos'n aboard the old _Saigon_?"

"Yuh--yeah!" goggled Harper, groggily, getting his legs under him, whilst the crowd went hysterical.

"What's eatin' you, Hoolihan?" I roared indignantly. "G'wan countin'!"

He gives me a baleful glare.

"I'm refereein' this mill," he said. "You tend to your part of it. By golly, Johnny, I ain't seen you since I broke jail in Calcutta--"

But Johnny was up at last, and trying to keep me from taking him apart, which all that prevented me was the gong.

Hoolihan helped Harper to his corner, and they kept up an animated conversation till the next round started--or rather Hoolihan did. Harper wasn't in much condition to enjoy conversation, having left three molars embedded in my right glove.

Whilst we was whanging away at each other during the fourth, I was aware of Hoolihan's voice.

"Stand up to him, Johnny," he said. "I'll see that you get a square deal. G'wan, sink in your left. That right to the guts didn't hurt us none. Pay no attention to them body blows. He's bound to weaken soon."

Enraged beyond control, I turned on him and said, "Look here, you red-headed baboon, are you a referee or a second?"

I dunno what retort he was fixing to make, because just then Harper takes advantage of my abstraction to slam me behind the ear with all he had. Maddened by this perfidy, I turned and sunk my left to the hilt in his midriff, whereupon he turned a beautiful pea-green.

"Tie into him, Johnny," urged Hoolihan.

"Shut up, Red," gurgled Harper, trying to clinch. "You're makin' him mad, and he's takin' it out on _me_!"

"Well, we can take it," begun Hoolihan, but at that moment I tagged Harper on the ear with a meat-cleaver right, and he done a nose-dive, to Hoolihan's extreme disgust.

"One!" he hollered, waving his arm like a jib-boom. "Two! Three! Get up, Johnny. This baboon can't fight."

"Maybe he can't," said Johnny, dizzily, squinting up from the canvas, with his hair full of resin, "but if he hits me again like he just done, I'll be a candidate for a harp. And I hate music. You can count all night if you want to, Red, but as far as I'm concerned, the party's over!"

Hoolihan give a snort of disgust, and grabbed my right arm and raised it and hollered: "Ladies and gents, it is with the deepest regret that I announce this bone-headed gorilla as the winner!"

With a beller of wrath, I jerked my arm away from him and hung a clout on his proboscis that knocked him headfirst through the ropes. Before I couldst dive out on top of him, as was my firm intention, I was seized from behind by ten special policemen--rough-houses is so common in the Amusement Palace that the promoter is always prepared. Whilst I was being interfered with by these misguided idjits, Hoolihan riz from amongst the ruins of the benches and customers, and tried to crawl back into the ring, bellering like a bull and spurting blood all over everything. But a large number of people fell on him with piercing yells and dragged him back and set on him.

Meanwhile forty or fifty friends of the promoter hadst come to the rescue of the ten cops, and eventually I found myself back in my dressing-room without having been able to glut my righteous wrath on Red Hoolihan's huge carcass. He'd been carried out through one door whilst several dozen men was hauling me through another. It's a good thing for them that I'd left my white bulldog Mike aboard the _*Sea Girl*._

I WAS SO blind mad I couldn't hardly get my clothes on, and by the time I hadst finished I was alone in the building. Gnashing my teeth slightly, I prepared to sally forth and find Red Hoolihan. Shanghai was too small for both of us.

But as I started for the door that opened into the corridor, I heard a quick rush of feet in the alley outside, and the back door of the dressing-room bust open. I wheeled, with my fists cocked, thinking maybe it was Red--and then I stopped short and gawped in surprise. It wasn't Red. It was a girl.

She was purty as all get-out, but now she was panting and pale and scared-looking. She shut the door and leaned against it.

"Don't let them get me!" she gurgled.

"Who?" I asked.

"Those Chinese devils!" she gasped. "The terrible Whang Yi!"

"Who's them?" I inquired, considerably bewildered.

"A secret society of fiends and murderers!" she said. "They chased me into that alley! They'll torture me to death!"

"They won't, neither," I said. "I'll mop up the floor with 'em. Lemme look!"

I pushed her aside and opened the door and stuck my head out in the alley. "I don't see nobody," I said.

She leaned back against the wall, with one hand to her heart. I looked at her with pity. Beauty in distress always touches a warm spot in my great, big, manly bosom.

"They're hiding out there, somewhere," she whimpered.

"What they chasin' you for?" I asked, forgetting all about my hurry to smear the docks with Red Hoolihan.

"I have something they want," she said. "My name is Laura Hopkins. I do a dance act at the European Grand Theater--did you ever hear of Li Yang?"

"The bandit chief which was raising Cain around here a couple of years ago?" I said. "Sure. He raided all up and down the coast. Why?"

"Last night I came upon a Chinaman dying in the alley behind the theater," she said. "He'd been stabbed. But he had a piece of paper in his mouth, which had been overlooked by the men who killed him. He had been one of Li Yang's soldiers. He gave me that paper, when he knew he was dying. It was a map showing where Li Yang had hidden his treasure."

"The heck you say!" I remarked, much interested.

"Yes. And the spot is less than a day's journey from here," she said. "But somehow the killers learned that I had this map. They call themselves the Whang Yi. They are the men who were the enemies of Li Yang in his lifetime. They want the treasure themselves. So they're after me. Oh, what shall I do?" she said, wringing her hands.

"Don't be afraid," I said. "I'll pertect you from them yeller-bellied rats."

"I want to get away," she whimpered. "I'm afraid to stay in Shanghai. They'll kill me. I dare not try to find the treasure. I'd give them the map if they'd only spare my life. But they'll kill me just for knowing about it. Oh, if I only had money enough to get away! I' d sell the map for fifty dollars."

"You would?" I ejaculated. "Why, that there treasure is likely to be a lot of gold and silver and jewerls and stuff. He was a awful thief."

"It won't do me any good dead," she answered. "Oh, what shall I do?"

"I'll tell you," I said, digging into my britches. "Sell it to me. I'll give you fifty bucks."

"Would you?" she cried, jumping up, her eyes shining. "No--oh, no; it wouldn't be fair to you. It's too dangerous. I'll tear the map up, and--"

"Wait a minute!" I hollered. "Don't do that, dern it! I'll take the risks. I ain't scared of no yeller bellies. Here, here's the fifty. Gimme the map."

"I'm afraid you'll regret it," she said. "But here it is."

Whilst she was counting the fifty, I looked at the map, feeling like I was holding a fortune in my hand. It seemed to represent a small island laying a short distance offa the mainland, with trees and things growing on it. One of these trees was taller'n the others and stood off to itself. A arrer run from it to a spot on the beach, which was marked with a "x." There was a lot of Chinese writing on the edge of the map, and a line of English.

"Fifty paces south of that tall tree," said Miss Hopkins. "Five feet down in the loose sand. The island is only a few hours run from the port, if you take a motor launch. Full directions are written out there in English."

"I'll find it," I promised, handling the map with awe and reverence. "But before I start, I'll see you home so them Whang Yis won't try to grab you."

But she said, "No, I'll go out the front way and hail a cab. Tomorrow night I'll be safe on the high seas. I'll never forget what you've done for me."

"If you'll give me the address of where you're goin'," I said, "I'll see that you get a share of the treasure if I finds it."

"Don't worry about that," she said. "You've already done more for me than you realize. Goodbye! I hope you find all you deserve."

And she left in such a hurry I hardly realized she had went till she was gone.

WELL, I WASTED no time. I forgot all about Red Hoolihan--a man with millions on his mind ain't got no time for such hoodlums--and I headed for a certain native quarter of the waterfront as fast as I could leg it. I knowed a Chinese fisherman named Chin Yat who had a motor launch which he rented out, and being as I had given all my money to Miss Hopkins, I didn't have no dough, and he was the only one which I knowed would let me have his boat on credit.

It was late, because the fight card had been a unusually long one. It was away past midnight when I got to Chin Yat's, and I seen him and a big white man puttering around the boat, under the light of torches burning near the wharves. I bust into a run, because I was afraid he'd rent the boat before I could get there, though I couldn't figger what any white man would want with a boat that time of night.

As I hove up, I hollered, "Hey Chin, I wanta rent your boat--"

The big white man turned around, and the torchlight fell on his face. It was Red Hoolihan.

"What you doin' here?" he demanded, clenching his fists.

"I got no time to waste on you," I snarled. "I'll fix you later. Chin, I gotta have your motor-boat."

He shook his head and sing-songed, "Velly solly. No can do."

"What you mean?" I hollered. "How come you can't?"

"'Cause it's already rented to me," said Hoolihan, "and I've done paid him his dough in advance."

"But this here's important," I bellered. "I _got_ to have that boat! It means a lot of dough."

"What d'you know about a lot of dough?" snorted Hoolihan. "I need that boat because I'm goin' after more dough than you ever dreamed of, you bone-headed ape! You know why I ain't takin' the time to caulk the wharf-timbers with your gore? Well, I'll tell you, so you won't get no false ideas. I ain't got the time to waste on a baboon like you. I'm goin' after hidden treasure! When I come back, that boat'll be loaded to the gunnels with gold!"

And so saying, he waved a piece of paper in my face.

"Where'd you get that?" I yelped.

"None of your business," he said. "That's--hey, leggo that!"

I had made a grab for it, in my excitement, and he took a poke at me. I busted him in the snout in return, and he nearly went over the lip of the wharf. He managed to catch hisself--and then he let out a agonized beller. The paper had slipped outa his hand and vanished in the black water.

"Now look what you done!" he howled frantically. "You've lost me a fortune. Put up your mitts, you spawn of the devil's gutter! I'm goin' to knock--"

"Did your map look like this?" I asked, pulling out mine and showing it to him in the torchlight. The sight sobered him quick.

"By Judas!" he bawled. "The same identical map! Where'd you get it?"

"Never mind about that," I said. "The p'int is, we both knows what the other'n's after. We both wants the treasure Li Yang hid before the Federalists bumped him off. I got a map but no boat, you got a boat but no map. Let's go!"

"Before I'd share anything with you," he said bitterly, "I'd lose the whole shebang."

"Who said anything about sharin' anything?" I roared. "The best man takes the loot. I still got a score to settle with you. We finds the plunder, and then we settles our argument. Winner takes the treasure!"

"Okay with me," he agreed, blood-thirstily. "Come on!"

But as we sputtered outa the harbor in the starlight, a sudden thought hit me.

"Hold on!" I said. "Does this here island lie south or north of the port?"

"Cut off the engine and we'll look at the map," he said, holding up a lantern. I done so, and we peered at the line of English which was writ in a very small, femernine hand.

"That's a 'n'," said Red, pointing at it with his big, hairy finger. "It means the island lies north of the harbor."

"It looks like a 's' to me," I said. "I believe it means the island's south of the harbor."

"I say north!" exclaimed Hoolihan, angrily.

"South!" I snarled.

"We goes north!" bellered Hoolihan, brandishing his fists. He hadn't no control over his temper at all. "We goes north or nowheres!"

As I started to rise, my foot hit something in the bottom of the launch. It was a belaying pin. I ain't a man to be gypped out of a fortune account of the stubbornness of some misguided jackass. I laid that belaying pin over Red Hoolihan's ear with a full-arm swing.

"We goes south," I repeated truculently, and they was no opposing voice.

FEELING YOUR WAY along that coast at night in a motor-launch ain't no picnic. Hoolihan come to just about daylight, and he got up and rubbed the lump over his ear, and cussed free and fervent.

"I won't forget this," he said. "This here is another score to settle with you. Where at are we?"

"There's the island, dead ahead," I answered.

He scowled over the map, and said, "It don' t look like the one on the map."

"You expect a ignerant Chinese to draw a perfect map?" I retorted. "It's bound to be the one. Look for a tall tree standing kinda out alone. It oughta be on this end of the island."

But it wasn't; they wasn't nothing there but low, thick bushes rising outa marshy land. We tried the other end of the island, and I said: "This is it. The Chinee made another mistake. He put the tree on the wrong end of the island. There's a sandy beach and a tall palm standin' out from the rest of the growth."

Hoolihan had forgot all about his doubts. He was as impatient as me to get ashore. We run in and tied up in a narrow cove, and tramped through the deep sand to the trees, packing the picks and shovels we had brung along, and my heart beat faster as I realized that in a short time I wouldst be a millionaire.

That tall palm was a lot closer to the water than it looked like on the map. When we'd stepped off fifty paces to the south, we was waist-deep in water!

"I see where we meets with engineerin' problems in our excavations," I said, but Hoolihan scowled and flexed his enormous arms, and said, "That ain't worryin' me. I'm thinkin' about somethin' else. Here we are, there's the treasure, lyin' under five foot of sand and water. All we got to do is dig it up. But we ain't settled yet whose treasure it is."

"All right," I said, shedding my shirt, "we settles it now."

With a roar, Hoolihan ripped off his shirt and squared off, the morning sun gleaming on the red hair of his gigantic chest, and the muscles standing out in knots all over his arms and shoulders. He come plunging in like the wild bull of Bashen, and I met him breast to breast with both maulers flailing.

He'd never been licked in a ring or out, they said. He was two hundred pounds of bone and bulging muscle, and he was quick as a cat on his feet. Or he would of been, if'n he'd had a chance to be.

We was standing ankle-deep in sand. They wasn't no chance for foot-work. It was like dragging our feet through hot mush. The sun riz higher and beat down on us like the pure essence of hell-fire, and it soaked vitality out of us like water out of a sponge. And that awful sand! It was worse'n having iron weights fastened to our ankles. There wasn't no foot-work, side-stepping--nothing but slug, slug, slug! Toe to toe, leaning head to head, with our four maulers working like sledge-hammers fastened on pistons.

I dunno how long we fought. It musta been hours, because the sun crawled up and up, and beat down on us like red hot lances. Everything was floating red before me; I couldn't hear nothing except Red's gusty panting, the scruff of our feet through that hellish sand, and the thud and crunch of our fists.

Talk about the heat Jeffries and Sharkey fought in at Coney Island, and the heat of the ring at Toledo! Them places was Eskimo igloos compared to that island, under that awful sun! I got so numb I could scarcely feel the jolt of Hoolihan's iron fists. I'd done quit any attempt at defense, and so had he. We was just driving in our punches wide open and with all we had behind 'em.

One of my eyes was closed, the brow split and the lid sagging down like a curtain. Half the hide was missing from my face, and one cauliflowered ear was pounded into a purple pulp. Blood was oozing from my lips, nose and ears. Sweat poured off my chest and run down my legs till I was standing in mud. We was both slimy with sweat and blood. I could hear the agonized pound of my own heart, and it felt like it was going to bust right through my ribs. My calf muscles and thigh muscles was quivering cords of fire, where they wasn't numb and dead. Every time I dragged a foot through that clinging, burning sand it felt like the joints of my limbs was giving apart.

But Hoolihan was reeling like a stabbed ox, staggering and blowing. His breath was sobbing through his busted teeth, and blood streamed down his chin. His belly was heaving like a sail in the wind, and his ribs was raw beef from my body punching.

I was driving him before me, step by step. And the next thing I knowed, we was under the shade of that big palm tree, and the sun wasn't flaying my back no more. It was almost like a dash of cold water. It revived Hoolihan a little, too. I seen him stiffen and lift his head, but he was done. My body beating hadst took all the starch outa his spine. My legs were dead, and I couldn't rush him no more, but I fell into him and, as I fell, I crashed my right overhand to his jaw with my last ounce of strength.

It connected, and we went down together, him under me. I laid there for a second, and then I groped around and caught hold of the tree and hauled myself to my feet. Hanging on with one hand, I shook the blood and sweat outa my eyes, and begun counting. I was so dopey and groggy I got mixed up three or four times and had to start over, and finally I passed out on my feet, cause when I come to I was still counting up around thirty or forty. Hoolihan hadn't moved.

I tried to say, "By golly, the dough's mine!" But all I could do was gulp like a dying fish. I took one staggering step towards the picks and shovels, and then my legs give way and I went headfirst into the sand. And there I laid, like a dead man.

IT WAS THE sound of a motor putt-putting above the wash of the surf which first roused me. Then, a few minutes later, I heard feet scruff through the sand, and men talking and laughing. Then somebody swore loud and freely.

I shook the red glare outa my eyes and blinked up. Four men was standing there, with picks and shovels in their hands, staring down at me, and I rekernized 'em: Smoky Harrigan, Bat Schimmerling, Joe Donovan and Tom Storley, as dirty a set of rats as ever infested a wharf.

"Well, by Jupiter!" said Smoky, with the sneer he always wore. "What do you know about this? Costigan and Hoolihan! How come these gorillas to land on _this_ island?"

I tried to get up, but my legs wouldn't work, and I sunk back into the sand. Hoolihan groaned and cussed groggily somewhere near me. Harrigan stooped and picked up something which I seen was my map which had fell into the sand.

He showed it to the others and they laughed loud and jeeringly, which dully surprised me. My brain was still too numb from Hoolihan's punching and that awful sun to hardly know what it was all about.

"Put that map down before I rises and busts you in half," I mumbled through pulped lips.

"Oh, is it yours?" asked Smoky, sardonically.

"I bought it offa Miss Laura Hopkins," I said groggily. "It's mine, and so is the dough. Gimme it before I lays you like a carpet."

"Laura Hopkins!" he sneered. "That was Suez Kit, the slickest girl-crook that ever rolled a drunk for his wad. She worked the same gyp on that big ox Hoolihan. I saw her take him as he left the fight club."

"What d'you mean?" I demanded, struggling up to a sitting posture. I still couldn't get on my feet, and Hoolihan was in even worse shape. "She sold the same map to Hoolihan? Is that where he got his'n?"

"Why, you poor sucker!" sneered Harrigan. "Can't you understand nothing? Them maps was fakes. I dunno what you're doin' here, but if you'd followed 'em, you'd been miles away to the north of the harbor, instead of the south."

"And there ain't no treasure of Li Yang?" I moaned.

"Sure there is," he said. "What's more, it's hid right here on this island. And this is the right map." He waved a strip of parchment all covered with lines and Chinese writing. "There's treasure here. Li Yang didn't hide it here hisself, but it was left here for him by a smuggler. Li Yang got bumped off before he could come for it. An old Chinee fence named Yao Shan had the map. Suez Kit bought it off him with the hundred bucks she gypped out of you and Hoolihan. He must have been crazy to sell it, but you can't never tell about them Chineses."

"But the Whang Yis?" I gasped wildly.

"Horseradish!" sneered Smoky. "A artistic touch to put the story over. But if it'll make you feel any better, I'll tell you that Suez Kit lost the map after all. I'd been follerin' her for days, knowin' she was up to something, though I didn't know just what. When she got the map from old Yao Shan, I tapped her on the head and took it. And here we are!"

"The treasure's as much our'n as it is your'n," I protested.

"Heh! heh! heh!" he replied. "Try and get it. Gwan, boys, get to work. These big chumps has fought each other to a frazzle, and we got nothin' to fear from 'em."

So I laid there and et my soul out whilst they set about stealing our loot right under our noses. Smoky paid no attention to the palm tree. Studying the map closely, he located a big rock jutting up amongst some bushes, and he stepped off ten paces to the west. "Dig here," he said.

They pitched in digging a lot harder'n I had any idee them rats could work, and the sand flew. Purty soon Bat Schimmerling's pick crunched on something solid, and they all yelled.

"Look here!" yelled Tom Storley. "A lacquered chest, bound with iron bands!"

They all yelled with joy, and Hoolihan groaned dismally. He'd come to in time to get what it was all about.

"Gypped!" he moaned. "Cheated! Swindled! Framed! And now them thieves is robbin' us right before us!"

I HAULED MYSELF painfully across the sands, and stared down into the hole, and my heart leaped as I seen the top of a iron-bound chest at the bottom. A wave of red swept all the weakness and soreness outa my frame.

Smoky turned and yelled at me, "See what you've missed, you dumb chump? See that chest? I dunno what's in it, but whatever it is, it's worth millions! 'More precious than gold,' old Yao Shan said. And it's our'n! While you and that other gorilla are workin' out your lives haulin' ropes and eatin' resin dust, we'll be rollin' in luxury!"

"You'll roll in somethin' else first!" I yelled, heaving up amongst 'em like a typhoon. Harrigan swung up a pick, but before he couldst bring it down on my head, I spread his nose all over his face with a left hook which likewise deprived him of all his front teeth and rendered him _horse-de-combat._ At this moment Bat Schimmerling broke a shovel over my head, and Tom Storley run in and grappled with me. This was about the least sensible thing he could of done, as he instantly realized, and just before he lapsed into unconsciousness he hollered for Donovan to get a gun.

Donovan took the hint and run for the launch, where he procured a shotgun and come back on the jump. He hesitated to fire at long range, because I was so mixed up with Storley and Schimmerling that he couldn't hit me without riddling them. But about that time I untangled myself from Storley's senseless carcass and caressed Schimmerling's chin with a right uppercut which stood him on his head in the hole on top of the chest.

Donovan then give a yelp of triumph and throwed the gun to his shoulder--but Hoolihan had crawled up behind him on all-fours, and as Joe pulled the trigger, Red swept his legs out from under him. The charge combed my hair, it missed me that close, and Donovan crashed down on top of Hoolihan, who stroked his whiskers with a right that nearly tore his useless head off.

Hoolihan then crawled to the edge of the hole and looked down.

"It's your'n," he gulped. "You licked me. But it busts my heart to think of the dough I've lost."

"Aw, shut up," I growled, grabbing Schimmerling by the hind laig and dragging him out of the hole. "Help me get this chest outa here. Whatever's in it, you get half."

Hoolihan gaped at me.

"You mean that?" he gasped.

"He may, but I don't!" broke in a hard, femernine voice, and we whirled to behold Miss Laura Hopkins standing before us. But they was considerable change in her appearance. She wore a man's shirt, for one thing, and khaki pants and boots, and her face was a lot harder'n I remembered it. Moreover, they was a bandage on her head under her sun-helmet, and she had a pistol in her hand, p'inting at us. She looked like Suez Kit now, all right.

She give a sneer at Smoky and his minions, which was beginning to show signs of life.

"That fool thought he'd finished me, eh? Pah! I don't kill that easy," she said. "Stole my map, the rat! How did you two gorillas get here? Those maps I sold you were for an island half a day from here."

"It was my mistake," I said, and I added, limping disconsolately towards her, "I believed you. I thought you was in distress."

"The more fool you," she sneered. "I _had_ to have a hundred dollars to buy Yao Shan's map. That gyp I worked on you and Hoolihan was the best one I could think of, at the spur of the moment. Now get to work and hoist that chest out, and load it in my boat. You're a sap to trust anybody--_ow!"_

I'd slapped the gun out of her hand so quick she didn't have time to pull the trigger. It went spinning into the water and sunk.

"Just because _you're_ smart, you think everybody else is a sap," I snorted. "Cmon, Red, le's get our chest out."

SUEZ KIT STOOD staring wildly at us. "But it's mine!" she hollered. "I gave Yao Shan a hundred dollars--"

"You give him our hundred," I snorted. "You make me sick."

Me and Red bent down and got hold of the chest and rassled it out of the hole. Suez Kit was doing a war-dance all over the beach.

"You dirty, double-crossing rats!" she wept. "I might have known I couldn't trust any man! Robbers! Bandits! Oh, this is too much!"

"Oh, shut up," I said wearily. "We'll give you some of the loot--gimme that rock, Red. The lock is plumb rotten."

I took the stone and hit the lock a few licks, and it come all to pieces. Smoky and his gang had come to, and they watched us wanly. Suez Kit fidgeted around behind us, and I heard her breath coming in pants. Red throwed open the lid. They was a second of painful silence, and then Suez Kit let out an awful scream and staggered back, her hands to her head. Hanigan and his mob lifted up their voices in lamentation.

That chest wasn't full of silver, nor platinum, nor jewels. It was full of machine-gun cartridges!

"Bullets!" said Hoolihan, kinda numbly. "No wonder Yao Shan was willing to sell the map. 'More precious than gold,' he said. Of course, this ammunition _was_ more precious than gold to a bandit chief. Steve, I'm sick!"

So was Smoky and his gang. And Suez Kit wept like she'd sot on a hornet.

"Steve," said Red, as him and me limped towards our boat whilst the sounds of weeping and wailing riz behind us, "was it because I kept Donovan from blowin' your head off that you decided to split the treasure with me?"

"Do I look like a cheapskate?" I snapped. "I knowed from the first that I was going to split with you."

"Then why in the name of thunderation," he bellered, turning purple in the face, "did you have to beat me up like you done, when you was intendin' to split anyway? What was we fightin' about, anyway?"

"You might of been fightin' for the loot," I roared, brandishing my fists in his face, "but I was merely convincin' you who was the best man."

"Well, I ain't convinced," he bellered, waving _his_ fists. "It was the sand and the sun which licked me, not you. We'll settle this in the ring tonight, at the Amusement Palace."

"Let's go!" I yelled, leaping into the launch. "I'm itchin' to prove to the customers that you're as big a flop as a fighter as you were as a referee."

THE END

Contents

TEXAS FISTS

By Robert E. Howard

THE *SEA GIRL* hadn't been docked in Tampico more'n a few hours when I got into a argument with a big squarehead off a tramp steamer. I forget what the row was about--sailing vessels versus steam, I think. Anyway, the discussion got so heated he took a swing at me. He musta weighed nearly three hundred pounds, but he was meat for me. I socked him just once and he went to sleep under the ruins of a table.

As I turned back to my beer mug in high disgust, I noticed that a gang of fellers which had just come in was gawping at me in wonder. They was cow-punchers, in from the ranges, all white men, tall, hard and rangy, with broad-brimmed hats, leather chaps, big Mexican spurs, guns an' everything; about ten of them, altogether.

"By the gizzard uh Sam Bass," said the tallest one, "I plumb believe we've found our man, hombres. Hey, pardner, have a drink! Come on--set down at this here table. I wanta talk to you."

So we all set down and, while we was drinking some beer, the tall cow-puncher glanced admiringly at the squarehead which was just coming to from the bar-keep pouring water on him, and the cow-puncher said:

"Lemme introduce us: we're the hands of the Diamond J--old Bill Dornley's ranch, way back up in the hills. I'm Slim, and these is Red, Tex, Joe, Yuma, Buck, Jim, Shorty, Pete and the Kid. We're in town for a purpose, pardner, which is soon stated.

"Back up in the hills, not far from the Diamond J, is a minin' company, and them miners has got the fightin'est buckaroo in these parts. They're backin' him agin all comers, and I hates to say what he's did to such Diamond J boys as has locked horns with him. Them miners has got a ring rigged up in the hills where this gent takes on such as is wishful to mingle with him, but he ain't particular. He knocked out Joe, here, in that ring, but he plumb mopped up a mesquite flat with Red, which challenged him to a rough-and-tumble brawl with bare fists. He's a bear-cat, and the way them miners is puttin' on airs around us boys is somethin' fierce.

"We've found we ain't got no man on the ranch which can stand up to that grizzly, and so we come into town to find some feller which could use his fists. Us boys is more used to slingin' guns than knuckles. Well, the minute I seen you layin' down that big Swede, I says to myself, I says, 'Slim, there's your man!'

"How about it, amigo? Will you mosey back up in the hills with us and flatten this big false alarm? We aim to bet heavy, and we'll make it worth yore while."

"And how far is this here ranch?" I asked.

"'Bout a day's ride, hossback--maybe a little better'n that."

"That's out," I decided. "I can't navigate them four-legged craft. I ain't never been on a horse more'n three or four times, and I ain't figgerin' on repeatin' the experiment."

"Well," said Slim, "we'll get hold of a auteymobeel and take you out in style."

"No," I said, "I don't believe I'll take you up; I wanta rest whilst I'm in port. I've had a hard voyage; we run into nasty weather and had one squall after another. Then the Old Man picked up a substitute second mate in place of our regular mate which is in jail in Melbourne, and this new mate and me has fought clean across the Pacific, from Melbourne to Panama, where he give it up and quit the ship."

The cow-punchers all started arguing at the same time, but Slim said:

"Aw, that's all right boys; I reckon the gent knows what he wants to do. We can find somebody else, I reckon. No hard feelin's. Have another drink."

I kinda imagined he had a mysterious gleam in his eye, and it looked like to me that when he motioned to the bartender, he made some sort of a signal; but I didn't think nothing about it. The bar-keep brought a bottle of hard licker, and Slim poured it, saying: "What did you say yore name was, amigo?"

"Steve Costigan, A. B. on the sailing vessel *Sea Girl*," I answered. "I want you fellers to hang around and meet Bill O'Brien and Mushy Hanson, my shipmates, they'll be around purty soon with my bulldog Mike. I'm waitin' for 'em. Say, this stuff tastes funny."

"That's just high-grade tequila," said Slim. "Costigan, I shore wish you'd change yore mind about goin' out to the ranch and fightin' for us."

"No chance," said I. "I crave peace and quiet ... Say, what the heck ...?"

I hadn't took but one nip of that funny-tasting stuff, but the bar-room had begun to shimmy and dance. I shook my head to clear it and saw the cowboys, kinda misty and dim, they had their heads together, whispering, and one of 'em said, kinda low-like: "He's fixin' to pass out. Grab him!"

At that, I give a roar of rage and heaved up, upsetting the table and a couple of cow-hands.

"You low-down land-sharks," I roared. "You doped my grog!"

"Grab him, boys!" yelled Slim, and three or four nabbed me. But I throwed 'em off like chaff and caught Slim on the chin with a clout that sprawled him on the back of his neck. I socked Red on the nose and it spattered like a busted tomater, and at this instant Pete belted me over the head with a gun-barrel.

With a maddened howl, I turned on him, and he gasped, turned pale and dropped the gun for some reason or other. I sunk my left mauler to the wrist in his midriff, and about that time six or seven of them cow-punchers jumped on my neck and throwed me by sheer weight of man-power.

I got Yuma's thumb in my mouth and nearly chawed it off, but they managed to sling some ropes around me, and the drug, from which I was already weak and groggy, took full effect about this time and I passed clean out.

I musta been out a long time. I kinda dimly remember a sensation of bumping and jouncing along, like I was in a car going over a rough road, and I remember being laid on a bunk and the ropes took off, but that's all.

I WAS WOKE up by voices. I set up and cussed. I had a headache and a nasty taste in my mouth, and, feeling the back of my head, I found a bandage, which I tore off with irritation. Keel haul me! As if a scalp cut like that gun-barrel had give me needed dressing!

I was sitting on a rough bunk in a kinda small shack which was built of heavy planks. Outside I heered Slim talking:

"No, Miss Joan, I don't dast let you in to look at him. He ain't come to, I don't reckon 'cause they ain't no walls kicked outa the shack, yet; but he might come to hisseIf whilst you was in there, and they's no tellin' what he might do, even to you. The critter ain't human, I'm tellin' you, Miss Joan."

"Well," said a feminine voice, "I think it was just horrid of you boys to kidnap a poor ignorant sailor and bring him away off up here just to whip that miner."

"Golly, Miss Joan," said Slim, kinda like he was hurt, "if you got any sympathy to spend, don't go wastin' it on that gorilla. Us boys needs yore sympathy. I winked at the bar-keep for the dope when I ordered the drinks, and, when I poured the sailor's, I put enough of it in his licker to knock out three or four men. It hit him quick, but he was wise to it and started sluggin'. With all them knockout drops in him, he near wrecked the joint! Lookit this welt on my chin--when he socked me I looked right down my own spine for a second. He busted Red's nose flat, and you oughta see it this mornin'. Pete lammed him over the bean so hard he bent the barrel of his forty-five, but all it done was make Costigan mad. Pete's still sick at his stummick from the sock the sailor give him. I tell you, Miss Joan, us boys oughta have medals pinned on us; we took our lives in our hands, though we didn't know it at the start, and, if it hadn't been for the dope, Costigan would have destroyed us all. If yore dad ever fires me, I'm goin' to git a job with a circus, capturin' tigers and things. After that ruckus, it oughta be a cinch."

At this point, I decided to let folks know I was awake and fighting mad about the way I'd been treated, so I give a roar, tore the bunk loose from the wall and throwed it through the door. I heard the girl give a kind of scream, and then Slim pulled open what was left of the door and come through. Over his shoulder I seen a slim nice-looking girl legging it for the ranch-house.

"What you mean scarin' Miss Joan?" snarled Slim, tenderly fingering a big blue welt on his jaw.

"I didn't go to scare no lady," I growled. "But in about a minute I'm goin' to scatter your remnants all over the landscape. You think you can shanghai me and get away with it? I want a big breakfast and a way back to port."

"You'll git all the grub you want if you'll agree to do like we says," said Slim; "but you ain't goin' to git a bite till you does."

"You'd keep a man from mess, as well as shanghai him, hey?" I roared. "Well, lemme tell you, you long-sparred, leather-rigged son of a sea-cock, I'm goin' to--"

"You ain't goin' to do nothin'," snarled Slim, whipping out a long-barreled gun and poking it in my face.

"You're goin' to do just what I says or get the daylight let through you--"

Having a gun shoved in my face always did enrage me. I knocked it out of his hand with one mitt, and him flat on his back with the other, and, jumping on his prostrate frame with a blood-thirsty yell of joy, I hammered him into a pulp.

His wild yells for help brought the rest of the crew on the jump, and they all piled on me for to haul me off. Well, I was the center of a whirlwind of fists, boots, and blood-curdling howls of pain and rage for some minutes, but they was just too many of them and they was too handy with them lassoes. When they finally had me hawg-tied again, the side wall was knocked clean out of the shack, the roof was sagging down and Joe, Shorty, Jim and Buck was out cold.

SLIM, LOOKING A lee-sore wreck, limped over and glared down at me with his one good eye whilst the other boys felt theirselves for broken bones and throwed water over the fallen gladiators.

"You snortin' buffalo," Slim snarled. "How I hones to kick yore ribs in! What do you say? Do you fight or stay tied up?"

The cook-shack was near and I could smell the bacon and eggs sizzling. I hadn't eat nothing since dinner the day before and I was hungry enough to eat a raw sea lion.

"Lemme loose," I growled. "I gotta have food. I'll lick this miner for you, and when I've did that, I'm going to kick down your bunkhouse and knock the block offa every man, cook and steer on this fool ranch."

"Boy," said Slim with a grin, spitting out a loose tooth, "does you lick that miner, us boys will each give you a free swing at us. Come on--you're loose now--let's go get it."

"Let's send somebody over to the Bueno Oro Mine and tell them mavericks 'bout us gittin' a slugger," suggested Pete, trying to work back a thumb he'd knocked outa place on my jaw.

"Good idee," said Slim. "Hey, Kid, ride over and tell 'em we got a man as can make hash outa their longhorn. Guess we can stage the scrap in about five days, hey, Sailor?"

"Five days my eye," I grunted. "The *Sea Girl* sails day after tomorrow and I gotta be on her. Tell 'em to get set for the go this evenin'."

"But, gee whiz!" expostulated Slim. "Don't you want a few days to train?"

"If I was outa trainin', five days wouldn't help me none," I said. "But I'm allus in shape. Lead on the mess table. I crave nutriment."

Well, them boys didn't hold no grudge at all account of me knocking 'em around. The Kid got on a broom-tailed bronc and cruised off across the hills, and the rest of us went for the cook-shack. Joe yelled after the Kid: "Look out for Lopez the Terrible!" And they all laughed.

Well, we set down at the table and the cook brung aigs and bacon and fried steak and sour-dough bread and coffee and canned corn and milk till you never seen such a spread. I lay to and ate till they looked at me kinda bewildered.

"Hey!" said Slim, "ain't you eatin' too much for a tough scrap this evenin'?"

"What you cow-pilots know about trainin'?" I said. "I gotta keep up my strength. Gimme some more of them beans, and tell the cook to scramble me five or six more aigs and bring me in another stack of buckwheats. And say," I added as another thought struck me, "who's this here Lopez you-all was jokin' about?"

"By golly," said Tex, "I thought you cussed a lot like a Texan. 'You-all,' huh? Where was you born?"

"Galveston," I said.

"Zowie!" yelled Tex. "Put 'er there, pard; I aims for to triple my bets on you! Lopez? Oh, he's just a Mex bandit--handsome cuss, I'll admit, and purty mean. He ranges around in them hills up there and he's stole some of our stock and made a raid or so on the Bueno Oro. He's allus braggin' 'bout how he aims for to raid the Diamond J some day and ride off with Joan--that's old Bill Dornley's gal. But heck, he ain't got the guts for that."

"Not much he ain't," said Jim. "Say, I wish old Bill was at the ranch now, 'steada him and Miz Dornley visitin' their son at Zacatlan. They'd shore enjoy the scrap this evenin'. But Miss Joan'll be there, you bet."

"Is she the dame I scared when I called you?" I asked Slim.

"Called me? Was you callin' me?" said he. "Golly, I'd of thought a bull was in the old shack, only a bull couldn't beller like that. Yeah, that was her."

"Well," said I, "tell her I didn't go for to scare her. I just naturally got a deep voice from makin' myself heard in gales at sea."

Well, we finished breakfast and Slim says: "Now what you goin' to do, Costigan? Us boys wants to help you train all we can."

"Good," I said. "Fix me up a bunk; nothing like a good long nap when trainin' for a tough scrap."

"All right," said they. "We reckons you knows what you wants; while you git yore rest, we'll ride over and lay some bets with the Bueno Oro mavericks."

SO THEY SHOWED me where I couldst take a nap in their bunkhouse and I was soon snoozing. Maybe I should of kinda described the ranch. They was a nice big house, Spanish style, but made of stone, not 'dobe, and down to one side was the corrals, the cook-shack, the long bunkhouse where the cowboys stayed, and a few Mexican huts. But they wasn't many Mexes working on the Diamond J. They's quite a few ranches in Old Mexico owned and run altogether by white men. All around was big rolling country, rough ranges of sagebrush, mesquite, cactus and chaparral, sloping in the west to hills which further on became right good-sized mountains.

Well, I was woke up by the scent of victuals; the cook was fixing dinner. I sat up on the bunk and--lo, and behold--there was the frail they called Miss Joan in the door of the bunkhouse, staring at me wide-eyed like I was a sea horse or something.

I started to tell her I was sorry I scared her that morning, but when she seen I was awake she give a gasp and steered for the ranch-house under full sail.

I was bewildered and slightly irritated. I could see that she got a erroneous idee about me from listening to Slim's hokum, and, having probably never seen a sailor at close range before, she thought I was some kind of a varmint.

Well, I realized I was purty hungry, having ate nothing since breakfast, so I started for the cook-shack and about that time the cow-punchers rode up, plumb happy and hilarious.

"Hot dawg!" yelled Slim. "Oh, baby, did them miners bite! They grabbed everything in sight and we has done sunk every cent we had, as well bettin' our hosses, saddles, bridles and shirts."

"And believe me," snarled Red, tenderly fingering what I'd made outa his nose, and kinda hitching his gun prominently, "you better win!"

"Don't go makin' no grandstand plays at me," I snorted. "If I can't lick a man on my own inisheyative, no gun-business can make me do it. But don't worry; I can flatten anything in these hills, includin' you and all your relatives. Let's get into that mess gallery before I clean starve."

While we ate, Slim said all was arranged; the miners had knocked off work to get ready and the scrap would take place about the middle of the evening. Then the punchers started talking and telling me things they hadst did and seen, and of all the triple-decked, full-rigged liars I ever listened to, them was the beatenest. The Kid said onst he come onto a mountain lion and didn't have no rope nor gun, so he caught rattlesnakes with his bare hands and tied 'em together and made a lariat and roped the lion and branded it, and he said how they was a whole breed of mountain lions in the hills with the Diamond J brand on 'em and the next time I seen one, if I would catch it and look on its flank, I would see it was so.

So I told them that once when I was cruising in the Persian Gulf, the wind blowed so hard it picked the ship right outa the water and carried it clean across Arabia and dropped it in the Mediterranean Sea; all the riggings was blown off, I said, and the masts outa her, so we caught sharks and hitched them to the bows and made 'em tow us into port.

Well, they looked kinda weak and dizzy then, and Slim said: "Don't you want to work out a little to kinda loosen up your muscles?"

Well, I was still sore at them cow-wranglers for shanghaing me the way they done, so I grinned wickedly and said: "Yeah, I reckon I better; my muscles is purty stiff, so you boys will just naturally have to spar some with me."

Well they looked kinda sick, but they was game. They brung out a battered old pair of gloves and first Joe sparred with me. Whilst they was pouring water on Joe they argued some about who was to spar with me next and they drawed straws and Slim was it.

"By golly," said Slim looking at his watch, "I'd shore admire to box with you, Costigan, but it's gettin' about time for us to start dustin' the trail for the Bueno Oro."

"Heck, we got plenty uh time," said Buck.

Slim glowered at him. "I reckon the foreman--which is me--knows what time uh day it is," said Slim. "I says we starts for the mine. Miss Joan has done said she'd drive Costigan over in her car, and me and Shorty will ride with 'em. I kinda like to be close around Miss Joan when she's out in the hills. You can't tell; Lopez might git it into his haid to make a bad play. You boys will foller on your broncs."

WELL, THAT'S THE way it was. Joan was a mighty nice looking girl and she was very nice to me when Slim interjuced me to her, but I couldst see she was nervous being that close to me, and it offended me very much, though I didn't show it none.

Slim set on the front seat with her, and me and Shorty on the back seat, and we drove over the roughest country I ever seen. Mostly they wasn't no road at all, but Joan knowed the channel and didn't need no chart to navigate it, and eventually we come to the mine.

The mine and some houses was up in the hills, and about half a mile from it, on a kind of a broad flat, the ring was pitched. Right near where the ring stood, was a narrow canyon, leading up through the hills. We had to leave the car close to the mine and walk the rest of the way, the edge of the flat being too rough to drive on.

They was quite a crowd at the ring, which was set up in the open. I notice that the Bueno Oro was run by white men same as the ranch. The miners was all big, tough-looking men in heavy boots, bearded and wearing guns, and they was a considerable crew of 'em. They was still more cow-punchers from all the ranches in the vicinity, a lean, hard-bit gang, with even more guns on them than the miners had. By golly, I never seen so many guns in one place in my life!

They was quite a few Mexicans watching, men and women, but Joan was the only white woman I seen. All the men took their hats off to her, and I seen she was quite a favorite among them rough fellers, some of which looked more like pirates than miners or cowboys.

Well the crowd set up a wild roar when they seen me, and Slim yelled: "Well, you mine-rasslin' mavericks, here he is! I shudders to think what he's goin' to do to yore man."

All the cow-punchers yipped jubilantly and all the miners yelled mockingly, and up come the skipper of the mine--the guy that done the managing of it--a fellow named Menly.

"Our man is in his tent getting on his togs, Slim," said he. "Get your fighter ready--and we'd best be on the lookout. I've had a tip that Lopez is in the hills close by. The mine's unguarded. Everybody's here. And while there's no ore or money for him to swipe--we sent out the ore yesterday and the payroll hasn't arrived yet--he could do a good deal of damage to the buildings and machinery if he wanted to."

"We'll watch out, you bet," assured Slim, and steered me for what was to serve as my dressing room. They was two tents pitched one on each side of the ring, and they was our dressing rooms. Slim had bought a pair of trunks and ring shoes in Tampico, he said, and so I was rigged out shipshape.

As it happened, I was the first man in the ring. A most thunderous yell went up, mainly from the cow-punchers, and, at the sight of my manly physique, many began to pullout their watches and guns and bet them. The way them miners snapped up the wagers showed they had perfect faith in their man. And when he clumb in the ring a minute later they just about shook the hills with their bellerings. I glared and gasped.

"Snoots Leary or I'm a Dutchman!" I exclaimed.

"Biff Leary they call him," said Slim which, with Tex and Shorty and the Kid, was my handler. "Does you know him?"

"Know him?" said I. "Say, for the first fourteen years of my life I spent most of my time tradin' punches with him. They ain't a back-alley in Galveston that we ain't bloodied each other's noses in. I ain't seen him since we was just kids--I went to sea, and he went the other way. I heard he was mixin' minin' with fightin'. By golly, hadst I knowed this you wouldn't of had to shanghai me."

Well, Menly called us to the center of the ring for instructions and Leary gawped at me: "Steve Costigan, or I'm a liar! What you doin' fightin' for cow-wranglers? I thought you was a sailor."

"I am, Snoots," I said, "and I'm mighty glad for to see you here. You know, we ain't never settled the question as to which of us is the best man. You'll recollect in all the fights we had, neither of us ever really won; we'd generally fight till we was so give out we couldn't lift our mitts, or else till somebody fetched a cop. Now we'll have it out, once and for all!"

"Good!" said he, grinning like a ogre. "You're purty much of a man, Steve, but I figger I'm more. I ain't been swingin' a sledge all this time for nothin'. And I reckon the nickname of 'Biff' is plenty descriptive."

"You always was conceited, Biff," I scowled. "Different from me. Do I go around tellin' people how good I am? Not me; I don't have to. They can tell by lookin' at me that I'm about the best two-fisted man that ever walked a forecastle. Shake now and let's come out fightin'."

Well, the referee had been trying to give us instructions, but we hadn't paid no attention to him, so now he muttered a few mutters under his breath and told us to get ready for the gong. Meanwhile the crowd was developing hydrophobia wanting us to get going. They'd got a camp chair for Miss Joan, but the men all stood up, banked solid around the ring so close their noses was nearly through the ropes, and all yelling like wolves.

"For cat's sake, Steve," said Slim as he crawled out of the ring, "don't fail us. Leary looks even meaner than he done when he licked Red and Joe."

I'll admit Biff was a hard looking mug. He was five feet ten to my six feet, and he weighed 195 to my 190. He had shoulders as wide as a door, a deep barrel chest, huge fists and arms like a gorilla's. He was hairy and his muscles swelled like iron all over him, miner's style, and his naturally hard face hadst not been beautified by a broken nose and a cauliflower ear. Altogether, Biff looked like what he was--a rough and ready fighting man.

AT THE TAP of the gong he come out of his corner like a typhoon, and I met him in the center of the ring. By sheer luck he got in the first punch--a smashing left hook to the head that nearly snapped my neck. The crowd went howling crazy, but I come back with a sledge-hammer right hook that banged on his cauliflower ear like a gunshot. Then we went at it hammer and tongs, neither willing to take a back step, just like we fought when we was kids.

He had a trick of snapping a left uppercut inside the crook of my arm and beating my right hook. He'd had that trick when we fought in the Galveston alleys, and he hadn't forgot it. I never couldst get away from that peculiar smack. Again and again he snapped my head back with it--and I got a neck like iron, too; ain't everybody can rock my head back on it.

He wasn't neglecting his right either. In fact he was mighty fond of banging me on the ear with that hand. Meanwhile, I was ripping both hands to his liver, belly and heart, every now and then bringing up a left or right to his head. We slugged that round out without much advantage on either side, but just before the gong, one of them left uppercuts caught me square in the mouth and the claret started in streams.

"First blood, Steve," grinned Biff as he turned to his corner.

Slim wiped off the red stuff and looked kinda worried.

"He's hit you some mighty hard smacks, Steve," said he.

I snorted. "Think I been pattin' him? He'll begin to feel them body smashes in a round or so. Don't worry; I been waitin' for this chance for years."

At the tap of the gong for the second round we started right in where we left off. Biff come in like he aimed for to take me apart, but I caught him coming in with a blazing left hook to the chin. His eyes rolled, but he gritted his teeth and come driving in so hard he battered me back in spite of all I couldst do. His head was down, both arms flying, legs driving like a charging bull. He caught me in the belly with a right hook that shook me some, but I braced myself and stopped him in his tracks with a right uppercut to the head.

He grunted and heaved over a right swing that started at his knees, and I didn't duck quick enough. It caught me solid but high, knocking me back into the ropes.

The miners roared with joy and the cow-punchers screamed in dismay, but I wasn't hurt. With a supercilious sneer, I met Leary's rush with a straight left which snapped his head right back between his shoulders and somehow missed a slungshot right uppercut which had all my beef behind it.

Biff hooked both hands hard to my head and shot his right under my heart, and I paid him back with a left to the midriff which brung a grunt outa him. I crashed an overhand right for his jaw but he blocked it and was short with a hard right swing. I went inside his left to blast away at his body with both hands in close, and he throwed both arms around me and smothered my punches.

We broke of ourselves before Menly couldst separate us, and I hooked both hands to Leary's head, taking a hard drive between the eyes which made me see stars. We then stood head to head in the center of the ring and traded smashes till we was both dizzy. We didn't hear the gong and Menly had to jump in and haul us apart and shove us toward our corners.

The crowd was plumb cuckoo by this time; the cowboys was all yelling that I won that round and the miners was swearing that it was Biff's by a mile. I snickered at this argument, and I noticed Biff snort in disgust. I never go into no scrap figgering to win it on points. If I can't knock the other sap stiff, he's welcome to the decision. And I knowed Biff felt the same way.

Leary was in my corner for the next round before I was offa my stool, and he missed me with a most murderous right. I was likewise wild with a right, and Biff recovered his balance and tagged me on the chin with a left uppercut. Feeling kinda hemmed in, I went for him with a roar and drove him out into the center of the ring with a series of short, vicious rushes he couldn't altogether stop.

I shook him to his heels with a left hook to the body and started a right hook for his head. Up flashed his left for that trick uppercut, and I checked my punch and dropped my right elbow to block. He checked his punch too and crashed a most tremendous right to my unguarded chin. Blood splattered and I went back on my heels, floundering and groggy, and Biff, wild for the kill and flustered by the yells, lost his head and plunged in wide open, flailing with both arms.

I caught him with a smashing left hook to the jaw and he rolled like a clipper in rough weather. I ripped a right under his heart and cracked a hard left to his ear, and he grabbed me like a grizzly and hung on, shaking his head to get rid of the dizziness. He was tough--plenty tough. By the time the referee had broke us, his head had plumb cleared and he proved it by giving a roar of rage and smacking me square on the nose with a punch that made the blood fly.

Again the gong found us slugging head-to-head. Slim and the boys was so weak and wilted from excitement they couldn't hardly see straight enough to mop off the blood and give me a piece of lemon to suck.

Well, this scrap was to be to a finish and it looked like to me it wouldst probably last fifteen or twenty more rounds. I wasn't tired or weakened any, and I knowed Biff was like a granite boulder--nearly as tough as me. I figgered on wearing him down with body punishment, but even I couldn't wear down Biff Leary in a few shakes. Just like me, he won most of his fights by simply outlasting the other fellow.

Still, with a punch like both of us carried in each hand, anything might happen--and did, as it come about.

WE OPENED THE fourth like we had the others, and slugged our way through it, on even terms. Same way with the fifth, only in this I opened a gash on Biff's temple and he split my ear. As we come up for the sixth, we both showed some wear and tear. One of my eyes was partly closed, I was bleeding at the mouth and nose, and from my cut ear; Biff had lost a tooth, had a deep cut on his temple, and his ribs on the left side was raw from my body punches.

But neither of us was weakening. We come together fast and Biff ripped my lip open with a savage left hook. His right glanced offa my head and again he tagged me with his left uppercut. I sunk my right deep in his ribs and we both shot our lefts. His started a fraction of a second before mine, and he beat me to the punch; his mitt biffed square in my already closing eye, and for a second the punch blinded me.

His right was coming behind his left, swinging from the floor with every ounce of his beef behind it. Wham! Square on the chin that swinging mauler tagged me, and it was like the slam of a sledge-hammer. I felt my feet fly out from under me, and the back of my head hit the canvas with a jolt that kinda knocked the cobwebs outa my brain.

I shook my head and looked around to locate Biff. He hadn't gone to no corner but was standing grinning down at me, just back of the referee a ways. The referee was counting, the crowd was clean crazy, and Biff was grinning and waving his gloves at 'em, as much as to say what had he told 'em.

The miners was dancing and capering and mighty near kissing each other in their joy, and the cowboys was white-faced, screaming at me to get up, and reaching for their guns. I believe if I hadn't of got up, they'd of started slaughtering the miners. But I got up. For the first time I was good and mad at Biff, not because he knocked me down, but because he had such a smug look on his ugly map. I knowed I was the best man, and I was seeing red.

I come up with a roar, and Biff wiped the smirk offa his map quick and met me with a straight left. But I wasn't to be stopped. I bored into close quarters where I had the advantage, and started ripping away with both hands.

Quickly seeing he couldn't match me at infighting, Biff grabbed my shoulders and shoved me away by main strength, instantly swinging hard for my head. I ducked and slashed a left hook to his head. He ripped a left to my body and smashed a right to my ear. I staggered him with a left hook to the temple, took a left on the head, and beat him to the punch with a mallet-like right hander to the jaw. I caught him wide open and landed a fraction of a second before he did. That smash had all my beef behind it and Biff dropped like a log.

But he was a glutton for punishment. Snorting and grunting, he got to his all-fours, glassy-eyed but shaking his head, and, as Menly said "nine," Leary was up. But he was groggy; such a punch as I dropped him with is one you don't often land. He rushed at me and connected with a swinging left to the ribs that shook me some, but I dropped him again with a blasting left hook to the chin.

This time I seen he'd never beat the count, so I retired to the furtherest corner and grinned at Slim and the other cowboys, who was doing a Indian scalp-dance while the miners was shrieking for Biff to get up.

Menly was counting over him, and, just as he said "seven," a sudden rattle of shots sounded. Menly stopped short and glared at the mine, half a mile away. All of us looked. A gang of men was riding around the buildings and shooting in them. Menly give a yell and hopped out of the ring.

"Gang up!" he yelled. "It's Lopez and his men! They've come to do all the damage they can while the mine's unguarded! They'll burn the office and ruin the machinery if we don't stop 'em! Come a-runnin'!"

He grabbed a horse and started smoking across the flat, and the crowd followed him, the cowboys on horses, the rest on foot, all with their guns in their hands. Slim jumped down and said to Miss Joan: "You stay here, Miss Joan. You'll be safe here and we'll be back and finish this prize fight soon's we chase them Greasers over the hill."

WELL, I WAS plumb disgusted to see them mutts all streak off across the flat, leaving me and Biff in the ring, and me with the fight practically won. Biff shook hisself and snorted and come up slugging, but I stepped back and irritably told him to can the comedy.

"What's up?" said he, glaring around. "Why, where's Menly? Where's the crowd? What's them shots?"

"The crowd's gone to chase Lopez and his merry men," I snapped. "Just as I had you out, the fool referee quits countin'."

"Well, I'd of got up anyhow," said Biff. "I see now. It is Lopez's gang, sure enough--"

The cow-punchers and miners had nearly reached the mine by this time, and guns was cracking plenty on both sides. The Mexicans was drawing off, slowly, shooting as they went, but it looked like they was about ready to break and run for it. It seemed like a fool play to me, all the way around.

"Hey, Steve," said Biff, "whatsa use waitin' till them mutts gits back? Let's me and you get our scrap over."

"Please don't start fighting till the boys come back," said Joan, nervously. "There's something funny about this. I don't feel just right. Oh--"

She give a kind of scream and turned pale. Outa the ravine behind the ring rode a Mexican. He was young and good-looking but he had a cruel, mocking face; he rode a fine horse and his clothes musta cost six months' wages. He had on tight pants which the legs flared at the bottoms and was ornamented with silver dollars, fine boots which he wore inside his pants legs, gold-chased spurs, a silk shirt and a jacket with gold lace all over it, and the costliest sombrero I ever seen. Moreover, they was a carbine in a saddle sheath, and he wore a Luger pistol at his hip.

"Murder!" said Biff. "It's Lopez the Terrible!"

"Greetings, senorita!" said he, with a flash of white teeth under his black mustache, swinging off his sombrero and making a low bow in his saddle. "Lopez keeps his word--have I not said I would come for you? Oho, I am clever. I sent my men to make a disturbance and draw the Americanos away. Now you will come with me to my lair in the hills where no gringo will ever find you!"

Joan was trembling and white-faced, but she was game. "You don't dare touch an American woman, you murderer!" she said. "My cowboys would hang you on a cactus."

"I will take the risk," he purred. "Now, senorita, come--"

"Get up here in the ring, Miss Joan," I said, leaning down to give her a hand. "That's it--right up with me and Biff. We won't let no harm come to you. Now, Mr. Lopez, if that's your name, I'm givin' you your sailin' orders--weigh anchor and steer for some other port before I bend one on your jaw."

"I echoes them sentiments," said Biff, spitting on his gloves and hitching at his trunks.

Lopez's white teeth flashed in a snarl like a wolf's. His Luger snaked into his hand.

"So," he purred, "these men of beef, these bruisers dare defy Lopez!" He reined up alongside the ring and, placing one hand on a post, vaulted over the ropes, his pistol still menacing me and Biff. Joan, at my motion, hadst retreated back to the other side of the ring. Lopez began to walk towards us, like a cat stalking a mouse.

"The girl I take," he said, soft and deadly. "Let neither of you move if you wish to live."

"Well, Biff," I said, tensing myself, "we'll rush him from both sides. He'll get one of us but the other'n'll git him."

"Oh, don't!" cried Joan. "He'll kill you. I'd rather--"

"Let's go!" roared Biff, and we plunged at Lopez simultaneous.

But that Mex was quicker than a cat; he whipped from one to the other of us and his gun cracked twice. I heard Biff swear and saw him stumble, and something that burned hit me in the left shoulder.

Before Lopez couldst fire again, I was on him, and I ripped the gun outa his hand and belted him over the head with it just as Biff smashed him on the jaw. Lopez the Terrible stretched out limp as a sail-rope, and he didn't even twitch.

"OH, YOU'RE SHOT, both of you!" wailed Joan, running across the ring toward us. "Oh, I feel like a murderer! I shouldn't have let you do it. Let me see your wounds."

Biff's left arm was hanging limp and blood was oozing from a neat round hole above the elbow. My own left was getting so stiff I couldn't lift it, and blood was trickling down my chest.

"Heck, Miss Joan," I said, "don't worry 'bout us. Lucky for us Lopez was usin' them steel-jacket bullets that make a clean wound and don't tear. But I hate about me and Biff not gettin' to finish our scrap--"

"Hey, Steve," said Biff hurriedly, "the boys has chased off the bandits and heered the shots, and here they come across the flat on the run! Let's us finish our go before they git here. They won't let us go on if we don't do it now. And we may never git another chance. You'll go off to your ship tomorrer and we may never see each other again. Come on. I'm shot through the left arm and you got a bullet through your left shoulder, but our rights is okay. Let's toss this mutt outa the ring and give each other one more good slam!"

"Fair enough, Biff," said I. "Come on, before we gets weak from losin' blood."

Joan started crying and wringing her hands.

"Oh, please, please, boys, don't fight each other any more! You'll bleed to death. Let me bandage your wounds--"

"Shucks, Miss Joan," said I, patting her slim shoulder soothingly, "me and Biff ain't hurt, but we gotta settle our argument. Don't you fret your purty head none."

We unceremoniously tossed the limp and senseless bandit outa the ring and we squared off, with our rights cocked and our lefts hanging at our sides, just as the foremost of the cow-punchers came riding up.

We heard the astounded yells of Menly, Slim and the rest, and Miss Joan begging 'em to stop us, and then we braced our legs, took a deep breath and let go.

We both crashed our rights at exactly the same instant, and we both landed--square on the button. And we both went down. I was up almost in a instant, groggy and dizzy and only partly aware of what was going on, but Biff didn't twitch.

The next minute Menly and Steve and Tex and all the rest was swarming over the ropes, yelling and hollering and demanding to know what it was all about, and Miss Joan was crying and trying to tell 'em and tend to Biff's wound.

"Hey!" yelled Yuma, outside the ring. "That was Lopez I seen ride up to the ring a while ago--here he is with a three-inch gash in his scalp and a fractured jawbone!"

"Ain't that what Miss Joan's been tellin' you?" I snapped. "Help her with Biff before he bleeds to death--naw, tend to him first--I'm all right."

Biff come to about that time and nearly knocked Menly's head off before he knowed where he was, and later, while they was bandaging us, Biff said: "I wanta tell you, Steve, I still don't consider you has licked me, and I'm figgerin' on lookin' you up soon's as my arm's healed up."

"Okay with me, Snoots," I grinned. "I gets more enjoyment outa fightin' you than anybody. Reckon there's fightin' Texas feud betwixt me and you."

"Well, Steve," said Slim, "we said we'd make it worth your while--what'll it be?"

"I wouldn't accept no pay for fightin' a old friend like Biff," said I. "All I wantcha to do is get me back in port in time to sail with the *Sea Girl*. And, Miss Joan, I hope you don't feel scared of me no more."

Her answer made both me and Biff blush like school-kids. She kissed us.

THE END

Contents

THE BULL DOG BREED

By Robert E. Howard

"AND SO," CONCLUDED the Old Man, "this big bully ducked the seltzer bottle and the next thing I knowed I knowed nothin'. I come to with the general idee that the _*Sea Girl*_ was sinkin' with all hands and I was drownin'--but it was only some chump pourin' water all over me to bring me to. Oh, yeah, the big French cluck I had the row with was nobody much, I learned--just only merely nobody but Tiger Valois, the heavyweight champion of the French navy--"

Me and the crew winked at each other. Until the captain decided to unburden to Penrhyn, the first mate, in our hearing, we'd wondered about the black eye he'd sported following his night ashore in Manila. He'd been in an unusual bad temper ever since, which means he'd been acting like a sore-tailed hyena. The Old Man was a Welshman, and he hated a Frenchman like he hated a snake. He now turned on me.

"If you was any part of a man, you big mick ham," he said bitterly, "you wouldn't stand around and let a blankety-blank French so-on and so-forth layout your captain. Oh, yeah, I know you wasn't there, then, but if you'll fight him--"

"Aragh!" I said with sarcasm, "leavin' out the fact that I'd stand a great chance of gettin' matched with Valois--why not pick me somethin' easy, like Dempsey? Do you realize you're askin' me, a ordinary ham-an'-egger, to climb the original and only Tiger Valois that's whipped everything in European and the Asian waters and looks like a sure bet for the world's title?"

"Gerahh!" snarled the Old Man. "Me that's boasted in every port of the Seven Seas that I shipped the toughest crew since the days of Harry Morgan--" He turned his back in disgust and immediately fell over my white bulldog, Mike, who was taking a snooze by the hatch. The Old Man give a howl as he come up and booted the innocent pup most severe. Mike instantly attached hisself to the Old Man's leg, from which I at last succeeded in prying him with a loss of some meat and the pants leg.

The captain danced hither and yon about the deck on one foot while he expressed his feelings at some length and the crew stopped work to listen and admire.

"And get me right, Steve Costigan," he wound up, "the _*Sea Girl*_ is too small for me and that double-dash dog. He goes ashore at the next port. Do you hear me?"

"Then I go ashore with him," I answered with dignity. "It was not Mike what caused you to get a black eye, and if you had not been so taken up in abusin' me you would not have fell over him.

"Mike is a Dublin gentleman, and no Welsh water rat can boot _him_ and get away with it. If you want to banish your best A.B. mariner, it's up to you. Till we make port you keep your boots off of Mike, or I will personally kick you loose from your spine. If that's mutiny, make the most of it--and, Mister First Mate, I see you easin' toward that belayin' pin on the rail, and I call to your mind what I done to the last man that hit me with a belayin' pin."

There was a coolness between me and the Old Man thereafter. The old nut was pretty rough and rugged, but good at heart, and likely he was ashamed of himself, but he was too stubborn to admit it, besides still being sore at me and Mike. Well, he paid me off without a word at Hong Kong, and I went down the gangplank with Mike at my heels, feeling kind of queer and empty, though I wouldn't show it for nothing, and acted like I was glad to get off the old tub. But since I growed up, the _*Sea Girl*_'s been the only home I knowed, and though I've left her from time to time to prowl around loose or to make a fight tour, I've always come back to her.

Now I knowed I couldn't come back, and it hit me hard. The _*Sea Girl*_ is the only thing I'm champion of, and as I went ashore I heard the sound of Mushy Hansen and Bill O'Brien trying to decide which should succeed to my place of honor.

WELL, MAYBE SOME will say I should of sent Mike ashore and stayed on, but to my mind, a man that won't stand by his dog is lower down than one which won't stand by his fellow man.

Some years ago I'd picked Mike up wandering around the wharfs of Dublin and fighting everything he met on four legs and not averse to tackling two-legged critters. I named him Mike after a brother of mine, Iron Mike Costigan, rather well known in them higher fight circles where I've never gotten to.

Well, I wandered around the dives and presently fell in with Tom Roche, a lean, fighting engineer that I once knocked out in Liverpool. We meandered around, drinking here and there, though not very much, and presently found ourselves in a dump a little different from the general run. A French joint, kinda more highbrow, if you get me. A lot of swell-looking

fellows was in there drinking, and the bartenders and waiters, all French, scowled at Mike, but said nothing. I was unburdening my woes to Tom, when I noticed a tall, elegant young man with a dress suit, cane and gloves stroll by our table. He seemed well known in the dump, because birds all around was jumping up from their tables and waving their glasses and yelling at him in French. He smiled back in a superior manner and flourished his cane in a way which irritated me. This galoot rubbed me the wrong way right from the start, see?

Well, Mike was snoozing close to my chair as usual, and, like any other fighter, Mike was never very particular where he chose to snooze. This big bimbo could have stepped over him or around him, but he stopped and prodded Mike with his cane. Mike opened one eye, looked up and lifted his lip in a polite manner, just like he was sayin': "We don't want no trouble; go 'long and leave me alone."

Then this French dipthong drawed back his patent leather shoe and kicked Mike hard in the ribs. I was out of my chair in a second, seeing red, but Mike was quicker. He shot up off the floor, not for the Frenchman's leg, but for his throat. But the Frenchman, quick as a flash, crashed his heavy cane down across Mike's head, and the bulldog hit the floor and laid still. The next minute the Frenchman hit the floor, and believe me he laid still! My right-hander to the jaw put him down, and the crack his head got against the corner of the bar kept him there.

I bent over Mike, but he was already coming around, in spite of the fact that a loaded cane had been broken over his head. It took a blow like that to put Mike out, even for a few seconds. The instant he got his bearings, his eyes went red and he started out to find what hit him and tear it up. I grabbed him, and for a minute it was all I could do to hold him. Then the red faded out of his eyes and he wagged his stump of a tail and licked my nose. But I knowed the first good chance he had at the Frenchman he'd rip out his throat or die trying. The only way you can lick a bulldog is to kill him.

Being taken up with Mike I hadn't had much time to notice what was going on. But a gang of French sailors had tried to rush me and had stopped at the sight of a gun in Tom Roche's hand. A real fighting man was Tom, and a bad egg to fool with.

By this time the Frenchman had woke up; he was standing with a handkerchief at his mouth, which latter was trickling blood, and honest to Jupiter I never saw such a pair of eyes on a human! His face was dead white, and those black, burning eyes blazed out at me--say, fellows!--they carried more than hate and a desire to muss me up! They was mutilation and sudden death! Once I seen a famous duelist in Heidelberg who'd killed ten men in sword fights--he had just such eyes as this fellow.

A gang of Frenchies was around him all whooping and yelling and jabbering at once, and I couldn't understand a word none of them said. Now one come prancing up to Tom Roche and shook his fist in Tom's face and pointed at me and yelled, and pretty soon Tom turned around to me and said: "Steve, this yam is challengin' you to a duel--what about?"

I thought of the German duelist and said to myself: "I bet this bird was born with a fencin' sword in one hand and a duelin' pistol in the other." I opened my mouth to say "Nothin' doin'--" when Tom pipes: "You're the challenged party--the choice of weapons is up to you."

At that I hove a sigh of relief and a broad smile flitted across my homely but honest countenance. "Tell him I'll fight him," I said, "with five-ounce boxin' gloves."

Of course I figured this bird never saw a boxing glove. Now, maybe you think I was doing him dirty, pulling a fast one like that--but what about him? All I was figuring on was mussing him up a little, counting on him not knowing a left hook from a neutral corner--takin' a mean advantage, maybe, but he was counting on killing me, and I'd never had a sword in my hand, and couldn't hit the side of a barn with a gun.

Well, Tom told them what I said and the cackling and gibbering bust out all over again, and to my astonishment I saw a cold, deadly smile waft itself across the sinister, handsome face of my tete-a-tete.

"They ask who you are," said Tom. "I told 'em Steve Costigan, of America. This bird says his name is Francois, which he opines is enough for _you._ He says that he'll fight you right away at the exclusive Napoleon Club, which it seems has a ring account of it occasionally sponsoring prize fights."

AS WE WENDED our way toward the aforesaid club, I thought deeply. It seemed very possible that this Francois, whoever he was, knew something of the manly art. Likely, I thought, a rich clubman who took up boxing for a hobby. Well, I reckoned he hadn't heard of me, because no amateur, however rich, would think he had a chance against Steve Costigan, known in all ports as the toughest sailor in the Asian waters--if I do say so myself--and champion of--what I mean--ex-champion of the _*Sea Girl*,_ the toughest of all the trading vessels.

A kind of pang went through me just then at the thought that my days with the old tub was ended, and I wondered what sort of a dub would take my place at mess and sleep in my bunk, and how the forecastle gang would haze him, and how all the crew would miss me--I wondered if Bill O'Brien had licked Mushy Hansen or if the Dane had won, and who called hisself champion of the craft now--

Well, I felt low in spirits, and Mike knowed it, because he snuggled up closer to me in the 'rickshaw that was carrying us to the Napoleon Club, and licked my hand. I pulled his ears and felt better. Anyway, Mike wouldn't never desert me.

Pretty ritzy affair this club. Footmen or butlers or something in uniform at the doors, and they didn't want to let Mike in. But they did--oh, yeah, they did.

In the dressing room they give me, which was the swellest of its sort I ever see, and looked more like a girl's boodwar than a fighter's dressing room, I said to Tom: "This big ham must have lots of dough--notice what a hand they all give him? Reckon I'll get a square deal? Who's goin' to referee? If it's a Frenchman, how'm I gonna follow the count?"

"Well, gee whiz!" Tom said, "you ain't expectin' him to count over you, are you?"

"No," I said. "But I'd like to keep count of what he tolls off over the other fellow."

"Well," said Tom, helping me into the green trunks they'd give me, "don't worry none. I understand Francois can speak English, so I'll specify that the referee shall converse entirely in that language."

"Then why didn't this Francois ham talk English to me?" I wanted to know.

"He didn't talk to you in anything," Tom reminded me. "He's a swell and thinks you're beneath his notice--except only to knock your head off."

"H'mm," said I thoughtfully, gently touching the slight cut which Francois' cane had made on Mike's incredibly hard head. A slight red mist, I will admit, waved in front of my eyes.

When I climbed into the ring I noticed several things: mainly the room was small and elegantly furnished; second, there was only a small crowd there, mostly French, with a scattering of English and one Chink in English clothes. There was high hats, frock-tailed coats and gold-knobbed canes everywhere, and I noted with some surprise that they was also a sprinkling of French sailors.

I sat in my corner, and Mike took his stand just outside, like he always does when I fight, standing on his hind legs with his head and forepaws resting on the edge of the canvas, and looking under the ropes. On the street, if a man soaks me he's likely to have Mike at his throat, but the old dog knows how to act in the ring. He won't interfere, though sometimes when I'm on the canvas or bleeding bad his eyes get red and he rumbles away down deep in his throat.

TOM WAS MASSAGING my muscles light-like and I was scratching Mike's ears when into the ring comes Francois the Mysterious. _Oui! Oui!_ I noted now how much of a man he was, and Tom whispers to me to pull in my chin a couple of feet and stop looking so goofy. When Francois threw off his silk embroidered bathrobe I saw I was in for a rough session, even if this bird was only an amateur. He was one of these fellows that _look_ like a fighting man, even if they've never seen a glove before.

A good six one and a half he stood, or an inch and a half taller than me. A powerful neck sloped into broad, flexible shoulders, a limber steel body tapered to a girlishly slender waist. His legs was slim, strong and shapely, with narrow feet that looked speedy and sure; his arms was long, thick, but perfectly molded. Oh, I tell you, this Francois looked more like a champion than any man I'd seen since I saw Dempsey last.

And the face--his sleek black hair was combed straight back and lay smooth on his head, adding to his sinister good looks. From under narrow black brows them eyes burned at me, and now they wasn't a duelist's eyes--they was tiger eyes. And when he gripped the ropes and dipped a couple of times, flexing his muscles, them muscles rippled under his satiny skin most beautiful, and he looked just like a big cat sharpening his claws on a tree.

"Looks fast, Steve," Tom Roche said, looking serious. "May know somethin'; you better crowd him from the gong and keep rushin'--"

"How else did I ever fight?" I asked.

A sleek-looking Frenchman with a sheik mustache got in the ring and, waving his hands to the crowd, which was still jabbering for Francois, he bust into a gush of French.

"What's he mean?" I asked Tom, and Tom said, "Aw, he's just sayin' what everybody knows--that this ain't a regular prize fight, but an affair of honor between you and--uh--that Francois fellow there."

Tom called him and talked to him in French, and he turned around and called an Englishman out of the crowd. Tom asked me was it all right with me for the Englishman to referee, and I tells him yes, and they asked Francois and he nodded in a supercilious manner. So the referee asked me what I weighed and I told him, and he hollered: "This bout is to be at catch weights, Marquis of Queensberry rules. Three-minute rounds, one minute rest; to a finish, if it takes all night. In this corner, Monsieur Francois, weight 205 pounds; in this corner, Steve Costigan of America, weight 190 pounds. Are you ready, gentlemen?"

'Stead of standing outside the ring, English style, the referee stayed in with us, American fashion. The gong sounded and I was out of my corner. All I seen was that cold, sneering, handsome face, and all I wanted to do was to spoil it. And I very nearly done it the first charge. I came in like a house afire and I walloped Francois with an overhand right hook to the chin--more by sheer luck than anything, and it landed high. But it shook him to his toes, and the sneering smile faded.

TOO QUICK FOR the eye to follow, his straight left beat my left hook, and it packed the jarring kick that marks a puncher. The next minute, when I missed with both hands and got that left in my pan again, I knowed I was up against a master boxer, too.

I saw in a second I couldn't match him for speed and skill. He was like a cat; each move he made was a blur of speed, and when he hit he hit quick and hard. He was a brainy fighter--he thought out each move while traveling at high speed, and he was never at a loss what to do next.

Well, my only chance was to keep on top of him, and I kept crowding him, hitting fast and heavy. He wouldn't stand up to me, but back-pedaled all around the ring. Still, I got the idea that he wasn't afraid of me, but was retreating with a purpose of his own. But I never stop to figure out why the other bird does something.

He kept reaching me with that straight left, until finally I dived under it and sank my right deep into his midriff. It shook him--it should of brought him down. But he clinched and tied me up so I couldn't hit or do nothing. As the referee broke us Francois scraped his glove laces across my eyes. With an appropriate remark, I threw my right at his head with everything I had, but he drifted out of the way, and I fell into the ropes from the force of my own swing. The crowd howled with laughter, and then the gong sounded.

"This baby's tough," said Tom, back in my corner, as he rubbed my belly muscles, "but keep crowdin' him, get inside that left, if you can. And watch the right."

I reached back to scratch Mike's nose and said, "You watch this round."

Well, I reckon it was worth watching. Francois changed his tactics, and as I come in he met me with a left to the nose that started the claret and filled my eyes full of water and stars. While I was thinking about that he opened a cut under my left eye with a venomous right-hander and then stuck the same hand into my midriff. I woke up and bent him double with a savage left hook to the liver, crashing him with an overhand right behind the ear before he could straighten. He shook his head, snarled a French cuss word and drifted back behind that straight left where I couldn't reach him.

I went into him like a whirlwind, lamming head on full into that left jab again and again, trying to get to him, but always my swings were short. Them jabs wasn't hurting me yet, because it takes a lot of them to weaken a man. But it was like running into a floating brick wall, if you get what I mean. Then he started crossing his right--and oh, baby, what a right he had! Blip! Blim! Blam!

His rally was so unexpected and he hit so quick that he took me clean off my guard and caught me wide open. That right was lightning! In a second I was groggy, and Francois beat me back across the ring with both hands going too fast for me to block more than about a fourth of the blows. He was wild for the kill now and hitting wide open.

Then the ropes was at my back and I caught a flashing glimpse of him, crouching like a big tiger in front of me, wide open and starting his right. In that flash of a second I shot my right from the hip, beat his punch and landed solid to the button. Francois went down like he'd been hit with a pile driver--the referee leaped forward--the gong sounded!

As I went to my corner the crowd was clean ory-eyed and not responsible; and I saw Francois stagger up, glassy-eyed, and walk to his stool with one arm thrown over the shoulder of his handler.

But he come out fresh as ever for the third round. He'd found out that I could hit as hard as he could and that I was dangerous when groggy, like most sluggers. He was wild with rage, his smile was gone, his face dead white again, his eyes was like black fires--but he was cautious. He side-stepped my rush, hooking me viciously on the ear as I shot past him, and ducking when I slewed around and hooked my right. He backed away, shooting that left to my face. It went that way the whole round; him keeping the right reserved and marking me up with left jabs while I worked for his body and usually missed or was blocked. Just before the gong he rallied, staggered me with a flashing right hook to the head and took a crushing left hook to the ribs in return.

THE FOURTH ROUND come and he was more aggressive. He began to trade punches with me again. He'd shoot a straight left to my face, then hook the same hand to my body. Or he'd feint the left for my face and drop it to my ribs. Them hooks to the body didn't hurt much, because I was hard as a rock there, but a continual rain of them wouldn't do me no good, and them jabs to the face was beginning to irritate me. I was already pretty well marked up.

He shot his blows so quick I usually couldn't block or duck, so every time he'd make a motion with the left I'd throw my right for his head haphazard. After rocking his head back several times this way he quit feinting so much and began to devote most of his time to body blows.

Now I found out this about him: he had more claws than sand, as the saying goes. I mean he had everything, including a lot of stuff I didn't, but he didn't like to take it. In a mix-up he always landed three blows to my one, and he hit about as hard as I did, but he was always the one to back away.

Well, come the seventh round. I'd taken plenty. My left eye was closing fast and I had a nasty gash over the other one. My ribs was beginning to feel the body punishment he was handing out when in close, and my right ear was rapidly assuming the shape of a cabbage. Outside of some ugly welts on his torso, my dancing partner had only one mark on him--the small cut on his chin where I'd landed with my bare fist earlier in the evening.

But I was not beginning to weaken for I'm used to punishment; in fact I eat it up, if I do say so. I crowded Francois into a corner before I let go. I wrapped my arms around my neck, worked in close and then unwound with a looping left to the head.

Francois countered with a sickening right under the heart and I was wild with another left. Francois stepped inside my right swing, dug his heel into my instep, gouged me in the eye with his thumb and, holding with his left, battered away at my ribs with his right. The referee showed no inclination to interfere with this pastime, so, with a hearty oath, I wrenched my right loose and nearly tore off Francois' head with a torrid uppercut.

His sneer changed to a snarl and he began pistoning me in the face again with his left. Maddened, I crashed into him headlong and smashed my right under his heart--I felt his ribs bend, he went white and sick and clinched before I could follow up my advantage. I felt the drag of his body as his knees buckled, but he held on while I raged and swore, the referee would not break us, and when I tore loose, my charming playmate was almost as good as ever.

He proved this by shooting a left to my sore eye, dropping the same hand to my aching ribs and bringing up a right to the jaw that stretched me flat on my back for the first time that night. Just like that! _Biff--bim--bam!_ Like a cat hitting--and I was on the canvas.

Tom Roche yelled for me to take a count, but I never stay on the canvas longer than I have to. I bounced up at "Four!" my ears still ringing and a trifle dizzy, but otherwise O.K.

Francois thought otherwise, rushed rashly in and stopped a left hook which hung him gracefully over the ropes. The gong!

The beginning of the eighth I come at Francois like we'd just started, took his right between my eyes to hook my left to his body--he broke away, spearing me with his left--I followed swinging--missed a right--_crack!_

He musta let go his right with all he had for the first time that night, and he had a clear shot to my jaw. The next thing I knowed, I was writhing around on the canvas feeling like my jaw was tore clean off and the referee was saying: "--seven--"

Somehow I got to my knees. It looked like the referee was ten miles away in a mist, but in the mist I could see Francois' face, smiling again, and I reeled up at "nine" and went for that face. _Crack! Crack!_ I don't know what punch put me down again but there I was. I beat the count by a hair's breadth and swayed forward, following my only instinct and that was to walk into him!

FRANCOIS MIGHT HAVE finished me there, but he wasn't taking any chances for he knowed I was dangerous to the last drop. He speared me a couple of times with the left, and when he shot his right, I ducked it and took it high on my forehead and clinched, shaking my head to clear it. The referee broke us away and Francois lashed into me, cautious but deadly, hammering me back across the ring with me crouching and covering up the best I could.

On the ropes I unwound with a venomous looping right, but he was watching for that and ducked and countered with a terrible left to my jaw, following it with a blasting right to the side of the head. Another left hook threw me back into the ropes and there I caught the top rope with both hands to keep from falling. I was swaying and ducking but his gloves were falling on my ears and temples with a steady thunder which was growing dimmer and dimmer--then the gong sounded.

I let go of the ropes to go to my corner and when I let go I pitched to my knees. Everything was a red mist and the crowd was yelling about a million miles away. I heard Francois' scornful laugh, then Tom Roche was dragging me to my corner.

"By golly," he said, working on my cut up eyes, "you're sure a glutton for punishment; Joe Grim had nothin' on you.

"But you better lemme throw in the towel, Steve. This Frenchman's goin' to kill you--"

"He'll have to, to beat me," I snarled. "I'll take it standin'."

"But, Steve," Tom protested, mopping blood and squeezing lemon juice into my mouth, "this Frenchman is--"

But I wasn't listening. Mike knowed I was getting the worst of it and he'd shoved his nose into my right glove, growling low down in his throat. And I was thinking about something.

One time I was laid up with a broken leg in a little fishing village away up on the Alaskan coast, and looking through a window, not able to help him, I saw Mike fight a big gray devil of a sled dog--more wolf than dog. A big gray killer. They looked funny together--Mike short and thick, bow-legged and squat, and the wolf dog tall and lean, rangy and cruel.

Well, while I lay there and raved and tried to get off my bunk with four men holding me down, that blasted wolf-dog cut poor old Mike to ribbons. He was like lightning--like Francois. He fought with the slash and get away--like Francois. He was all steel and *Whale*-bone--like Francois.

Poor old Mike had kept walking into him, plunging and missing as the wolf-dog leaped aside--and every time he leaped he slashed Mike with his long sharp teeth till Mike was bloody and looking terrible. How long they fought I don't know. But Mike never give up; he never whimpered; he never took a single back step; he kept walking in on the dog.

At last he landed--crashed through the wolf-dog's defense and clamped his jaws like a steel vise and tore out the wolf-dog's throat. Then Mike slumped down and they brought him into my bunk more dead than alive. But we fixed him up and finally he got well, though he'll carry the scars as long as he lives.

And I thought, as Tom Roche rubbed my belly and mopped the blood off my smashed face, and Mike rubbed his cold, wet nose in my glove, that me and Mike was both of the same breed, and the only fighting quality we had was a everlasting persistence. You got to kill a bulldog to lick him. Persistence! How'd I ever won a fight? How'd Mike ever won a fight? By walking in on our men and never giving up, no matter how bad we was hurt! Always outclassed in everything except guts and grip! Somehow the fool Irish tears burned my eyes and it wasn't the pain of the collodion Tom was rubbing into my cuts and it wasn't self-pity--it was--I don't know what it was! My grandfather used to say the Irish cried at Benburb when they were licking the socks off the English.

THEN THE GONG sounded and I was out in the ring again playing the old bulldog game with Francois--walking into him and walking into him and taking everything he handed me without flinching.

I don't remember much about that round. Francois' left was a red-hot lance in my face and his right was a hammer that battered in my ribs and crashed against my dizzy head. Toward the last my legs felt dead and my arms were like lead. I don't know how many times I went down and got up and beat the count, but I remember once in a clinch, half-sobbing through my pulped lips: "You gotta kill me to stop me, you big hash!" And I saw a strange haggard look flash into his eyes as we broke. I lashed out wild and by luck connected under his heart. Then the red fog stole back over everything and then I was back on my stool and Tom was holding me to keep me from falling off.

"What round's this comin' up?" I mumbled.

"The tenth," he said. "For th' luvva Pete, Steve, quit!"

I felt around blind for Mike and felt his cold nose on my wrist.

"Not while I can see, stand or feel," I said, deliriously. "It's bulldog and wolf--and Mike tore his throat out in the end--and I'll rip this wolf apart sooner or later."

Back in the center of the ring with my chest all crimson with my own blood, and Francois' gloves soggy and splashing blood and water at every blow, I suddenly realized that his punches were losing some of their kick. I'd been knocked down I don't know how many times, but I now knew he was hitting me his best and I still kept my feet. My legs wouldn't work right, but my shoulders were still strong. Francois played for my eyes and closed them both tight shut, but while he was doing it I landed three times under the heart, and each time he wilted a little.

"What round's comin' up?" I groped for Mike because I couldn't see.

"The eleventh--this is murder," said Tom. "I know you're one of these birds which fights twenty rounds after they've been knocked cold, but I want to tell you this Frenchman is--"

"Lance my eyelid with your pocket-knife," I broke in, for I had found Mike. "I gotta see."

Tom grumbled, but I felt a sharp pain and the pressure eased up in my right eye and I could see dim-like.

Then the gong sounded, but I couldn't get up; my legs was dead and stiff.

"Help me up, Tom Roche, you big bog-trotter," I snarled. "If you throw in that towel I'll brain you with the water bottle!"

With a shake of his head he helped me up and shoved me in the ring. I got my bearings and went forward with a funny, stiff, mechanical step, toward Francois--who got up slow, with a look on his face like he'd rather be somewhere else. Well, he'd cut me to pieces, knocked me down time and again, and here I was coming back for more. The bulldog instinct is hard to fight--it ain't just exactly courage, and it ain't exactly blood lust--it's--well, it's the bulldog breed.

NOW I WAS facing Francois and I noticed he had a black eye and a deep gash under his cheek bone, though I didn't remember putting them there. He also had welts a-plenty on his body. I'd been handing out punishment as well as taking it, I saw.

Now his eyes blazed with a desperate light and he rushed in, hitting as hard as ever for a few seconds. The blows rained so fast I couldn't think and yet I knowed I must be clean batty--punch drunk--because it seemed like I could hear familiar voices yelling my name--the voices of the crew of the _*Sea Girl*,_ who'd never yell for me again.

I was on the canvas and this time I felt that it was to stay; dim and far away I saw Francois and somehow I could tell his legs was trembling and he shaking like he had a chill. But I couldn't reach him now. I tried to get my legs under me, but they wouldn't work. I slumped back on the canvas, crying with rage and weakness.

Then through the noise I heard one deep, mellow sound like an old Irish bell, almost. Mike's bark! He wasn't a barking dog; only on special occasions did he give tongue. This time he only barked once. I looked at him and he seemed to be swimming in a fog. If a dog ever had his soul in his eyes, he had; plain as speech them eyes said: "Steve, old kid, get up and hit one more blow for the glory of the breed!"

I tell you, the average man has got to be fighting for somebody else besides hisself. It's fighting for a flag, a nation, a woman, a kid or a dog that makes a man win. And I got up--I dunno how! But the look in Mike's eyes dragged me off the canvas just as the referee opened his mouth to say "Ten!" But before he could say it--

In the midst I saw Francois' face, white and desperate. The pace had told. Them blows I'd landed from time to time under the heart had sapped his strength--he'd punched hisself out on me--but more'n anything else, the knowledge that he was up against the old bulldog breed licked him.

I drove my right smash into his face and his head went back like it was on hinges and the blood spattered. He swung his right to my head and it was so weak I laughed, blowing out a haze of blood. I rammed my left to his ribs and as he bent forward I crashed my right to his jaw. He dropped, and crouching there on the canvas, half supporting himself on his hands, he was counted out. I reeled across the ring and collapsed with my arms around Mike, who was whining deep in his throat and trying to lick my face off.

THE FIRST THING I felt on coming to, was a cold, wet nose burrowing into my right hand, which seemed numb. Then somebody grabbed that hand and nearly shook it off and I heard a voice say: "Hey, you old shellback, you want to break a unconscious man's arm?"

I knowed I was dreaming then, because it was Bill O'Brien's voice, who was bound to be miles away at sea by this time. Then Tom Roche said: "I think he's comin' to. Hey, Steve, can you open your eyes?"

I took my fingers and pried the swollen lids apart and the first thing I saw, or wanted to see, was Mike. His stump tail was going like anything and he opened his mouth and let his tongue loll out, grinning as natural as could be. I pulled his ears and looked around and there was Tom Roche--and Bill O'Brien and Mushy Hansen, Olaf Larsen, Penrhyn, the first mate, Red O'Donnell, the second--and the Old Man!

"Steve!" yelled this last, jumping up and down and shaking my hand like he wanted to take it off, "you're a wonder! A blightin' marvel!"

"Well," said I, dazed, "why all the love fest--"

"The fact is," bust in Bill O'Brien, "just as we're about to weigh anchor, up blows a lad with the news that you're fightin' in the Napoleon Club with--"

"--and as soon as I heard who you was fightin' with I stopped everything and we all blowed down there," said the Old Man. "But the fool kid Roche had sent for us loafed on the way--"

"--and we hadda lay some Frenchies before we could get in," said Hansen.

"So we saw only the last three rounds," continued the Old Man. "But, boy, they was worth the money--he had you outclassed every way except guts--you was licked to a frazzle, but he couldn't make you realize it--and I laid a bet or two--"

And blow me, if the Old Man didn't stuff a wad of bills in my sore hand.

"Halfa what I won," he beamed. "And furthermore, the _*Sea Girl*_ ain't sailin' till you're plumb able and fit."

"But what about Mike?" My head was swimming by this time.

"A bloomin' bow-legged angel," said the Old Man, pinching Mike's ear lovingly. "The both of you kin have my upper teeth! I owe you a lot, Steve. You've done a lot for me, but I never felt so in debt to you as I do now. When I see that big French ham, the one man in the world I would of give my right arm to see licked--"

"Hey!" I suddenly seen the light, and I went weak and limp. "You mean that was--"

"You whipped Tiger Valois, heavyweight champion of the French fleet, Steve," said Tom. "You ought to have known how he wears dude clothes and struts amongst the swells when on shore leave. He wouldn't tell you who he was for fear you wouldn't fight him; and I was afraid I'd discourage you if I told you at first and later you wouldn't give me a chance."

"I might as well tell you," I said to the Old Man, "that I didn't know this bird was the fellow that beat you up in Manila. I fought him because he kicked Mike."

"Blow the reason!" said the Old Man, raring back and beaming like a jubilant crocodile. "You licked him--that's enough. Now we'll have a bottle opened and drink to Yankee ships and Yankee sailors--especially Steve Costigan."

"Before you do," I said, "drink to the boy who stands for everything them aforesaid ships and sailors stands for--Mike of Dublin, an honest gentleman and born mascot of all fightin' men!"

THE END

Contents

THE IRON MAN

By Robert E. Howard

Chapter I

A CANNON-BALL for a left and a thunderbolt for a right! A granite jaw, and chilled steel body! The ferocity of a tiger, and the greatest fighting heart that ever beat in an iron-ribbed breast! That was Mike Brennon, heavyweight contender.

Long before the sports writers ever heard the name of Brennon, I sat in the "athletic tent" of a carnival performing in a small Nevada town, grinning at the antics of the barker, who was volubly offering fifty dollars to anyone who could stay four rounds with "Young Firpo, the California Assassin, champeen of Los Angeles and the East Indies!" Young Firpo, a huge hairy fellow, with the bulging muscles of a weight-lifter and whose real name was doubtless Leary, stood by with a bored and contemptuous expression on his heavy features. This was an old game to him.

"Now, friends," shouted the spieler, "is they any young man here what wants to risk his life in this here ring? Remember, the management ain't responsible for life or limb! But if anybody'll git in here at his own risk--"

I saw a rough-looking fellow start up--one of the usual "plants" secretly connected with the show, of course--but at that moment the crowd set up a yell, "Brennon! Brennon! Go on, Mike!"

At last a young fellow rose from his seat, and with an embarrassed grin, vaulted over the ropes. The "plant" hesitated--Young Firpo evinced some interest, and from the hawk-like manner in which the barker eyed the newcomer, and from the roar of the crowd, I knew that he was on the "up-and-up"--a local boy, in other words.

"You a professional boxer?" asked the barker.

"I've fought some here, and in other places," answered Brennon. "But you said you barred no one."

"We don't," grunted the showman, noting the difference in the sizes of the fighters.

While the usual rigmarole of argument was gone through, I wondered how the carnival men intended saving their money if the boy happened to be too good for their man. The ring was set in the middle of the tent; the dressing-rooms were in another part. There was no curtain across the back of the ring where the local fighter could be pressed to receive a blackjack blow from the confederate behind the curtain.

Brennon, after a short trip to the dressing-room, climbed into the ring and was given a wild ovation. He was a finely built lad, six feet one in height, slim-waisted and tapering of limb, with remarkably broad shoulders and heavy arms. Dark, with narrow gray eyes, and a shock of black hair falling over a low, broad forehead, his was the true fighting face--broad across the cheekbones--with thin lips and a firm jaw. His long, smooth muscles rippled as he moved with the ease of a huge tiger. Opposed to him Young Firpo looked sluggish and ape-like.

Their weights were announced, Brennon 189, Young Firpo 191. The crowd hissed; anyone could see that the carnival boxed weighed at least 210.

THE BATTLE WAS short, fierce and sensational, and with a bedlam-like ending. At the gong Brennon sprang from his corner, coming in wide open, like a bar-room brawler. Young Firpo met him with a hard left hook to the chin, stopping him in his tracks. Brennon staggered, and the carnival boxer swung his right flush to the jaw--a terrific blow which, strangely enough, did not seem to worry Brennon as had the other. He shook his head and plunged in again, but as he did so, his foe drew back the deadly left and crashed it once more to his jaw. Brennon dropped like a log, face first. The crowd was frenzied. The barker, who was also referee, began counting swiftly, Young Firpo standing directly over the fallen warrior.

At "five!" Brennon had not twitched. At "seven!" he stirred and began making aimless motions. At "eight!" he reeled to his knees, and his reddened, dazed eyes fixed themselves on his conqueror. Instantly they blazed with the fury of the killer. As the spieler opened his mouth to say "ten!" Brennon reeled up in a blast of breath-taking ferocity that stunned the crowd.

Young Firpo, too, seemed stunned. Face whitening, he began a hurried retreat. But Brennon was after him like a blood-crazed tiger, and before the carnival fighter could lift his hands, Brennon's wide-looping left smashed under his heart and a sweeping right found his chin, crashing him face down on the canvas with a force that shook the ring.

The astounded barker mechanically began counting, but Brennon, moving like a man in a trance, pushed him away and stooping, tore the glove from Young Firpo's limp left hand. Removing something therefrom, held it up to the crowd. It was a heavy iron affair, resembling brass knuckles, and known in the parlance of the ring as a knuckle-duster. I gasped. No wonder Young Firpo had been unnerved when his victim rose! That iron-laden glove crashing twice against Brennon's jaw should have shattered the bone, yet he had been able to rise within ten seconds and finish his man with two blows!

Now all was bedlam. The barker tried to snatch the knuckle-duster from Brennon, and one of Young Firpo's seconds rushed across the ring and struck at the winner. The crowd, sensing injustice to their favorite, surged into the ring with the avowed intention of wrecking the show! As I made my way to the nearest exit I saw an infuriated townsman swing up a chair to strike the still prostrate Young Firpo. Brennon sprang forward and caught the blow on his own shoulder, going to his knees under it; then I was outside and as I walked away, laughing, I still heard the turmoil and the shouts of the policemen.

Some time later I saw Brennon fight again, in a small club on the West Coast. His opponent was a second-rater named Mulcahy. During the fight my old interest in Brennon was renewed. With incredible stamina, with as terrific a punch as I ever saw, it was evident his one failing was an absolute lack of science. Mulcahy, though strong and tough, was a mere dub, yet he clearly outboxed Brennon for nearly two rounds, and hit him with everything he had, though his best blows did not even make the dark-browed lad wince. With the second round a half minute to go, one of Brennon's sweeping swings landed and the fight was over.

I thought to myself: that lad looks like a champion, but he fights like a longshoreman, but I won't attach too much importance to that. Many a fighter stumbles through life and never learns anything, simply because of an ignorant or negligent manager.

I went to Brennon's dressing-room and spoke to him.

"My name is Steve Amber. I've seen you fight a couple of times."

"I've heard of you," he answered. "What do you want?"

Overlooking his abrupt manner, I asked: "Who's your manager?"

"I haven't any."

"How would you like me to manage you?"

"I'd as soon have you as anybody," he answered shortly. "But this was my last fight. I'm through. I'm sick of flattening dubs in fourth-rate joints."

"Tie up with me. Maybe I'll get you better matches."

"No use. I had my chance twice. Once against Sailor Slade; once against Johnny Varella. I flopped. No, don't start to argue. I don't want to talk to you--or to anybody. I'm through, and I want to go to bed."

"Suit yourself," I answered. "I never coax--but here's my card. If you change your mind, look me up."

Chapter II _Scenting the Kill_

Weeks stretched into months. But Mike Brennon was not a man one could forget easily. When I dreamed, as all fight fans and fighters' managers dream, of a super-fighter, the form of Mike Brennon rose unbidden--a dark, brooding figure, charged with the abysmal fighting fury of the primitive.

Then one day Brennon came to me--not in a day-dream, but in the flesh. He stood in the office of my training camp, his crumpled hat in his hand, an eager grin on his dark face--a very different man from the morose and moody youth to whom I had talked before.

"Mr. Amber," he said directly, "if you still want me, I'd like to have you manage me."

"That's fine," I answered.

Brennon appeared nervous.

"Can you get me a fight right away?" he asked. "I need money."

"Not so fast," I said. "I can advance you some money if you're in debt--"

He made an impatient gesture. "It's not that--can you get me a fight this week?"

"Are you in trim? How long since you've been in the ring?"

"Not since you saw me last; but I always stay in shape."

I took Brennon to my open-air ring where Spike Ganlon, a clever middleweight, was working out, and instructed them to step for a few fast rounds. Brennon was eager enough, and I was astonished to see him put up a very fair sort of boxing against the shifty Ganlon. True, he was far out-stepped and out-classed, but that was to be expected, as Ganlon was a rather prominent figure in the fistic world. But I did not like the way Mike sent in his punches. They lacked the old trip-hammer force, and he was slower than I had remembered him to be. However, when I had him slug the heavy bag he flashed his old form, nearly tearing the bag loose from its moorings, and I decided that he had been pulling his punches against Ganlon.

The days that followed were full of hard work and careful coaching. Brennon listened carefully to what Ganlon and I told him, but the result was far from satisfying. He was intelligent, but he could not seem to apply practically the things he learned easily in theory.

Still, I did not expect too much of him at first. I worked with him patiently for several weeks, importing a fairly clever heavyweight for his sparring partner. The first time they really let go, I was amazed and disappointed. Mike shuffled and floundered awkwardly with futile, flabby blows. When a sharp jab on the nose stung him, he quit trying to box and went back to his old style of wild and aimless swinging. However, these swings were the old sledge-hammer type, and his erratic speed had returned to him. I quickly called a halt.

"I'm wrong," I said. "I've been trying to make a boxing wizard out of you. But you're a natural slugger, though you seem to have little of the natural slugger's aptitude. Looks like you'd have learned something from your actual experience in the ring.

"Well, anyway, I'm going to make a real slugger like Dempsey, Sullivan and McGovern out of you. I know how you are; you've got the slugger's instinct. You can box fairly well with a friend when you're just doing it for fun, but when you're in the ring, or somebody stings you, you forget everything but your natural style. It's no discredit to a man's mentality. Dempsey was a clever boxer when he was sparring, but he never boxed in the ring. And he swung like you do, till DeForest taught him to hit straight.

"Still, Mike, I'll tell you frankly that at his crudest, Dempsey showed more aptitude for the game than you do. Now, this is for your own good. Dempsey, Ketchell and McGovern, even when they were just starting, used instinctive footwork and kept stepping around their men. They ducked and weaved and hit accurately. You go in straight up and wide open, and a blind man could duck your swings. You've unusual speed, but you don't know how to use it. But now that I know where I've been making my mistake, I'll change my tactics."

FOR A TIME it seemed as though my dreams were coming true--that Mike was a second Dempsey. In spite of his urging that I get him a fight, I kept him idle for three months--that is, he was not fighting. For hours each day I had him practice hooking the heavy bag with short smashes to straighten his punches and eliminate so much aimless swinging. He would never learn to put force behind a straight punch, but I intended making him a vicious hooker like Dempsey. And I tried to teach him the weave of that old master and the trick of boring in, protected by a barricade of gloves and elbows until in close; and the fundamentals of footwork and feinting. It was not easy.

"Mike," said Ganlon to me, "is a queer nut. He's got a fighter's heart and body, but he ain't got a fighter's brain. He understands, but he can't do what you teach him. He has to work for hours on the simplest trick--and then he's liable to forget it. If he was a bonehead, I'd understand it. But he's brainy in other ways."

"Maybe he fought so long in second-rate clubs he formed habits he can't break."

"Partly. But it goes deeper. They's a kink in his brain."

"What do you mean, a kink?" I asked uneasily.

"I dunno. But it's somethin' that breaks down his coordination and keeps his mind from workin' with his muscles. When he tries to box he has to stop and think, and in the ring you ain't got time. You see a punch comin' and in that split-second you got to know what you can't do and what you can do to get outa the way and counter. 'Course, you don't exactly study it all out, but you _know,_ see? That is, if you're a fast boxer. If you're a wide-open slugger like Mike, you don't think nothin'. You just take the punch as a matter of course, spit out your teeth and keep borin' in."

"But any slugger is that way," I objected. "And we're not trying to teach Mike to be clever, in the technical sense of the word."

Ganlon shook his head. "I know. But Mike's different. He ain't cut out for this game. Even these simple tricks are too complicated for him. Well, he's got to learn some defense, or he'll be punched cuckoo in a few years. All the great sluggers had some. Some weaved and crouched, like Dempsey; some wrapped their arms around their skull and barged in, like Nelson and Paolino. Them that fought wide open didn't last no time, 'specially among the heavies. The padded cell and paper-doll cut-outs for most of 'em. It don't stand to reason a human skull can stand up under the beatin's it gets like that."

"You're a born croaker. Mike's rugged but intelligent. He'll learn."

"At anything else, yes--at this game--maybe."

NOT LONG AFTER my talk with Spike, Brennon came to me.

"Steve," he said, "I've got to have a fight. I need money--bad."

"Mike," said I, "it's none of my business, but I don't see why you should be so desperately insistent. You've been at no expense at all, here in the camp. You said you weren't in debt, and you've refused my offer to loan you--"

"What business is it of yours?" he broke in, white at the lips.

"None at all," I hastened to assure him. "Only as your manager, I've got your financial interests at heart, naturally. I apologize."

"I apologize, too, Steve," he answered abruptly, his manner changing. "I should have known you weren't trying to pry into my private affairs. But I've got to have at least--" And he named a sum of money which rather surprised me.

"There's only one way to get that much," I answered. "Understand, I don't believe you're ready to go in with a first-string man. But since money is the object--Monk Barota is on the coast now, padding his kayo record. He'll be looking for set-ups. The promoter at the Hopi A.C. is a friend of mine. I can get you a match with him at close to the figure you named. You understand that a bad defeat now might ruin you. Don't say I didn't warn you. But you're in fine shape, and if you fight as we've taught you, I believe you can whip him."

"I'll whip him," Mike nodded grimly.

I hoped he was more sincere in his belief than I was. I really felt in my heart that he was not ready for a first-rater and I had intended building him up more gradually. But there was fierce, driving intensity about him when he spoke of the money he needed that broke down my resolution. Brennon was, in many ways, a character of terrific magnetic force. Like Sullivan, he dominated all about him, trainers, handlers and matchmakers. But only in the matter of money was he unreasonable, and this quirk in his nature amounted to an obsession.

Mainly through my influence, Brennon, an entirely unknown quantity, was matched with Barota for a ten-rounder; at ringside the odds were three to one on the Italian, with no takers. My last instructions to Mike were: "Remember! Use the crouch and guard Ganlon taught you. If you don't have some defense, he'll ruin you!"

The lights went out except those over the ring. The gong sounded. The crowd fell silent--that breathless, momentary silence that marks the beginning of the fight. The men slid out of their corners and--

"Oh, my gosh!" wailed Ganlon at my side. "He's doin' everything backward!"

Mike wore his old uncertain manner. Under the lights, with his foe before him and the roar of the crowd deafening him, he was like a trapped jungle beast, bewildered and confused. Barota led--Mike ducked clumsily the wrong way, and took the punch in the eye. That flicking left was hard for any man to avoid, but Mike incessantly ducked into it.

Ganlon was raving at my side. "After all these months of work, he forgets! You better throw in the sponge now. Look there!" as Mike tried a left of his own. "He can't even hook right. The whole house knows what's comin'. Same as writin' a letter about it."

BAROTA WAS TAKING his time. In spite of the fact that his foe seemed to have nothing but a scowl, no man could look into Mike Brennon's face and take him lightly. But a round of clumsy floundering and ineffectual pawing lulled his suspicions. Meanwhile, he flitted around the bewildered slugger, showering him with stinging left jabs. Ganlon was nearly weeping with rage as if his pupil's inaptness somehow reflected on him.

"All I know, I taught him, and there's that wop makin' a monkey outa him!"

With the round thirty seconds to go, Barota suddenly tore in with one of his famous attacks. Mike abandoned all attempts at science and began swinging wildly and futilely. Barota worked untouched between his flailing arms, beating a rattling barrage against Brennon's head and body. The gong stopped the punishment.

Mike's face was somewhat cut, but he was as fresh as if he had not just gone through a severe beating. He broke in on Ganlon's impassioned soliloquy to remark: "This fellow can't hit."

"Can't hit!" Ganlon nearly dropped the sponge. "Why, he's got a kayo record as long as a subway! Ain't he just pounded you all over the ring?"

"I didn't feel his punches, anyway," answered Mike, and then the gong sounded.

Barota came out fast, in a mood to bring this fight to a sudden close. He launched a swift attack, cut Mike's lips with a right; then began hammering at his body with the left-handed assault which had softened so many of his opponents for the kayo. The crowd went wild as he battered Mike around the ring, but suddenly I felt Ganlon's fingers sink into my arm.

"Bat Nelson true to life!" he whispered, his voice vibrating with excitement. "The crowd thinks, and Barota thinks, them left hooks is hurtin' Mike--but he ain't even feelin' 'em. He's got one chance--when Barota shoots the right--"

At this moment Barota stepped back, feinted swiftly and shot the right. He was proud of the bone-crushing quality of that right hand. He had a clear opening and every ounce of his weight went behind it. The leather-guarded knuckles backed by spar-like arm and heavy shoulder, crashed flush against Mike's jaw. The impact was plainly heard in every part of the

house. A gasp went up, nails sank deep into clenching palms. Mike swayed drunkenly, but he did not fall.

Barota stopped short for a flashing instant--frozen by the realization that he had failed to even floor his man. And in that second Mike swung a wild left and landed for the first time--high on the cheek bone, but Barota went down. The crowd rose screaming. Dazed, the Italian rose without a count and Mike tore into him with the ferocity of a tiger that scents the kill. Barota, blinded and dizzy, was in no condition to defend himself, yet Mike missed with both hands until a mine-sweeping right-hander caught his man flush on the temple, and he dropped--not merely out, but senseless.

The crowd was in a frenzy, but Ganlon said to me: "He's an iron man, don't you see? A natural-born freak like Grim and Goddard. He'll never learn anything, not if he trains a hundred years."

Chapter III _White Hot Fighting Fury_

THE DAY AFTER Mike Brennon had shocked the sporting world by his victory, he, Ganlon and I sat at breakfast, and we were a far from merry gang. Ganlon read the morning papers and growled.

"The whole country's on fire," he muttered. "Sports writers goin' cuckoo over the new find. Tellin' Barota cried and took on in his dressin'-room when he come to; and talkin' about how Mike 'fooled' his man in the first round by lookin' like a dub--callin' him a second Fitzsimmons! Applesauce. But here's a old-timer that knows his stuff.

"'If I am not much mistaken,'" he read, "'this Brennon is the same who looked like a deckhand against Sailor Slade in Los Angeles last year. His kayo of Barota had all the ear-marks of a fluke. He is, however, incredibly tough.'

"Uhmhuh," said Ganlon, laying down the paper. "Quite true. Mike, I hate to say it, but as a fighter you're a false alarm. It ain't your fault. You got the heart and the body, but you got no more natural talent than a ribbon clerk, and you can't learn. You got the fightin' instinct, but not the fighter's instinct--and they's a flock of difference.

"You're just a heavyweight Joe Grim. A iron man; never was one but Jeffries who could learn anything. I'm advisin' you to quit the ring--now. Your kind don't come to no good end. Too many punches on the head. They get permanently punch drunk. You don't have to go around countin' your fingers; you got brains enough to succeed somewhere else.

"You got three courses to follow: first, you can go around fightin' set-ups at the small clubs. You can make a livin' that way, and last a long time. Second, you can sign up with some of the offers you're bound to get now. Fightin' clever first-raters you won't win much, if any, but you'll be an attraction like Grim was. But you won't last. You'll crack under the incessant fire of smashes, and wind up in the booby hatch. Third and best, you can take what money you got and step out. Me and Steve will gladly lend you enough to start in business in a modest way."

I nodded. Mike shook his head and spread his iron fingers on the table in front of him. As usual he dominated the scene--a great somber figure of unknown potentialities.

"You're right, Spike, in everything you've said. I've always known there was a deficiency somewhere. No man could be as impervious to punishment as I am and have a perfectly normal brain. Not alone at boxing; I've failed at everything else I've tried. As for boxing, the crowd dazes me, for one thing. But that isn't all. I just can't remember what to do next, and have to struggle through the best way I can.

"But--I _can take it!_ That's my one hope. That's why I'm not quitting the game. At the cost of my reflexes, maybe, Nature gave me an unusual constitution. You admit I'd be a drawing card. Well, I'm like Battling Nelson--not human when it comes to taking punishment. The only man that ever hurt me was Sailor Slade, and he couldn't stop me. Nobody can now. Eventually, after years of battering, someone will knock me out. But before that time, I'm going to cash in on my ruggedness. Capitalize on the fact that no man can keep me down for the count. I'll accumulate a fortune if I'm handled right."

"Great heavens, man!" I exclaimed. "Do you realize what that means--the frightful punishment, the mutilations? You'll be fighting first-raters now--men with skill and terrific punches. You have no defense. You sap, they'd hammer you to a red pulp."

"My defense is a granite jaw and iron ribs," he answered. "I'll take them all on and wear them down."

"Maybe," I answered. "A man can wear himself down punching a granite boulder, as I've seen men do with Tom Sharkey and Joe Goddard, but what about the boulder! You were lucky with Barota. The next man will watch his step."

"They can't hurt me. And I can beat any man I can hit. Win or lose, I'll be a drawing card, and that means big purses. That's what I'm after. Do you think I'd go through this purgatory if the need wasn't great?"

"If it's poverty--" I began.

"What do you know about poverty?" he cried in a strange passion. "Were you left in a basket on the steps of an orphanage almost as soon as you were born? Did you spend your childhood mixed in with five hundred others, where the needs of all were so great that no one of you got more than the barest necessities? Did you pass your boyhood as a tramp and hobo worker, riding the rods and starving? I did!

"But that's neither here nor there; nor it isn't my own personal poverty so much that drove me back in the ring--but let it pass. As my manager, I want you to get busy. If I can win another fight it will increase my prestige. I don't expect to win many. Later on, they'll come packing in to see me, for the same reason they went to see Joe Grim--to see if I can be knocked out. Until the fans find out I'm a freak, I'll have to go on my merits. Barota wants a return match. I don't want him now, or any other clever man who'll outpoint me and make me look even worse than I am. I want the fans to see me bloody and staggering--and still carrying on! That's what draws the crowd. Get me a mankiller--a puncher who'll come in and try to murder me. Get me Jack Maloney!"

"It's suicide!" I cried. "Maloney'll kill you! I won't have anything to do with it!"

"Then, by heaven," Brennon roared, heaving erect and crashing his fist on the table, "our ways part here! You could help me better than anyone else--you know the ballyhoo. But if you fail me--"

"If you're determined," I said huskily, my mind almost numbed by the driving force of his will-power, "I'll do all I can. But I warn you, you'll leave this game with a clouded brain."

His nervous grip nearly crushed my fingers as he said shortly: "I knew you'd stand by me. Never mind my brain; it's cased in solid iron."

As he strode out Ganlon, slightly pale, said to me in a low voice: "A twist in his head sure. Money--all the time--money. I'm no dude, but he dresses like a wharfhand. What's he do with his money? He ain't supportin' no aged mother, it's a cinch. You heard him say he was left on a doorstep."

I shook my head. Brennon was an enigma beyond my comprehension.

THE RISE OF Iron Mike Brennon is now ring history, and of all the vivid pages in the annals of this heart-stirring game, I hold that the story of this greatest of all iron men makes the most lurid, fantastic and pulse-quickening chapter.

Iron Mike Brennon! Look at him as he was when his exploits swept the country. Six feet one from his narrow feet to the black tousled shock of his hair; one hundred and ninety pounds of steel springs and *Whale*bone. With his terrible eyes glaring from under heavy black brows, thin, blood-smeared lips writhed in snarl of battle fury--still when I dream of the super-fighter there rises the picture of Mike Brennon--a dream charged with bitterness. Take a man with incredible stamina and hitting power; take from him the ability to remember one iota of science in actual combat and leave out of his make-up the instinct of the natural fighter, and you have Iron Mike Brennon. A man who would have been the greatest champion of all time, but for that flaw in his make-up.

His first fight, after that memorable breakfast table conversation, was with Jack Maloney--one hundred and ninety-five pounds of white-hot fighting fury, with a right hand like a caulking mallet. They met at San Francisco.

With the aid of Ganlon and friendly scribes, I set the old ballyhoo working. The papers were full of Mike Brennon. They pointed out that he had over twenty knockouts to his credit, ignoring the fact that all of these victims, except one, were unknown dubs. They glossed over the fact that he had been out-pointed by second-raters and beaten to a pulp by Sailor Slade. They angrily refuted charges that his kayo of Barota was a fluke.

The stadium was packed that night. The crowd paid their money, and they got its worth. Before the bell I was whispering a few instructions which I knew would be useless, when Mike cut in with fierce eagerness: "What a sell-out! Look at that crowd! If I win it'll mean more sell-outs and bigger purses! I've _got_ to win!" His eyes gleamed with ferocious avidity.

Two giants crashed from their corners as the gong sounded. Maloney came in like the great slugger he was, body crouched, chin tucked behind his shoulder, hands high. Brennon, forgetting everything before the blast of the crowd and his own fighting fury, rushed like a longshoreman, head lifted, hands clenched at his hips, wide open--as iron men have fought since time immemorial--with but one thought--to get to his foe and crush him.

Maloney landed first, a terrific left hook which spattered Brennon with blood and brought the crowd to its feet, roaring. I heard a note of relief in the shouts of Maloney's manager. This bird was going to be easy, after all! Like most sluggers, when they find a man they can hit easily, Maloney had gone fighting crazy. He lashed Brennon about the ring, hitting so hard and fast that Mike had no time to get set. The few swings he did try swished harmlessly over Maloney's bobbing head.

"He's slowin' down," muttered Ganlon as the first round drew to a close. "The old iron man game! Maloney's punchin' hisself out."

True, Jack's blows were coming not weaker, but slower. No man could keep up the pace he was setting. Brennon was as strong as ever, and just before the gong he staggered Maloney with a sweeping left to the body--his first blow.

Back in his corner Ganlon wiped the blood from Mike's battered face and grinned savagely: "Joe Goddard had nothin' on you. I'm beginnin' to believe you'll beat him. You've took plenty and you'll take more; he'll come out strong but each round he'll get weaker; he'll be fought out."

THE FANS THUNDERED acclaim as Maloney rushed out for the second. But he had sensed something they had not. He had hit this man with everything he possessed and had failed to even floor him. So he tore in like a wild man, and again drove Brennon about the ring before a torrent of left and right hooks that sounded like the kicks of a mule. Brennon, eyes nearly closed, lips pulped, nose broken, showed no sign of distress until the latter part of the round, when Maloney landed repeatedly to the jaw with his maul-like right. Then Mike's knees trembled momentarily, but he straightened and cut his foe's cheek with a glancing right.

At the gong the crowd began to realize what was going on. The timbre of their yells changed. They began to inquire at the top of their voices if Maloney was losing his famed punch, or if Brennon was made of solid iron.

Ganlon, wiping Brennon's gory features and offering the smelling salts, which he pushed away, said swiftly: "Maloney's legs trembled as he went back to his corner; he looked back over his shoulder like he couldn't believe it when he saw you walk to your corner without a quiver. He knows he ain't lost his punch! He knows you're the first man ever stood up to him wide open; he knows you been through a tough grind and ain't even saggin'. You got his goat. Now go get _him!"_

The gong sounded. Maloney came in, the light of desperation in his eyes, to redeem his slipping fame as a knocker-out. His blows were like a rain of sledge-hammers and before that rain Mike Brennon went down. The referee began counting. Maloney reeled back against the ropes, breath coming in great gasps--completely fought out.

"He'll get up," said Ganlon calmly.

Brennon was half crouching on his knees, dazed, not hurt. I saw his lips move and I read their motion: "More fights--more money--"

He bounded erect. Maloney's whole body sagged. Brennon's rising took more morale out of Jack than any sort of a blow would have done. Mike, sensing the mental condition and physical weariness of Maloney, tore in like a tiger. Left, right, he missed, shaking off Maloney's weakening blows as if they had been slaps from a girl. At last he landed--a wide left hook to the head. Maloney tottered, and a wild over-hand right crashed under his cheek bone, dashing him to his knees. At "nine!" he staggered up, but another right that a blind man in good condition could have ducked, dropped him again. The referee hesitated, then raised Mike's hand, beckoning to Maloney's seconds.

As Maloney, aided by his handlers, reeled to his corner on buckling legs, I noted the ironical fact: the winner was a gory, battered wreck, while the loser had only a single cut on his cheek. I thought of the old fights in which iron men of another day had figured: of Joe Goddard, the old Barrier Champion, outlasting the great Choynski, finishing each of their terrible battles a bloody travesty of a man, but winner. I thought of Sharkey dropping Kid McCoy; of Nelson outlasting Gans; Young Corbett--Herrerra. And I sighed. Of all the men who relied on their ruggedness to carry them through, Brennon was the most wide open, the most erratic.

As I sponged his cuts in the dressing-room, I could not help saying: "You see what fighting a first-string hitter means; you won't be able to answer the gong for months."

"Months!" he mumbled through smashed lips. "You'll sign me up with Johnny Varella for a bout next week!"

Chapter IV Iron Mike's Dread

AFTER THE MALONEY fight, fans and scribes realized what he was--an iron man--and as such his fame grew. He became a drawing card just as he had predicted--one of the greatest of his day. And his inordinate lust for money grew with his power as an attraction. He haggled over prices, held out for every cent he could get, and rather than pass up a fight, would always lower his price. For the first and only time in my life, I was merely a figure-head. Brennon was the real power behind the curtain. And he insisted on fighting at least once a month.

"You'll crack three times as quickly fighting so often," I protested. "Otherwise you might last for years."

"But why stretch it out if I can make the same amount of money in a few months that I could make in that many years?"

"But consider the strain on you!" I cried.

"I'm not considering anything about myself," he answered roughly. "Get me a match."

The matches came readily. He had caught the crowd's fancy and no matter whom he fought, the fans flocked to see him. He met them all--ferocious sluggers, clever dancers, and dangerous fighters who combined the qualities of slugger and boxer. When first-rate opponents were not forthcoming quickly enough, he went into the sticks and pushed over second-raters. As long as he was making money, no matter how much or how little, he was satisfied. What he did with that money, I did not know. He was honest, always shot square with his obligations; but beyond that he was a miser. He lived at the training camps or at the cheapest hotels, in spite of my protests; he bought cheap clothes and allowed himself no luxuries whatever.

At first he won consistently. He was dangerous to any man. Coupled with his abnormal endurance was a mental state--a driving, savage determination--which dragged him off the canvas time and again. This was above and beyond his natural fighting fury, and he had acquired it between the time he had first retired and the next time I saw him.

At the time he was in his prime, there was a wealth of material in the heavyweight ranks, and Brennon loomed among them as the one man none of them could stop. That fact alone put him on equal footing with men in every other way his superiors.

Following the Maloney fight, the public clamored for a match between my iron man and Yon Van Heeren, the Durable Dutchman, who was considered, up to that time, the toughest man in the world, one who had never been knocked out, and whose only claim to fame, like Brennon's, was his ruggedness. A certain famous scribe, referring to this fight as "a brawl between two bar-room thugs," said: "This unfortunate affair has set the game back twenty years. No sensitive person seeing this slaughter for his or her first fight, could ever be tempted to see another. People who do not know the game are likely to judge it by the two gorillas, who, utterly devoid of science, turned the ring into a shambles."

Before the men went into the ring they made the referee promise not to stop the fight under any circumstances--an unusual proceeding, but easily understood in their case.

THE FIGHT WAS a strange experience to Mike; most of the punishment was on the other side. Van Heeren, six feet two and weighing 210 pounds, was a terrific hitter, but lacked Mike's dynamic speed and fury. Those sweeping haymakers which had missed so many others, crashed blindingly against the Dutchman's head or sank agonizingly into his body. At the end of the first round his face was a gory wreck. At the end of the fourth his features had lost all human semblance; his body was a mass of reddened flesh.

Toe to toe they stood, round after round, neither taking a back step. The fifth, sixth and seventh rounds were nightmares, in which Mike was dropped three times, and Van Heeren went down twice that many times. All over the stadium women were fainting or being helped out; fans were shrieking for the fight to be stopped.

In the ninth, Van Heeren, a hideous and inhuman sight, dropped for the last time. Four ribs broken, features permanently ruined, he lay writhing, still trying to rise as the referee tolled off the "Ten!" that marked his finish as a fighting man.

Mike Brennon, clinging to the ropes, dizzy and nearly punched out for the only time in his life, stood above his victim, acknowledged king of all iron men. This fight finished Van Heeren, and nearly finished boxing in the state, but it added to Brennon's fame, and his real pity for the broken Dutchman was mingled with a fierce exultation of realized power. More money--more packed houses! The world's greatest iron man! In the three years he fought under my management he met them all, except the champion of his division. He lost about as many as he won, but the only thing that could impair his drawing power was a knockout--and this seemed postponed indefinitely. He won more of his fights against the hard punchers than against the light tappers, as the latter took no chances. Many a slugger, after battering him to a red ruin, blew up and fell before his aimless but merciless attack. He broke the hands and he broke the hearts of the men who tried to stop him.

The light hitters outboxed him, but did not hurt him, and his wild swings were dangerous even to them. Barota outpointed him, and Jackie Finnegan, Frankie Grogan and Flash Sullivan, the lightheavy champion.

The hard hitters made the mistake of trading punches with him. Soldier Handler dropped him five times in four rounds, and then stopped a right-hander that knocked him clear out of the ring and into fistic oblivion. Jose Gonzales, the great South American, punched himself out on the iron tiger and went down to defeat. Gunboat Sloan battered out a red decision over him, but still believing he could achieve the impossible, went in to trade punches in a return bout, and lasted less than a round. Brennon finished Ricardo Diaz, the Spanish Giant, and beat down Snake Calberson after his toughness had broken the Brown Phantom's heart. Johnny Varella and several lesser lights broke their hands on him and quit. He met Whitey Broad and Kid Allison in no decision bouts; knocked out Young Hansen, and fought a fierce fifteen-round draw with Sailor Steve Costigan, who never rated better than a second-class man, but who gave some first-raters terrific battles.

To those who doubt that flesh and blood can endure the punishment which Brennon endured, I beg you to look at the records of the ring's iron men. I point to your attention, Tom Sharkey plunging headlong into the terrible blows of Jeffries; that same Sharkey shooting headlong over the ropes onto the concrete floor from the blows of Choynski, yet finishing the fight a winner.

I call to your attention Mike Boden, who had no more defense than had Brennon, staying the limit with Choynski; and Joe Grim taking all Fitzsimmons could hand him--was it fifteen or sixteen times he was floored? Yet he finished that fight standing. No man can understand the iron men of the ring. Theirs is a long, hard, bloody trail, with oftentimes only poverty and a clouded mind at the end, but the red chapter their clan has written across the chronicles of the game will never be effaced.

And so Brennon fought on, taking all his cruel punishment, hoarding his money, saying little--as much a mystery to me as ever. Sports writers discovered his passion for money, and raked him. They accused him of being miserly and refusing aid to his less fortunate fellows--the battered tramps who will occasionally touch a successful fighter for a hand-out. This was only partly true. He did sometimes give money to men who needed it desperately, but the occasions were infrequent.

Then he began to crack. Ganlon, his continual champion, first sensed it. Crouching beside me the night Mike fought Kid Allison, Spike whispered to me out of the corner of his mouth: "He's slowin' down. It's the beginnin' of the end."

THAT NIGHT SPIKE spoke plainly to his friend.

"Mike, you're about through. You're slippin'. Punches jar you worse than they used to. You've lasted three years of terrible hard goin'. You got to quit."

"When I'm knocked out," said Mike stubbornly. "I haven't taken the count yet."

"When a bird like you takes the count, it means he's a punch-drunk wreck," said Ganlon. "When the blows begin to hurt you, it means the shock of them is reachin' the brain and hurtin' it. Remember Van Heeren, that you finished? He's wanderin' around, sayin' he's trainin' to fight Fitzsimmons, that's been dead for years."

A shadow crossed Mike's dark face at the mention of the Dutchman's name. The beatings he had taken had disfigured him and given him a peculiarly sinister look, which however, did not rob his face of its strange dominating quality.

"I'm good for a few more fights," he answered. "I need money--"

"Always money!" I exclaimed. "You must have half a million dollars at least. I'm beginning to believe you _are_ a miser--"

"Steve," said Ganlon suddenly, "Van Heeren was around here yesterday."

"What of it?"

Ganlon continued almost accusingly, "Mike gave him a thousand dollars."

"What if I did?" cried Brennon in one of his rare inexplicable passions. "The fellow was broke--in no condition to earn any money--I finished him--why shouldn't I help him a little? Whose business is it?"

"Nobody's," I answered. "But it shows you're not a miser. And it deepens the mystery about you. Won't you tell me why you need more money?"

He made a quick impatient gesture. "There's no need. You get the matches--I do the fighting. We split the money, and that's all there is to it."

"But, Mike," I said as kindly as I could, "there is more to it. You've made me more money than either of the champions I've managed, and if I didn't sincerely wish for your own good, I'd say for you to stay in the ring.

"But you _ought_ to quit. You can even get your features fixed up--plastic face building is a wonderful art. Fight even one more time, and you may spend your days in a padded cell."

"I'm tougher than you think," he answered. "I'm as good as I ever was and I'll prove it. Get me Sailor Slade."

"He beat you once before, when you were better than you are now. How do you expect--"

"I didn't have the incentive to win then, that I have now."

I nodded. What this incentive was I did not know, but I had seen him rise again and again from what looked like certain defeat--had seen him, writhing on the canvas, turn white, his eyes blue with sudden terror as he dragged himself upright. Terror? Of losing! A terror that kept him going when even his iron body was tottering on the verge of collapse and when the old fighting frenzy had ceased to function in the numbed brain. What prompted this dread? It was a mystery I could not fathom, but that in some way it was connected with his strange money-lust, I knew.

"You'll sign me for four fights," Brennon was saying. "With Sailor Slade, Young Hansen, Jack Slattery and Mike Costigan."

"You're out of your head!" I exclaimed sharply. "You've picked the four most dangerous battlers in the world!"

"Hansen, it'll be easy. I beat him once, and I can do it again. I don't know about Slattery. I want to take him on last. First, I've got to hurdle Slade. After him, I'll fight Costigan. He's the least scientific of the four, but the hardest hitter. If I'm slipping I want to get him before I've gone too far."

"It's suicide!" I cried. "If you've got to fight, pass up these mankillers and take on some set-ups. If Slade don't knock you out, he'll soften you up so Costigan will punch you right into the bughouse. He's a murderer. They call him Iron Mike, too."

"I'll pack them in," he answered heedlessly. "Slade's nearly the drawing card I am, and as for Costigan, the fans always turn out to see two iron men meet."

As usual, there was no answer to be made.

Chapter V _The Roll of the Iron Men_

IT WAS A few nights before the Brennon-Slade fight. I had wandered into Mike's room and my eye fell on a partially completed letter on his writing table. Without any intention of spying, I idly noted that it was addressed to a girl named Marjory Walshire, at a very fashionable girls' school in New York state.

I saw that a letter from this girl lay beside the other one, and though it was an atrocious breach of manners, in my curiosity to know why a girl in a society school like that would be writing a prize-fighter, I picked up the partially completed letter and glanced idly over it. The next moment I was reading it with fierce intensity, all scruples, forgotten. Having finished it, I snatched up the other and ruthlessly tore it open.

I had scarcely finished reading this when Mike entered with Ganlon. His eyes blazed with sudden fury, but before he could say a word I launched an offensive of my own--for one of the few times in my life, wild with rage.

"You born fool!" I snarled. "So this is why you've been crucifying yourself!"

"What do you mean by getting into my private correspondence?" his voice was husky with fury.

I sneered. "I'm not going to enter into a discussion of etiquette. You can beat me up afterward, but just now I'm going to have my say.

"You've been keeping some girl in a ritzy finishing school back East. Finishing school! It's nearly finished you! What kind of a girl is she, to let you go through this mill for her? I'd like for her to see your battered map now! While she's been lolling at ease in the most expensive school she could find, you've been flattening out the resin with your shoulders and soaking it down with your blood--"

"Shut up!" roared Brennon, white and shaking.

He leaned back against the table, gripping the edge so hard his knuckles whitened as he fought for control. At last he spoke more calmly.

"Yes, that's the incentive that's kept me going. That girl is the only girl I ever loved--the only thing I ever had to love.

"Listen, do you know how lonely a kid is when he has absolutely nobody in the world to love? The folks in the home were kind, but there were so many children--I got the beginnings of a good education. That's all.

"Out in the world it was worse. I worked, tramped, starved. I fought for everything I ever got. I have a better education than most, you say. I worked my way through high school, and read all the books in my spare time that I could beg, steal or borrow. Many a time I went hungry to buy a book.

"I drifted into the ring from fighting in carnivals and the like. I never got anywhere. After I whipped Mulcahy the night you talked to me, I quit. Drifted. Then in a little town on the Arizona desert I met Marjory Walshire.

"Poverty? She knew poverty! Working her fingers to the bone in a cafe. Good blood in her too, just as there is in me, somewhere. She should have been born to the satins and velvets--instead she was born to the greasy dishes and dirty tables of a second-class cafe. I loved her, and she loved me. She told me her dreams that she never believed would come true--of education--nice clothes--refined companions--every thing that any girl wants.

"Where was I to turn? I could take her out of the cafe--only to introduce her to the drudgery of a laboring man's wife. So I went back into the ring. As soon as I could, I sent her to school. I've been sending her money enough to live as well as any girl there, and I've saved too, so when she gets out of school and I have to quit the ring, we can be married and start in business that won't mean drudgery and poverty.

"Poverty is the cause of more crimes, cruelty and suffering than anything else. Poverty kept me from having a home and people like other kids. You know how it is in the slums--parents toiling for a living and too many children. They can't support them all. Mine left me on the door-step of the orphanage with a note: 'He's honest born. We love him, but we can't keep him. Call him Michael Brennon.'

"Poverty can be as cruel in a small town as in a city--Marjory, who'd never been out of the town where she was born--with her soul starved and her little white hands reddened and callused--

"It's the thought of her that's kept me on my feet when the whole world was blind and red and the fists of my opponent were like hammers on my shattering brain--that's the thought that dragged me off the canvas when my body was without feeling and my arms hung like lead, to strike down the man I could no longer see. And as long as she's waiting for me at the end of the long trail, there's no man on earth can make me take the count!"

His voice crashed through the room like a clarion call of victory, but my old doubts returned.

"But how can she love you so much," I exclaimed, "when she's willing for you to go through all this for her?"

"What does she know of fighting? I made her believe boxing was more or less of a dancing and tapping affair. She'd heard of Corbett and Tunney, clever fellows who could step twenty rounds without a mark, and she supposed I was like them. She hasn't seen me in nearly four years--not since I left the town where she worked. I've put her off when she's wanted to come and see me, or for me to come to her. When she does see my battered face it'll be a terrible shock to her, but I was never very handsome anyway--"

"Do you mean to tell me," I broke in, "that she never tunes in on one of your fights, never reads an account of them, when the papers are full of your doings?"

"She don't know my real name. After I quit the game the first time, I went under the name of Mike Flynn to duck the two-by-four promoters I'd fought for, and who were always pestering me to fight for them again. The first time I saw Marjory I began to think of fighting again, and I never told her differently. The money I've sent has been in cashier's checks. To her, I'm simply Mike Flynn, a fighter she never hears of. She wouldn't recognize my picture in the papers."

"But her letters are addressed to Mike Brennon."

"You didn't look closely. They're addressed to Michael Flynn, care of Mike Brennon, this camp. She thinks Brennon is merely a friend of her Mike. Well, now you know why I've fought on and stinted myself. With Van Heeren, it was different. I'm responsible for his condition. I had to help him.

"These four fights now; one of them may be my last. I've got money, but I want more. I intend that Marjory shall never want again for anything. I'm to get a hundred grand for this fight. My third purse of that size. With good management, thanks to you, I've made more money than many champions. If I whip these four men, I'll fight on. If I'm knocked out, I'll have to quit. Let's drop the matter."

I HAVEN'T THE heart to tell of the Brennon-Slade fight in detail. Even today the thought of the punishment Mike took that night takes the stiffening out of my knees. He had slipped even more than we had thought. The steel-spring legs, which had carried him through so many whirlwind battles, had slowed down. His sweeping haymakers crashed over with their old power, but they did not continually wing through the air as of old. Blows that should not have jarred him, staggered him. The squat sailor, wild with the thought of a knockout, threw caution to the winds. How many times he floored Mike I never dared try to remember, but Brennon was still Iron Mike. Again and again the gong saved him; in the fourteenth round Slade went to pieces, and the iron tiger he had punched into a red smear, found him in the crimson mist and blindly blasted him into unconsciousness.

Brennon collapsed in his corner after Slade was counted out, and both men were carried senseless from the ring. I sat by Mike's side that night while he lay in a semi-conscious state, occasionally muttering brokenly as his bruised brain conjured up red visions. He lay, both eyes closed, his oft-broken nose a crushed ruin, cut and gashed all about the head and face, now and then stirring uneasily as the pain of three broken ribs stabbed him.

For the first time he spoke the name of the girl he loved, groping out his hands like a lost child. Again he fought over his fearful battles and his mighty fists clenched until the knuckles showed white and low bestial snarls tore through his battered lips.

In his delirium he raised himself painfully on one elbow, his burning, unseeing eyes gleaming like slits of flame between the battered lids; he spoke in a low voice as if answering and listening to the murmur of ghosts: "Joe Grim! Battling Nelson! Mike Boden! Joe Goddard! Iron Mike Brennon!"

My flesh crawled. I cannot impart to you the uncanniness of hearing the roll call of those iron men of days gone by, muttered in the stillness of night through the pulped and delirious lips of the grimmest of them all.

At last he fell silent, and went into a natural slumber. As I went softly into the other room, Ganlon entered, his savage eyes blazing with fierce triumph. With him was a girl--a darling of high society she seemed, with her costly garments and air of culture, but she exhibited an elemental anxiety such as no pampered and sophisticated debutante would, or could have done.

"Where is he?" she cried desperately. "Where is Mike? I must see him!"

"He's asleep now," I said shortly, and added in my cruel bitterness: "You've done enough to him already. He wouldn't want you to see him like he is now."

She cringed as from a blow. "Oh, let me just look in from the door," she begged, twining her white hands together--and I thought of how often Mike's hands had been bathed in blood for her--"I won't wake him."

I hesitated and her eyes flamed; now she was the primal woman.

"Try to stop me and I'll kill you!" she cried, and rushed past me into the room.

Chapter VI A Cinch to Win!

THE GIRL STOPPED short on the threshold. Mike muttered restlessly in his sleep and turned his blind eyes toward the door, but did not waken. As the girl's eyes fell on that frightfully disfigured face, she swayed drunkenly; her hands went to her temples and a low whimper like an animal in pain escaped her. Then, her face corpse-white and her eyes set in a deathly stare, she stole to the bedside and with a heart-rending sob, sank to her knees, cradling that battered head in her arms.

Mike muttered, but still he did not waken. At last I drew her gently away and led her into the next room, closing the door behind us. There she burst into a torrent of weeping. "I didn't know!" she kept sobbing over and over. "I didn't know fighting was like that! He told me never to go to a fight, or listen to one over the radio, and I obeyed him. Why, how could I know--here's one of the few letters in which he even mentioned his fights. I've kept them all."

The date was over three years old. I read: "Last night I stopped Jack Maloney, a foremost contender. He scarcely laid a glove on me. Don't worry about me, darling, this game is a cinch."

I laughed bitterly, remembering the gory wreck Maloney had made of Mike before he went out.

"I've been doing you an injustice," I said. "I didn't think a man could keep a girl in such ignorance as to the real state of things, but it's true. You're O.K. Maybe you can persuade Mike to give up the game--we can't."

"Surely he can't be thinking of fighting again if he lives?" she cried.

I laughed. "He won't die. He'll be laid up a while, that's all. Now I'll take you to a hotel--"

"I'm going to stay here close to Mike," she answered passionately. "I could kill myself when I think how he's suffered for me. Tomorrow I'm going to marry him and take him away."

After she was settled in a spare room, I turned to Spike: "I guess you're responsible for this. You might have waited till Mike was out of bed. That was a terrible shock for her."

"I intended it should be," he snarled. "I wrote and told her did she know her boy Mike Flynn was really Mike Brennon which was swiftly bein' punched into the booby-hatch? And I gave her some graphic accounts of his battles. I wrote her in time for her to get here to see the fight, but she says she missed a train."

"Let him fight," Spike spat. "Costigan will kill him, if they fight. I've seen these iron men crack before. I was in Tom Berg's corner the night Jose Gonzales knocked him out, and he died while the referee was countin' over him. Some men you got to kill to stop. Mike Brennon's one of 'em. If the girl's got a spark of real womanhood in her, she'll persuade him to quit."

Morning found the battered iron man clear of mind, his super-human recuperative powers already asserting themselves. I brought Marjory to his bedside and before he could say anything, I left them alone. Later she came to me, her eyes red with weeping.

"I've argued and begged," she cried desperately, "but he won't give in!"

All of us surrounded Mike's bedside. "Mike," I said, "you're a fool. The punches have gone to your head. You can't mean you'll fight again!"

"I'm good for some more big purses," he replied with a grin.

Marjory cried out as if he had stabbed her. "Mike--oh, Mike! We have more money now than we'll ever use. You haven't been fair to me. I'd have rather gone in rags, and worked my fingers to the bone in the lowest kind of drudgery than to have you suffer!"

His face lighted with a rare smile. He reached out a hand, amazingly gentle, and took one of the girl's soft hands in his own.

"White little hands," he murmured. "Soft, as they were meant to be, now. Why, just looking at you repays me a thousand times for all I've gone through. And what have I gone through? A few beatings. The old-timers took worse, and got little or nothing."

"But there's no reason for your crucifying yourself--and me--any longer."

He shook his head with that strange abnormal stubbornness which was the worst defect in his character.

"As long as I can draw down a hundred thousand dollars a fight, I'd be a fool to quit. I'm tougher than any of you think. A hundred thousand dollars!" His eyes gleamed with the old light. "The crowd roaring! And Iron Mike Brennon taking everything that's handed out, and finishing on his feet! No! No! I'll quit when I'm counted out--not before!"

"Mike!" the girl cried piercingly. "If you fight again, I'll swear I'll go away and never see you again!"

His gaze beat her eyes down, and her head sank on her breast. I never saw the human being--except one--who could stand the stare of Mike Brennon's magnetic eyes.

"Marjory," his deep voice vibrated with confidence, "you're just trying to bluff me into doing what you want me to do. But you're mine, and you always will be. You won't leave me, now. You can't!"

She hid her tear-blinded face in her hands and sobbed weakly. He stroked her bowed head tenderly. A failure in the ring perhaps, but outside of it Brennon had a power over those with whom he came in contact that none could overcome. The way he had beaten down the girl's weak pretense was almost brutal.

"Mike!" snarled Ganlon, speaking harshly and bitterly to hide his emotions; for a moment the hard-faced middleweight with his two hundred savage ring battles behind him, dominated the scene: "Mike, you're crazy! You got everything a man could want--things that most men work their lives out for and never get. You're on the borderline. You couldn't whip a second-rater.

"Costigan's as tough as you ever were. If I thought he'd flatten you with a punch or two, I'd say, go to it. But he won't. He'll knock you out, but it'll be after a smashin' that'll ruin you for life. You'll die, or you'll go to the bughouse. What good will your money, or Marjory's love do you then?"

Mike took his time about replying, and again his strange influence was felt like a cloud over the group.

"Costigan's over-rated. I'll show him up. He never saw the day he could take as much as I can, or hit as hard."

Spike made a despairing gesture, and turned away. Later he said to the girl and me: "No use arguin'. He thinks it's the money, but it ain't. The game's in his blood. And he's jealous of Mike Costigan. These iron men is terrible proud of their toughness. Remember how Van Heeren fought?"

"Win or lose, ten rounds with Costigan means Mike's finish. Each is too tough to be knocked out quick. It'll be a long, bloody grind, and it _may_ finish Costigan, but it'll _sure_ finish Mike. He'll end that fight dead, or punched nutty. At his best, Brennon would likely have wore Costigan down like he did Van Heeren. But Mike's gone away back, and Costigan is young--in his prime--which in a iron man is the same as sayin' you couldn't hurt him with a pile-driver."

MIKE BRENNON TRAINED conscientiously, as always. I discharged his sparring partners and had him punch the light bag for speed, and do a great deal of road work in a vain effort to recover some of the former steel spring quality of his weakening legs. But I knew it was useless. It was not a matter of conditioning--his trouble lay behind him in the thousands of cruel blows he had absorbed. A clever boxer may get out of condition, lose fights and come back; but when an iron man slips there is no comeback.

In the four months which preceded the Costigan fight, an air of gloom surrounded the camp which affected all but Mike himself. Marjory, after days of passionate pleading, sank into a sort of apathy. That he was being bitterly cruel to the girl never occurred to Mike, and we could not make him see it. He laughed at our fears as foolish, and insisted that he was practically in his prime. He swore that his fight with Slade, far from showing that he had slipped, proved that he was better than ever! For had he not beaten Slade, the most dangerous man in the ring? As for Costigan--a few rounds of savage slugging would send him down and out.

Mike was aware of his fistic faults; he frankly admitted that any second-rater who could avoid his swings could outpoint him; but he sincerely believed that he was still superior in ruggedness to any man that ever lived. And deep in his heart, I doubt if Mike really believed he would ever be knocked out.

One thing he insisted on; that Marjory should not see the fight. And she made one last plea for him to give it up.

"No use to start all that," he answered calmly. "Think, Marjory! My fourth hundred-thousand-dollar purse! That's a record few champions have set! One hundred thousand with Flash Sullivan--Gonzales--Slade--and now Costigan! Thousands of tickets sold in advance! I've got to go on now, anyhow. And I'm a cinch to win!"

Chapter VII Framed

AS IF IT were yesterday I visualize the scene; the ring bathed in the white glow above it; while the great crowd that filled the huge outside bowl swept away into the darkness of each side. A circle of white faces looked up from the ringside seats. Farther out only a twinkling army of glowing cigarettes evidenced the multitude, and a vast rippling undertone came from the soft darkness.

"Iron Mike Brennon, 190 pounds; in this corner, Iron Mike Costigan, 195!"

Brennon sat in his corner, head bowed, a contrast to the nervous, feline-like picture he had offered when he had paced the floor in his dressing-room. I wondered if he was still seeing the tear-stained face of Marjory as she kissed him in his dressing-room before he came into the ring.

When the men were called to the center of the ring for instructions, Mike, to my surprise, seemed apathetic. He walked with dragging feet. However, in front of his foe he came awake with fierce energy. Iron Mike Costigan was dark, with tousled black hair. Five feet eleven, and heavier than Brennon, what he lacked in lithe ranginess he made up in oak and iron massiveness.

The eyes of the two men burned into each other with savage intensity. Volcanic blue for Costigan; cold steel gray for Brennon. Their sun-browned faces were set in unconscious snarls. But as they stood facing each other, Brennon's stare of concentrated cold ferocity wavered and fell momentarily before Costigan's savage blue eyes. I realized that this was the first man who had ever looked Mike down, and I thought of Corbett staring down Sullivan--of McGovern's eyes falling before Young Corbett's.

Then the men were back in their corners, and the seconds and handlers were climbing through the ropes. I hissed to Mike that I was going to throw in the sponge if the going got too rough, but he made no reply. He seemed to have sunk into that strange apathy again.

The gong!

Costigan hurtled from his corner, a compact bulk of fighting fury. Brennon came out more slowly. At my side Ganlon hissed: "What's the matter with Mike? He acts like he was drunk!"

The two Iron Mikes had met in the center of the ring. Costigan might have been slightly awed by the fame of the man he faced. At any rate he hesitated. Brennon walked toward his foe, but his feet dragged.

Then Costigan suddenly launched an attack, and shot a straight left to Brennon's face. As if the blow had roused him to his full tigerish fury, Mike went into action. The old sweeping haymakers began to thunder with all their ancient power. Costigan had, of course, no defense. A sweeping left-hander crashed under his heart with a sound like a caulking mallet striking a ship's side; a blasting right that whistled through the air, cannon-balled against his jaw. Costigan went down as though struck by a thunderbolt.

Then even as the crowd rose, he reeled up again. But I was watching Brennon. As though that sudden burst of action had taken all the strength out of him, he sagged against the ropes, limp, cloudy-eyed. Now sensing that his foe was up, he dragged himself forward with halting and uncertain motions.

Costigan, still dizzy from that terrific knockdown, was conscious of only one urge--the old instinct of the iron man--bore in and hit until somebody falls! Now he crashed through Brennon's groping arms and shot a right hook to the chin. Brennon swayed and fell, just as a drunken man falls when a prop against which he has been leaning is removed.

Over his motionless form the referee was counting: "Eight! Nine! Ten!" And the ring career of Iron Mike Brennon was at an end. A stunned silence reigned, and Iron Mike Costigan, new king of all iron men, leaned against the ropes, unable to believe his senses. _Mike Brennon had been knocked out!_

AROUND THE RING the typewriters of the reporters were ticking out the fall of a king: "Evidently Mike Brennon's famous iron jaw has at last turned to crockery after years of incredible bombardings...."

We carried Mike, still senseless, to his dressing-room. Ganlon was muttering under his breath, and as soon as we had Mike safe on a cot with a physician looking to him, the middleweight vanished. Marjory had been waiting for us and now she stood, white-faced and silent, by the cot where her lover lay.

At last he opened his eyes, and instantly he leaped erect, hands up. Then he halted, swayed and rubbed his eyes. Marjory was at his side in an instant and gently forced him back on the cot.

"What happened? Did I win?" he asked dazedly.

"You were knocked out in the first round, Mike." I felt it better to answer him directly. His eyes widened with amazement.

"I? Knocked out? Impossible!"

"Yes, Mike, you were," I assured him, expecting him to do any of the things I have seen fighters do on learning of their first knock-out--weep terribly, faint, rave and curse, or rush out looking for the conqueror. But being Mike Brennon and a never-to-be-solved enigma, he did none of these things. He merely rubbed his chin and laughed cynically.

"Guess I'd gone farther back than I thought. I don't remember the punch that put me out; funny thing--I've come through my last fight without a mark."

"And now you'll quit!" cried Marjory. "This is the best thing that could have happened to you. You promised you'd quit if you were knocked out, Mike." Her voice was painful in its intensity.

"Why, I wouldn't draw half a house now," Mike was beginning ruefully, when Ganlon burst in, eyes blazing.

"Mike!" he snarled. "Steve! Don't you two boneheads see there's somethin' wrong here? Mike, when did you begin feelin' drowsy?"

Brennon started. "That's right. I'd forgotten. I began feeling queer when I climbed in the ring. I sort of woke up when the referee was talking to us, and I remember how Costigan's eyes blazed. Then when I went back to my corner I got dizzy and drunken. Then I knew I was moving out in the ring and I saw Costigan through a fog. He hit me a hummer and I woke up and started swinging and saw him go down. That's the last I remember until I came to here."

Ganlon laughed bitterly. "Sure. You was out on your feet before Costigan hit you. A girl coulda pushed you over, and that's all Costigan done!"

"Doped!" I cried. "Costigan's crowd--or the gambling ring--"

"Naw--Mike's been crossed by the last person you'd think of. I been doin' some detective work. Mike, just before you left your dressin'-room, you drunk a small cup of tea, didn't you? Kinda unusual preparation for a hard fight, eh? But you drunk it to please somebody--"

Marjory was cowering in the corner. Mike was troubled and puzzled.

"But Spike, Marjory made that tea herself--"

"Yeah, and she doped it herself! She framed you to lose!"

OUR EYES TURNED on the shrinking girl--amazement in mine, anger in Ganlon's, and a deep hurt in Mike's.

"Marjory, why did you do that?" asked Mike, bewildered. "I might have won--"

"Yes, you might have won!" she cried in a sudden gust of desperate and despairing defiance. "After Costigan had battered you to a red ruin! Yes, I drugged the tea. It's my fault you were knocked out. You can't go back now, for you've lost your only attraction. You can't draw the crowds. I've gone through tortures since I first saw you lying on that cot after your fight with Slade--but you've only laughed at me. Now you'll have to quit. You're out of the game with a sound mind--that's all I care. I've saved you from your mad avarice and cruel pride in spite of yourself! And you can beat me now, or kill me--I don't care!"

For a moment she stood panting before us, her small fists clenched, then as no one spoke, all the fire went out of her. She wilted visibly and moved droopingly and forlornly toward the door. The wrap which enveloped her slender form, slid to the floor as she fumbled at the door-knob, revealing her in a cheap gingham dress. Mike, like a man awakening from a trance, started forward:

"Marjory! Where are you going? What are you doing in that rig?"

"It's the dress I was wearing when you first met me," she answered listlessly, "I wrote and got back my old job at the cafe."

He crossed the room with one stride, caught her slim shoulders and spun her around to face him, with unconsciously brutal force. "What do you mean?" he said.

She collapsed suddenly in a storm of weeping. "Don't you hate me for drugging you?" she sobbed. "I didn't think you'd ever want to see me again."

He crushed her to him hungrily. "Girl, I swear I didn't realize how it was hurting you. I thought you were foolish--willful. I couldn't see how you were suffering. But you've opened my eyes. I must have been insane! You're right--it was pride--senseless vanity--I couldn't see it then, but I do now. I didn't understand that I was ruining your happiness. And that's all that matters now, dear. We've got our life and love before us, and if it rests with me, you're going to be happy all the rest of your life."

Ganlon beckoned me and I followed him out. For the only time since I had known him, Mike's hard face had softened. The sentiment that lies at the base of the Irish nature, however deeply hidden sometimes, made his steely eyes almost tender.

"I had her down all wrong," Ganlon said softly. "I take back everything I might have said about her. She's a regular--and Mike--well, he's the only iron man I ever knew that got the right breaks at last."

THE END

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THE PIT OF THE SERPENT

By Robert E. Howard

THE MINUTE I stepped ashore from the *Sea Girl*, merchantman, I had a hunch that there would be trouble. This hunch was caused by seeing some of the crew of the Dauntless. The men on the Dauntless have disliked the *Sea Girl*'s crew ever since our skipper took their captain to a cleaning on the wharfs of Zanzibar--them being narrow-minded that way. They claimed that the old man had a knuckle-duster on his right, which is ridiculous and a dirty lie. He had it on his left.

Seeing these roughnecks in Manila, I had no illusions about them, but I was not looking for no trouble. I am heavyweight champion of the *Sea Girl*, and before you make any wisecracks about the non-importance of that title, I want you to come down to the forecastle and look over Mushy Hansen and One-Round Grannigan and Flat-Face O'Toole and Swede Hjonning and the rest of the man-killers that make up the *Sea Girl*'s crew. But for all that, no one can never accuse me of being quarrelsome, and so instead of following my natural instinct and knocking seven or eight of these bezarks for a row, just to be ornery, I avoided them and went to the nearest American bar.

After a while I found myself in a dance hall, and while it is kind of hazy just how I got there, I assure you I had not no great amount of liquor under my belt--some beer, a few whiskeys, a little brandy, and maybe a slug of wine for a chaser like. No, I was the perfect chevalier in all my actions, as was proven when I found myself dancing with the prettiest girl I have yet to see in Manila or elsewhere. She had red lips and black hair, and oh, what a face!

"Say, miss," said I, the soul of politeness, "where have you been all my life?"

"Oooh, la!" said she, with a silvery ripple of laughter. "You Americans say such theengs. Oooh, so huge and strong you are, senyor!"

I let her feel of my biceps, and she give squeals of surprise and pleasure, clapping her little white hands just like a child what has found a new pretty.

"Oooh! You could just snatch little me oop and walk away weeth me, couldn't you, senyor?"

"You needn't not be afraid," said I, kindly. "I am the soul of politeness around frails, and never pull no rough stuff. I have never soaked a woman in my life, not even that dame in Suez that throwed a knife at me. Baby, has anybody ever give you a hint about what knockouts your eyes is?"

"Ah, go 'long," said she, coyly--"Ouch!"

"Did somebody step on your foot?" I ask, looking about for somebody to crown.

"Yes--let's sit theese one out, senyor. Where did you learn to dance?"

"It comes natural, I reckon," I admitted modestly. "I never knew I could till now. This is the first time I ever tried."

From the foregoing you will see that I am carrying on a quiet conversation, not starting nothing with nobody. It is not my fault, what happened.

Me and this girl, whose name is Raquel La Costa, her being Spanish that way, are sitting peacefully at a table and I am just beginning to get started good telling her how her eyes are like dark pools of night (pretty hot, that one; I got it offa Mushy Hansen, who is all poetical like), when I notice her looking over my shoulder at somebody. This irritates me slightly, but I ignore it, and having forgotten what I was saying, my mind being slightly hazy for some reason, I continue:

"Listen, cutey--hey, who are you winkin' at? Oh, somethin' in your eye, you say? All right, as I was sayin', we got a feller named Hansen on board the *Sea Girl* what writes po'try. Listen to this:

"Oh, the road to glory lay
Over old Manila Bay.
Where the Irish whipped the Spanish
On a sultry summer day."

At this moment some bezark came barging up to our table and, ignoring me, leaned over and leered engagingly at my girl.

"Let's shake a hoof, baby," said this skate, whom I recognized instantly as Bat Slade, champion box fighter of the Dauntless.

Miss La Costa said nothing, and I arose and shoved Slade back from the table.

"The lady is engaged at present, stupid," says I, poking my jaw out. "If you got any business, you better 'tend to it."

"Don't get gay with me, Costigan," says he, nastily. "Since when is dames choosin' gorillas instead of humans?"

By this time quite a crowd had formed, and I restrained my natural indignation and said, "Listen, bird, take that map outa my line uh vision before I bust it."

Bat is a handsome galoot who has a way with the dames, and I knew if he danced one dance with my girl he would figure out some way to do me dirt. I did not see any more of the Dauntless men; on the other hand, I was the only one of the *Sea Girl*'s crew in the joint.

"Suppose we let the lady choose between us," said Bat. Can you beat that for nerve? Him butting in that way and then giving himself equal rights with me. That was too much. With a bellow, I started my left from the hip, but somehow he wasn't there--the shifty crook! I miss by a yard, and he slams me with a left to the nose that knocks me over a chair.

My brain instantly cleared, and I realized that I had been slightly lit. I arose with an irritated roar, but before hostilities could be renewed, Miss La Costa stepped between us.

"Zut," said she, tapping us with her fan. "Zut! What is theese? Am I a common girl to be so insult' by two great tramps who make fight over me in public? Bah! Eef you wanta fight, go out in ze woods or some place where no one make scandal, and wham each other all you want. May ze best man win! I will not be fight over in public, no sir!"

AND WITH THAT she turned back and walked away. At the same time, up came an oily-looking fellow, rubbing his hands together. I mistrust a bird what goes around rubbing his hands together like he was in a state of perpetual self-satisfaction.

"Now, now, boys," said this bezark, "le's do this right! You boys wanta fight. Tut! Tut! Too bad, too bad! But if you gotta fight, le's do it right, that's what I say! Let fellers live together in peace and enmity if they can, but if they gotta fight, let it be did right!"

"Gi' me leeway--and I'll do this blankety-blank right," says I, fairly shaking with rage. It always irritates me to be hit on the nose without a return and in front of ladies.

"Oh, will you?" said Bat, putting up his mitts. "Let's see you get goin', you--"

"Now, now, boys," said the oily bird, "le's do this right! Costigan, will you and Slade fight for me in my club?"

"Anywheres!" I roar. "Bare-knuckles, gloves, or marlin-spikes!"

"Fine," says the oily bird, rubbing his hands worse than ever. "Ah, fine! Ah--um--ah, Costigan, will you fight Slade in the pit of the serpent?"

Now, I should have noticed that he didn't ask Slade if he'd fight, and I saw Slade grin quietly, but I was too crazy with rage to think straight.

"I'll fight him in the pit of Hades with the devil for a referee!" I roared. "Bring on your fight club--ring, deck, or whatever! Let's get goin'."

"That's the way to talk!" says the oily bird. "Come on."

He turned around and started for the exit, and me and Slade and a few more followed him. Had I of thought, I would have seen right off that this was all working too smooth to have happened impromptu, as it were. But I was still seething with rage and in no shape to think properly.

Howthesomever, I did give a few thoughts as to the chances I had against Slade. As for size, I had the advantage. I'm six feet, and Slade is two inches shorter; I am also a few pounds heavier but not enough to make much difference, us being heavyweights that way. But Slade, I knew, was the shiftiest, trickiest leather-slinger in the whole merchant marine. I had never met him for the simple reason that no match-maker in any port would stage a bout between a *Sea Girl* man and a Dauntless tramp, since that night in Singapore when the bout between Slade and One-Round Grannigan started a free-for-all that plumb wrecked the Wharfside A. C. Slade knocked Grannigan out that night, and Grannigan was then champion slugger aboard the *Sea Girl*. Later, I beat Grannigan.

As for dope, you couldn't tell much, as usual. I'd won a decision over Boatswain Hagney, the champion of the British Asiatic naval fleet, who'd knocked Slade out in Hong Kong, but on the other hand, Slade had knocked out Mike Leary of the Blue *Whale*, who'd given me a terrible beating at Bombay.

These cogitations was interrupted at that minute by the oily bird. We had come out of the joint and was standing on the curb. Several autos was parked there, and the crowd piled into them. The oily bird motioned me to get in one, and I done so.

Next, we was speeding through the streets, where the lights was beginning to glow, and I asked no questions, even when we left the business section behind and then went right on through the suburbs and out on a road which didn't appear to be used very much. I said nothing, however.

AT LAST WE stopped at a large building some distance outside the city, which looked more like an ex-palace than anything else. All the crowd alighted, and I done likewise, though I was completely mystified. There was no other houses near, trees grew dense on all sides, the house itself was dark and gloomy-looking. All together I did not like the looks of things but would not let on, with Bat Slade gazing at me in his supercilious way. Anyway, I thought, they are not intending to assassinate me because Slade ain't that crooked, though he would stop at nothing else.

We went up the walk, lined on each side by tropical trees, and into the house. There the oily bird struck a light and we went down in the basement. This was a large, roomy affair, with a concrete floor, and in the center was a pit about seven feet deep, and about ten by eight in dimensions. I did not pay no great attention to it at that time, but I did later, I want to tell you.

"Say," I says, "I'm in no mood for foolishness. What you bring me away out here for? Where's your arena?"

"This here's it," said the oily bird.

"Huh! Where's the ring? Where do we fight?"

"Down in there," says the oily bird, pointing at the pit.

"What!" I yell. "What are you tryin' to hand me?"

"Aw, pipe down," interrupted Bat Slade. "Didn't you agree to fight me in the serpent pit? Stop grouchin' and get your duds off."

"All right," I says, plumb burned up by this deal. "I don't know what you're tryin' to put over, but lemme get that handsome map in front of my right and that's all I want!"

"Grahhh!" snarled Slade, and started toward the other end of the pit. He had a couple of yeggs with him as handlers. Shows his caliber, how he always knows some thug; no matter how crooked the crowd may be, he's never without acquaintances. I looked around and recognized a pickpocket I used to know in Cuba, and asked him to handle me. He said he would, though, he added, they wasn't much a handler could do under the circumstances.

"What kind of a deal have I got into?" I asked him as I stripped. "What kind of a joint is this?"

"This house used to be owned by a crazy Spaniard with more mazuma than brains," said the dip, helping me undress. "He yearned for bull fightin' and the like, and he thought up a brand new one. He rigged up this pit and had his servants go out and bring in all kinds of snakes. He'd put two snakes in the pit and let 'em fight till they killed each other."

"What! I got to fight in a snake den?"

"Aw, don't worry. They ain't been no snakes in there for years. The Spaniard got killed, and the old place went to ruin. They held cock fights here and a few years ago the fellow that's stagin' this bout got the idea of buyin' the house and stagin' grudge fights."

"How's he make any money? I didn't see nobody buyin' tickets, and they ain't more'n thirty or forty here."

"Aw, he didn't have no time to work it up. He'll make his money bettin'. He never picks a loser! And he always referees himself. He knows your ship sails tomorrow, and he didn't have no time for ballyhooin'. This fight club is just for a select few who is too sated or too vicious to enjoy a ordinary legitimate prize fight. They ain't but a few in the know--all this is illegal, of course--just a few sports which don't mind payin' for their pleasure. The night Slade fought Sailor Handler they was forty-five men here, each payin' a hundred and twenty-five dollars for admission. Figure it out for yourself."

"Has Slade fought here before?" I ask, beginning to see a light.

"Sure. He's the champion of the pit. Only last month he knocked out Sailor Handler in nine rounds."

Gerusha! And only a few months ago me and the Sailor--who stood six-four and weighed two-twenty--had done everything but knife each other in a twenty-round draw.

"Ho! So that's the way it is," said I. "Slade deliberately come and started trouble with me, knowin' I wouldn't get a square deal here, him bein' the favorite and--"

"No," said the dip, "I don't think so. He just fell for that Spanish frail. Had they been any malice aforethought, word would have circulated among the wealthy sports of the town. As it is, the fellow that owns the joint is throwin' the party free of charge. He didn't have time to work it up. Figure it out--he ain't losing nothin'. Here's two tough sailors wanting to fight a grudge fight--willin' to fight for nothin'. It costs him nothin' to stage the riot. It's a great boost for his club, and he'll win plenty on bets."

The confidence with which the dip said that last gave me cold shivers.

"And who will he bet on?" I asked.

"Slade, of course. Ain't he the pit champion?"

While I was considering this cheering piece of information, Bat Slade yelled at me from the other end of the pit:

"Hey, you blankey dash-dot-blank, ain't you ready yet?"

He was in his socks, shoes and underpants, and no gloves on his hands.

"Where's the gloves?" I asked. "Ain't we goin' to tape our hands?"

"They ain't no gloves," said Slade, with a satisfied grin. "This little riot is goin' to be a bare-knuckle affair. Don't you know the rules of the pit?"

"You see, Costigan," says the oily bird, kinda nervous, "in the fights we put on here, the fighters don't wear no gloves--regular he-man grudge stuff, see?"

"Aw, get goin'!" the crowd began to bellow, having paid nothing to get in and wanting their money's worth. "Lessee some action! What do you think this is? Start somethin'!"

"Shut up!" I ordered, cowing them with one menacing look. "What kind of a deal am I getting here, anyhow?"

"Didn't you agree to fight Slade in the serpent pit?"

"Yes but--"

"Tryin' to back out," said Slade nastily, as usual. "That's like you *Sea Girl* tramps, you--"

"Blank, exclamation point, and asterisk!" I roared, tearing off my undershirt and bounding into the pit. "Get down in here you blank-blank semicolon, and I'll make you look like the last rose of summer, you--"

Slade hopped down into the pit at the other end, and the crowd began to fight for places at the edge. It was a cinch that some of them was not going to get to see all of it. The sides of the pit were hard and rough, and the floor was the same way, like you'd expect a pit in a concrete floor to be. Of course they was no stools or anything.

"Now then," says the oily bird, "this is a finish fight between Steve Costigan of the *Sea Girl*, weight one-eighty-eight, and Battling Slade, one-seventy-nine, of the Dauntless, bare-knuckle champion of the Philippine Islands, in as far as he's proved it in this here pit. They will fight three-minute rounds, one minute rest, no limit to the number of rounds. There will be no decision. They will fight till one of 'em goes out. Referee, me.

"The rules is, nothing barred except hittin' below the belt--in the way of punches, I mean. Break when I say so, and hit on the breakaway if you wanta. Seconds will kindly refrain from hittin' the other man with the water bucket. Ready?"

"A hundred I lay you like a rug", says Slade.

"I see you and raise you a hundred," I snarl.

The crowd began to yell and curse, the timekeeper hit a piece of iron with a six-shooter stock, and the riot was on.

NOW, UNDERSTAND, THIS was a very different fight from any I ever engaged in. It combined the viciousness of a rough-and-tumble with that of a legitimate ring bout. No room for any footwork, concrete to land on if you went down, the uncertain flare of the lights which was hung on the ceiling over us, and the feeling of being crowded for space, to say nothing of thinking about all the snakes which had fought there. Ugh! And me hating snakes that way.

I had figured that I'd have the advantage, being heavier and stronger. Slade couldn't use his shifty footwork to keep out of my way. I'd pin him in a corner and smash him like a cat does a rat. But the bout hadn't been on two seconds before I saw I was all wrong. Slade was just an overgrown Young Griffo. His footwork was second to his ducking and slipping. He had fought in the pit before, and had found that kind of fighting just suited to his peculiar style. He shifted on his feet just enough to keep weaving, while he let my punches go under his arms, around his neck, over his head or across his shoulder.

At the sound of the gong I'd stepped forward, crouching, with both hands going in the only way I knew.

Slade took my left on his shoulder, my right on his elbow, and, blip-blip! his left landed twice to my face. Now I want to tell you that a blow from a bare fist is much different than a blow from a glove, and while less stunning, is more of a punisher in its way. Still, I was used to being hit with bare knuckles, and I kept boring in. I swung a left to the ribs that made Slade grunt, and missed a right in the same direction.

This was the beginning of a cruel, bruising fight with no favor. I felt like a wild animal, when I had time to feel anything but Slade's left, battling down there in the pit, with a ring of yelling, distorted faces leering down at us. The oily bird, referee, leaned over the edge at the risk of falling on top of us, and when we clinched he would yell, "Break, you blank-blanks!" and prod us with a cane. He would dance around the edge of the pit trying to keep in prodding distance, and cussing when the crowd got in his way, which was all the time. There was no room in the pit for him; wasn't scarcely room enough for us.

Following that left I landed, Slade tied me up in a clinch, stamped on my instep, thumbed me in the eye, and swished a right to my chin on the breakaway. Slightly infuriated at this treatment, I curled my lip back and sank a left to the wrist in his midriff. He showed no signs at all of liking this, and retaliated with a left to the body and a right to the side of the head. Then he settled down to work.

He ducked a right and came in close, pounding my waist line with short jolts. When, in desperation, I clinched, he shot a right uppercut between my arms that set me back on my heels. And while I was off balance he threw all his weight against me and scraped me against the wall, which procedure removed a large area of hide from my shoulder. With a roar, I tore loose and threw him the full length of the pit, but, charging after him, he side-stepped somehow and I crashed against the pit wall, head-first. Wham! I was on the floor, with seventeen million stars flashing before me, and the oily bird was counting as fast as he could, "Onetwothreefourfive--"

I bounded up again, not hurt but slightly dizzy. Wham, wham, wham! Bat came slugging in to finish me. I swished loose a right that was labeled T.N.T., but he ducked.

"Look out, Bat! That bird's dangerous!" yelled the oily bird in fright.

"So am I!" snarled Bat, cutting my lip with a straight left and weaving away from my right counter. He whipped a right to the wind that made me grunt, flashed two lefts to my already battered face, and somehow missed with a venomous right. All the time, get me, I was swinging fast and heavy, but it was like hitting at a ghost. Bat had maneuvered me into a corner, where I couldn't get set or defend myself. When I drew back for a punch, my elbow hit the wall. Finally I wrapped both arms around my jaw and plunged forward, breaking through Slade's barrage by sheer weight. As we came together, I threw my arms about him and together we crashed to the floor.

Slade, being the quicker that way, was the first up, and hit me with a roundhouse left to the side of the head while I was still on one knee.

"Foul!" yells some of the crowd.

"Shut up!" bellowed the oily bird. "I'm refereein' this bout!"

As I found my feet, Slade was right on me and we traded rights. Just then the gong sounded. I went back to my end of the pit and sat down on the floor, leaning my back against the wall. The dip peered over the edge.

"Anything I can do?" said he.

"Yeah," said I, "knock the daylights out of the blank-blank that's pretendin' to referee this bout."

Meanwhile the aforesaid blank-blank shoved his snoot over the other end of the pit, and shouted anxiously, "Slade, you reckon you can take him in a couple more rounds?"

"Sure," said Bat. "Double your bets; triple 'em. I'll lay him in the next round."

"You'd better!" admonished this fair-minded referee.

"How can he get anybody to bet with him?" I asked.

"Oh," says the dip, handing me down a sponge to wipe off the blood, "some fellers will bet on anything. For instance, I just laid ten smackers on you, myself."

"That I'll win?"

"Naw; that you'll last five rounds."

AT THIS MOMENT the gong sounded and I rushed for the other end of the pit, with the worthy intention of effacing Slade from the face of the earth. But, as usual, I underestimated the force of my rush and the length of the pit. There didn't seem to be room enough for Slade to get out of my way, but he solved this problem by dropping on his knees, and allowing me to fall over him, which I did.

"Foul!" yelled the dip. "He went down without bein' hit!"

"Foul my eye!" squawked the oily bird. "A blind man could tell he slipped, accidental."

We arose at the same time, me none the better for my fiasco. Slade took my left over his shoulder and hooked a left to the body. He followed this with a straight right to the mouth and a left hook to the side of the head. I clinched and clubbed him with my right to the ribs until the referee prodded us apart.

Again Slade managed to get me into a corner. You see, he was used to the dimensions whereas I, accustomed to a regular ring, kept forgetting about the size of the blasted pit. It seemed like with every movement I bumped my hip or shoulder or scraped my arms against the rough cement of the walls. To date, Slade hadn't a mark to show he'd been in a fight, except for the bruise on his ribs. What with his thumbing and his straight lefts, both my eyes were in a fair way to close, my lips were cut, and I was bunged up generally, but was not otherwise badly hurt.

I fought my way out of the corner, and the gong found us slugging toe to toe in the center of the pit, where I had the pleasure of staggering Bat with a left to the temple. Not an awful lot of action in that round; mostly clinching.

The third started like a whirlwind. At the tap of the gong Slade bounded from his end and was in mine before I could get up. He slammed me with a left and right that shook me clean to my toes, and ducked my left. He also ducked a couple of rights, and then rammed a left to my wind which bent me double. No doubt--this baby could hit!

I came up with a left swing to the head, and in a wild mix-up took four right and left hooks to land my right to the ribs. Slade grunted and tried to back-heel me, failing which he lowered his head and butted me in the belly, kicked me on the shin, and would have did more, likely, only I halted the proceedings temporarily by swinging an overhand right to the back of his neck which took the steam out of him for a minute.

We clinched, and I never saw a critter short of a octopus which could appear to have so many arms when clinching. He always managed to not only tie me up and render me helpless for the time being, but to stamp on my insteps, thumb me in the eye and pound the back of my neck with the edge of his hand. Add to this the fact that he frequently shoved me against the wall, and you can get a idea what kind of a bezark I was fighting. My superior weight and bulk did not have no advantage. What was needed was skill and speed, and the fact that Bat was somewhat smaller than me was an advantage to him.

Still, I was managing to hand out some I punishment. Near the end of that round Bat had a beautiful black eye and some more bruises on his ribs. Then it happened. I had plunged after him, swinging; he sidestepped out of the corner, and the next instant was left-jabbing me to death while I floundered along the wall trying to get set for a smash.

I swished a right to his body, and while I didn't think it landed solid, he staggered and dropped his hands slightly. I straightened out of my defensive crouch and cocked my right, and, simultaneous, I realized I had been took. Slade had tricked me. The minute I raised by chin in this careless manner, he beat me to the punch with a right that smashed my head back against the wall, laying open the scalp. Dazed and only partly conscious of what was going on I rebounded right into Slade, ramming my jaw flush into his left. Zam! At the same instant I hooked a trip-hammer right under his heart, and we hit the floor together.

Zowie! I could hear the yelling and cursing as if from a great distance, and the lights on the ceiling high above seemed dancing in a thick fog. All I knew was that I had to get back on my feet as quick as I could.

"One--two--three--four," the oily bird was counting over the both of us, "five--Bat, you blank-blank, get up!--Six--seven--Bat, blast it, get your feet under you!--eight--Juan, hit that gong! What kind of a timekeeper are you?"

"The round ain't over yet!" yelled the dip, seeing I had begun to get my legs under me.

"Who's refereein' this?" roared the oily bird, jerking out a .45. "Juan, hit that gong!--Nine!"

Juan hit the gong and Bat's seconds hopped down into the pit and dragged him to his end, where they started working over him. I crawled back to mine. Splash! The dip emptied a bucket of water over me. That freshened me up a lot.

"How you comin'?" he asked.

"Great!" said I, still dizzy. "I'll lay this bird like a rug in the next round! For honor and the love of a dame! 'Oh, the road to glory lay--'"

"I've seen 'em knocked even more cuckoo," said the dip, tearing off a cud of tobacco.

THE FOURTH! SLADE came up weakened, but with fire in his eye. I was all right, but my legs wouldn't work like they should. Slade was in far better condition. Seeing this, or probably feeling that he was weakening, he threw caution to the winds and rushed in to slug with me.

The crowd went crazy. Left-right-left-right! I was taking four to one, but mine carried the most steam. It couldn't last long at this rate.

The oily bird was yelling advice and dashing about the pit's edge like a lunatic. We went into a clinch, and he leaned over to prod us apart as usual. He leaned far over, and I don't know if he slipped or somebody shoved him. Anyway, he crashed down on top of us just as we broke and started slugging. He fell between us, stopped somebody's right with his chin, and flopped, face down--through for the night!

By mutual consent, Bat and me suspended hostilities, grabbed the fallen referee by his neck and the slack of his pants, and hove him up into the crowd. Then, without a word, we began again. The end was in sight.

Bat suddenly broke and backed away. I followed, swinging with both hands. Now I saw the wall was at his back. Ha! He couldn't duck now! I shot my right straight for his face. He dropped to his knees. Wham! My fist just cleared the top of his skull and crashed against the concrete wall.

I heard the bones shatter and a dark tide of agony surged up my arm, which dropped helpless at my side. Slade was up and springing for me, but the torture I was in made me forget all about him. I was nauseated, done up--out on my feet, if you get what I mean. He swung his left with everything he had--my foot slipped in some blood on the floor--his left landed high on the side of my skull instead of my jaw. I went down, but I heard him squawk and looked up to see him dancing and wringing his left hand.

The knockdown had cleared my brain somewhat. My hand was numb and not hurting so much, and I realized that Bat had broke his left hand on my skull like many a man has did. Fair enough! I came surging up, and Bat, with the light of desperation in his eyes, rushed in wide open, staking everything on one right swing.

I stepped inside it, sank my left to the wrist in his midriff, and brought the same hand up to his jaw. He staggered, his arms fell, and I swung my left flush to the button with everything I had behind it. Bat hit the floor.

About eight men shoved their snoots over the edge and started counting, the oily bird being still out. They wasn't all counting together, so somehow I managed to prop myself up against the wall, not wanting to make no mistake, until the last man had said "ten!" Then everything began to whirl, and I flopped down on top of Slade and went out like a candle.

LET'S PASS OVER the immediate events. I don't remember much about them anyhow. I slept until the middle of the next afternoon, and I know the only thing that dragged me out of the bed where the dip had dumped me was the knowledge that the *Sea Girl* sailed that night and that Raquel La Costa probably would be waiting for the victor--me.

Outside the joint where I first met her, who should I come upon but Bat Slade!

"Huh!" says I, giving him the once over. "Are you able to be out?"

"You ain't no beauty yourself," he retorted.

I admit it. My right was in a sling, both eyes was black, and I was generally cut and bruised. Still, Slade had no right to give himself airs. His left was all bandaged, he too had a black eye, and moreover his features was about as battered as mine. I hope it hurt him as much to move as it did me. But he had the edge on me in one way--he hadn't rubbed as much hide off against the walls.

"Where's that two hundred we bet?" I snarled.

"Heh, heh!" sneered he. "Try and get it! They told me I wasn't counted out officially. The referee didn't count me out. You didn't whip me."

"Let the money go, you dirty, yellow crook," I snarled, "but I whipped you, and I can prove it by thirty men. What you doin' here, anyway?"

"I come to see my girl."

"Your girl? What was we fightin' about last night?"

"Just because you had the sap's luck to knock me stiff don't mean Raquel chooses you," he answered savagely. "This time, she names the man she likes, see? And when she does, I want you to get out!"

"All right," I snarled. "I whipped you fair and can prove it. Come in here; she'll get a chance to choose between us, and if she don't pick the best man, why, I can whip you all over again. Come on, you--"

Saying no more, we kicked the door open and went on in. We swept the interior with a eagle glance, and then sighted Raquel sitting at a table, leaning on her elbows and gazing soulfully into the eyes of a handsome bird in the uniform of a Spanish naval officer.

We barged across the room and come to a halt at her table. She glanced up in some surprise, but she could not have been blamed had she failed to recognize us.

"Raquel," said I, "we went forth and fought for your fair hand just like you said. As might be expected, I won. Still, this incomprehensible bezark thinks that you might still have some lurkin' fondness for him, and he requires to hear from your own rosy lips that you love another--meanin' me, of course. Say the word and I toss him out. My ship sails tonight, and I got a lot to say to you."

"Santa Maria!" said Raquel. "What ees theese? What kind of a bizness is theese, you two tramps coming looking like theese and talking gibberish? Am I to blame eef two great tramps go pound each other's maps, ha? What ees that to me?"

"But you said--" I began, completely at sea, "you said, go fight and the best man--"

"I say, may the best man win! Bah! Did I geeve any promise? What do I care about Yankee tramps what make the fist-fight? Bah! Go home and beefsteak the eye. You insult me, talking to me in public with the punch' nose and bung' up face."

"Then you don't love either of us?" said Bat.

"Me love two gorillas? Bah! Here is my man--Don Jose y Balsa Santa Maria Gonzales."

She then gave a screech, for at that moment Bat and me hit Don Jose y Balsa Santa Maria Gonzales simultaneous, him with the right and me with the left. And then, turning our backs on the dumfounded Raquel, we linked arms and, stepping over the fallen lover, strode haughtily to the door and vanished from her life.

"AND THAT," SAID I, as we leaned upon the bar to which we had made our mutual and unspoke agreement, "ends our romance, and the glory road leads only to disappointment and hokum."

"Women," said Bat gloomily, "are the bunk."

"Listen," said I, remembering something, "how about that two hundred you owe me?"

"What for?"

"For knockin' you cold."

"Steve," said Bat, laying his hand on my shoulder in brotherly fashion, "you know I been intendin' to pay you that all along. After all, Steve, we are seamen together, and we have just been did dirt by a woman of another race. We are both American sailors, even if you are a harp, and we got to stand by each other. Let bygones be bygones, says I. The fortunes of war, you know. We fought a fair, clean fight, and you was lucky enough to win. Let's have one more drink and then part in peace an' amity."

"You ain't holdin' no grudge account of me layin' you out?" I asked, suspiciously.

"Steve," said Bat, waxing oratorical, "all men is brothers, and the fact that you was lucky enough to crown me don't alter my admiration and affection. Tomorrow we will be sailin' the high seas, many miles apart. Let our thoughts of each other be gentle and fraternal. Let us forgit old feuds and old differences. Let this be the dawn of a new age of brotherly affection and square dealin'."

"And how about my two hundred?"

"Steve, you know I am always broke at the end of my shore leave. I give you my word I'll pay you them two hundred smackers. Ain't the word of a comrade enough? Now le's drink to our future friendship and the amicable relations of the crews of our respective ships. Steve, here's my hand! Let this here shake be a symbol of our friendship. May no women ever come between us again! Good-bye, Steve! Good luck! Good luck!"

And so saying, we shook and turned away. That is, I turned and then whirled back as quick as I could--just in time to duck the right swing he'd started the minute my back was turned, and to knock him cold with a bottle I snatched off the bar.

THE END

Contents

THE SIGN OF THE SNAKE

By Robert E. Howard

I was ready for trouble. Canton's narrow waterfront streets were still and shadowy in that hour before dawn when I left the docks. The guttering street lamps gave little light. My bulldog, Bill, bristled suddenly and began to rumble in his throat. There was a rattle of feet on the cobblestones down an alley to the right. Then the sound of a heavy fall, scuffling, a strangled scream.

Plainly it was none of my business. But I quickened my pace and dashing around the corner, nearly fell over a writhing, struggling mass on the cobblestones. The dim light of a street lamp showed me what was going on. Two men fought there in deadly silence. One was a slim young Chinese in European clothes. Down on his back in the muck, he was. Kneeling on his chest was a slant-eyed devil in native riggings. He was big and lean, with a face like a Taoist devil-mask. With one talon-like hand, he clutched the throat of the smaller man. A knife flashed in his other hand.

I recognized him for what he was--one of the bloody hatchet-men the big tongs and secret societies use for their dirty work. I followed my natural instinct and knocked him senseless with a smashing right hook behind the ear. He stretched out without a twitch and the young Chinese sprang up, gasping and wild eyed.

"Thank you, my friend," he gurgled in perfect English. "I owe my life to you. Here, take this..." And he tried to stuff a wad of banknotes into my hand.

I drew back. "You owe me nothing," I growled. "I'd have done as much for any man."

"Then please accept my humble and sincere thanks," he exclaimed, seizing my hand. "You are an American, are you not? What is your name?"

"I'm Steve Costigan, first mate of the trading vessel Panther," I answered.

"I will not forget," he said. "I will repay you some day, as my name is Yotai T'sao. But now I must not linger. This is my one chance of escape. If I can get aboard the English ship that is anchored in the bay, I am safe. But I must go before this beast comes to. Best that you go too. May fortune attend you. But beware of the Yo Thans."

The next instant he was racing down the street at full speed. Watching him in amazement, I saw him sprint onto the docks and dive off, without the slightest pause. I heard the splash as he hit and a little later I saw, in the growing gray light, a widening ripple aiming toward the British S.S. Marquis, which lay out in the bay. I left off wondering what it could mean, when the hatchet-man scrambled uncertainly to his feet. More or less ironically, I said: "Well, my bully boy, give me the low-down on this business, will you?"

His answer was a look of such diabolic hatred as to almost send cold shivers down my spine. He limped away into the shadows. I dismissed the whole affair from my mind and went on down the street.

About sun-up I decided I would get a little sleep in preparation for the day. It was my first shore leave in weeks, and I was determined to make the most of it. I turned into a seamen's boarding house kept by a Eurasian called Diego, got a room and turned in.

I WAS WAKENED BY BILL'S growling. He was clawing at the locked door and looking up at the transom, which was open. Then I saw something lying on my chest--a piece of stiff paper, rolled into a dart-shaped wad. I unrolled it, but there were no words on it, either English or Chinese, just a picture portraying a coiled snake, somewhat resembling a cobra. That was all.

Somewhat puzzled, I rose and dressed and shouted for Diego. When he came I said: "Look, Diego. Someone threw this through the transom onto my chest. Do you know what the meaning of it is."

He took a single look. Then he leaped back with a shriek: "Yo Than. Death. It's the murder sign of the Yo Thans."

"What do you mean?" I growled. "Who are these Yo Thans?"

"A Chinese secret society," gasped Diego, white and shaking like a leaf. "International criminals--murderers. Three times have I seen men receive the sign of the snake. Each time he who received it dies before the sun rose again. Get back to your ship. Hide, stay aboard until she sails. Maybe you can escape."

"Skulk aboard my ship like a cringing rat?" I growled. "I, who am known as a fighting man in every Asiatic port? I've never run or hidden from any man yet. Tell me, who is Yotai T'sao?"

But Diego was gripped by the yellow hand of fear.

"I'll tell you nothing," he screamed. "I'm risking my life talking to you. Get out, quick. You mustn't stay here. I can't have another murder in my house. Go, please, Steve."

"All right," I snapped. "Don't burst a blood-vessel, Diego. I'm going."

In disgust, I stalked forth in quest of food. While I ate and Bill had his scoffings from a panikin on the floor, I reviewed the situation and had the uncomfortable feeling that I had somehow blundered into the affairs of some mysterious gang of Oriental cut-throats. Under the bland outer surface of the Orient run dark and mysterious currents of plot and intrigue, unknown to white men--unless one unluckily goes beyond his depth in native affairs and is caught by some such deadly undertow.

In that case.... Well, it is no uncommon thing for a white man to disappear, to simply vanish as into thin air. Perhaps he is never heard of again. Perhaps his knife-riddled body is found floating in the river, or cast up on the beach. In either event, only silence rewards investigations. China never speaks. Like a vast, sleeping yellow giant she preserves her ancient and mysterious silence inviolate.

Finishing my meal, I sauntered out into the streets again, with their filth and glamor, sordidity and allure going hand in hand; throngs of Orientals buying and selling, bargaining in their monotonous sing-song, sailors of all nations rolling through the crowds....

I began to have a queer feeling that I was being followed. Again and again I wheeled quickly and scanned the crowd, but in that teeming swarm of yellow slant-eyed faces it was impossible to tell whether anyone was trailing me. Yet the sensation persisted.

AS THE DAY WORE ON I found myself in Froggy Ladeau's American Bar, at the edge of the waterfront district. There I spied a man I knew--an Englishman named Wells, who had some sort of a government job. I sat down at his table. "Wells," I said, "did you ever hear of a man named Yotai T'sao?"

"That I have," he answered. "But I fear the blighter's been potted off. He's been working with the government trying to get evidence against a certain gang of dangerous criminals and last night he disappeared."

"He's all right," I replied. "I saw him swim out to an English ship which weighed anchor shortly after sun-up. But who are these criminals?"

"Bad blokes," said Wells, taking a long swig of ale. "An organized society. It's rumored their chief is a coral button mandarin. They specialize in murder and blackmail, to say nothing of smuggling, gun-running and jewel-stealing. Of late they've been tampering with bigger things--governmental secrets. The Yo Thans, they're called. The government would jolly well like to lay hands on them. But you've no idea what snaky customers they are. They're here, there and everywhere. We know they exist, but we can't nab the beggars. If the natives would talk--but they won't, and there's China for you. Even victims of the society won't blab. So what can we do?

"But the government has gotten a promise of assistance from the most Honorable and Eminent Yun Lai Kao. You've heard of him?"

"Sure," I nodded. "Sort of a wealthy Oriental recluse and philanthropist, isn't he?"

"That and more. The natives look on him as a sort of god. He has almost unbelievable power in Canton, though he's never bothered to wield it very much. He's a philosopher--too busy considering abstract ideals and principles to bother with material things. He seldom ever appears in public. It was the very deuce to get him interested enough in sordid reality to

promise to help the government scotch a gang of thugs. That shows, too, how helpless the government really is in this matter, when it has to call on private individuals. The only argument that moved him was the assurance that the Yo Thans are swiftly assuming a political importance, and were likely to start a civil war in China."

"Is it that important?" I asked, startled.

"Believe me, it is. These things grow fast. The unknown power, the nameless man, directing the activities of these thugs, is ruthless and clever as the devil, quite capable of raising the red flag of anarchy if he gets a little more power. China is a powder keg, ready for some unscrupulous rogue to set it off. No conservative Chinese wants that to happen. That's why Yun Lai Kao agreed to help. And with his power over the natives, I believe the government will lay the Yo Thans by the heels."

"What sort of a man is this mandarin, Yun Lai Kao?" I asked. "A venerable, white bearded patriarch, with ten-inch finger nails encased in gold and a load of Confucian epigrams?"

"Not by a long shot," answered Wells. "He doesn't look the type of a mystic at all. A clean-cut chap in middle life, he is, with a firm jaw and gimlet eyes--a graduate from Oxford too, by the way. Should have been a scientist or a soldier. Some queer quirk in his Oriental mind turned him to philosophy."

A COMMOTION BURST out in the bar. Ladeau was having some kind of a row with a big sailor. Suddenly the sailor hauled off and hit Froggy between the eyes. Ladeau crashed down on a table, with beer mugs and seltzer water bottles spilling all over him, and began yelling for Big John Clancy, his American bouncer. Hearing this, the sailor took to his heels. But Ladeau, floundering around in the ruins of the table with his eyes still full of stars, didn't see that. Big John came barging in and Froggy yelled: "Throw him out! Beat him up! Give him the bum's rush! Out with him, John!"

"Out with who?" roared Clancy, glaring around and doubling up his huge fists.

"That blasted sailor," bawled Froggy. Clancy then made a natural mistake. As it happened, I was the only sailor in the bar. I had just turned back to speak to Wells, when to my outraged amazement, I felt myself gripped by what appeared to be a gorilla.

"Out with you, my bully," growled Big John, hauling me out of my chair and trying to twist me around and get a hammerlock on my right arm.

I might have explained the situation, but my nerves were on edge already. And being mate on a tough tramp trader makes a man handier with his fists than with his tongue. I acted without conscious thought and jolted him loose from me with a left hook under the heart that nearly upset him. It would have finished an ordinary man, but Big John was built like a battleship. He gave a deafening roar and plunged headlong on me, locking both of his mighty arms around me. We went to the floor together, smashing a few chairs in our fall. As we cursed and wrestled, his superior weight enabled him to get on top of me.

At that instant my bulldog Bill landed square between Clancy's shoulders. By some chance his jaws missed Big John's bull neck, but ripped out the whole back of his coat. Big John gave a yell of fright and with a desperate heave of his enormous shoulders, shook Bill off and jumped up. I arose, too, and caught Bill just as he was soaring for Clancy's throat. I pushed him back, ordering him to keep out of it, and then turned toward Big John, who was snorting and blowing like a grampus in his wrath.

I was seeing red myself.

"Come on, you son-of-a-seahorse," I snarled. "If it's fighting you want, I'll give you a belly-full."

At that he gave a terrible howl and came for me, crazy-eyed. Ladeau ran between us, dancing and howling like a burnt cat.

"Git away, Froggy," bellowed Big John, swinging his huge arms like windmills. "Git outa the way! I'm goin' to smear this salt-water tramp all over the joint."

"Wait a minute, please, John," screamed Ladeau, pushing against Clancy's broad chest with both hands. "This here is Steve Costigan of the Panther."

"What do I care who he is?" roared Big John. "Git outa the way!"

"You can't fight in here," Froggy howled desperately. "If you two tangles here, you'll tear the joint down. I can't afford it. Anyway, he ain't the man that hit me."

"Well, he's the swine that hit me," rumbled Big John.

"Get aside, Froggy," I snapped. "Let us have it out. It's the only way."

"No, no!" shrieked Ladeau. "It cost me five hundred dollars to repair the place after you throwed Red McCoy out, John, and I seen Costigan lick Bully Dawson in a saloon in Hong Kong. They had to rebuild the joint. Come down on the beach, back of the Kago Tong warehouses and fight it out where you can't bust nothin' but each others' noses."

"A jolly good idea," put in Wells. "You fellows don't want to make a spectacle of yourselves here, in a respectable district, and have the police on you. If you must fight, why don't you do as Ladeau says?"

Big John folded his mighty arms and glared at me, as he growled: "Fair enough. I ain't the man to do useless damage. I'll be at the beach as quick as I can get there. Get some of your crew, Costigan, so as to have fair play all around. And get there as soon as you can."

"Good enough," I snapped. Turning on my heel, I left the bar. Oh, it seems foolish, no doubt, grown men fighting like school boys. But reputations grow. A man in the ordinary course of duty acquires the name of a fighter and before he knows it, his pride is forcing him into fights to maintain it.

HOPING TO FIND SOME of the Panther's crew, I went down the narrow waterfront streets. My efforts met with no success. As a last resort, I thought of a shop down a little side street in the native quarter, run by a Chinese named Yuen Lao, who sells trinkets such as sailors buy in foreign ports to give to their sweethearts.

With the thought that I might find some of my friends there, I turned into the obscure, winding street. I noticed that there were even fewer people traversing it than usual. An old man with a cage full of canary birds, a coolie pulling a cart, a fish peddler or so--that was all.

I saw the shop just ahead of me. Then, with a vicious zing--something came humming through the air. It hissed by my neck as I instinctively ducked. It thudded into the wall at my shoulder--a long thin bladed knife, stuck a good three inches into the hard boards and quivering from the force of the throw. Had it hit me, it would have gone clear through me.

I looked across the street, but all I could see was the blank fronts of a row of vacant shops. The windows all seemed to be boarded up, but I knew that the knife had come from one of them. The Chinese on the street paid no attention to me at all. They went about their affairs as if they seen nothing, not even me. Little use to ask them if they saw the knife-thrower. China never speaks.

And the thought of the Yo Thans came back to me with a shudder. It had been no idle threat, that cryptic sign of the snake. They had struck and missed, but they would strike again and again until they opened the Doors of Doom for Steve Costigan. Cold sweat broke out on me. This was like fighting a cobra in the dark.

I turned into Yuen Lao's shop, with its shelves of jade idols, coral jewelry and tiny ivory elephants. A bronze Buddha squatted on a raised dais, its inscrutable face veiled by the smoke of burning joss sticks. Only Yuen Lao, tall and lean, with a mask-like face, stood in the shop.

I turned to leave, when he came quickly from behind his counter.

"You are Costigan, mate of the Panther?" said he in good English. I nodded, and he continued in a lowered voice. "You are in danger. Do not ask me how I know. These things have a way of getting about among the Chinese. Listen to me. I would be your friend. And you need friends. Without my aid, you will be dead before dawn."

"Oh, I don't know," I growled, involuntarily tensing my biceps. "I've never been in a jamb yet that I couldn't slug my way out of."

"Your strength will not help you." He shook his head. "Your shipmates cannot aid you. Your enemies will strike secretly and subtly. Their sign is the cobra. And, like the cobra, they kill swiftly, silently, giving their victim no chance to defend himself."

I began to feel wild and desperate, like a wolf in a trap, as the truth of his words came home to me.

"How am I going to fight men who won't come into the open?" I snarled, helplessly, knotting my fists until the knuckles showed white. "Get them in front of me and I'll battle the whole gang. But I can't smoke them out of their hives."

"You must listen to me," said Yuen Lao. "I will save you. I have no cause to love the Yo Thans."

"But why have they turned on me?" I asked in perplexity.

"You prevented their chief hatchet-man from slaying Yotai T'sao," said he. "Yotai T'sao was doomed, tried and sentenced by their most dread tribunal. He had intrigued his way into their secret meeting places and councils, to get evidence to use against them in the court. For he was a spy of the government. His life was forfeit and not even the government could save him from the vengeance of the Yo Thans. Last night he sought to escape and was trapped by Yaga, the hatchet-man who hunted him down and caught him almost on the wharves. There had Yotai T'sao died but for you. Today he is far at sea and safe. But the vengeance of the Yo Thans is turned upon you. And you are doomed."

"A nice mess," I muttered.

"But I am your friend," continued Yuen Lao. "And I hate the Yo Thans. I am more than I seem."

"Are you a government spy too?" I asked.

"Shh!" He laid his long finger to his lips and glanced around quickly and warily. "The very walls have ears in Canton. But I will tell you this. There is but one man in Canton who can save you, who will, if I ask him, speak the word that will make even the Yo Thans stay their hands."

"Yun Lai Kao," I muttered.

Yuen Lao started and peered at me intensely for an instant. Then he seemed to nod, almost imperceptibly.

"Tonight I will take you to--this--this man. Let him remain nameless, for the present. You must come alone, hinting your errand to no one. Trust me!"

"It's not many hours till sundown," I muttered. "When and where shall I meet you?"

"Come to me alone, in the Alley of Bats, as soon as it is well dark. And go now, quickly. We must not be seen too much together. And be wary, lest the Yo Thans strike again before we meet."

AS I LEFT THE SHOP I HAD a distinct feeling of relief. I had not been inclined to trust Yuen Lao's mere word, but his evident connection with the mighty and mysterious mandarin, Yun Lai Kao, together with what Wells had said of the mandarin, reassured me. If I could evade the hatred of the unknown murderers until dark....

Suddenly, with a curse of annoyance, I remembered that at this very moment I was supposed to be on my way to the beach to fight Big John Clancy with my naked fists. Well, it must be done. Even if I died that night, I must keep that appointment. I could not go out with men thinking I dared not meet Big John in open fight. Besides, the thought came to me, that was the safest place in Canton for me--on the open beach, surrounded by men of my own race. The problem lay in getting there alive. I made no further attempts to find the crew, but set off at a rapid walk, keeping my eye alert and passing alleyways very warily. Bill sensed my caution and kept close to me, walking stiff-legged, rumbling deep and ominously in his throat.

But I arrived unharmed at the strip of open beach behind the big warehouses. Big John was already there, stripped to the waist, growling his impatience and flexing his mighty arms. Froggy Ladeau was there and half a dozen others, all friends of Clancy. Wells was not there. I couldn't help wondering about that.

"I couldn't find any of my friends, Clancy," I said abruptly. "But I'm not afraid of not getting fair play. I've always heard of you as a square shooter. My dog won't interfere. I'll make him understand that. But Froggy can hold him if you'd rather."

"You've kept me waitin'," growled Big John. "Let's get goin'."

It's like a dream now, that fight on the Kago Tong beach. Men still talk about it, from Vladivostok to Sumatra, wherever the roving brotherhood gathers to spin old yarns over their glasses.

"No kickin', gougin', or bitin'," Big John growled. "Let it be a white man's fight."

And a white man's fight it was, there on the naked beach, both of us stripped to the waist, with no weapons but our naked fists. What a man John Clancy was! I was six feet tall and weighed 190 pounds. He stood six feet one and three quarter inches and he weighed 230 pounds--all bone and muscle it was, with never an ounce of fat on him. His legs were like tree

trunks, his arms looked as if they had been molded out of iron, and his chest was arching and broad as a door. A massive, corded neck upheld a lion-like head and a face like a Roman senator's.

I weighed my chances as we approached each other, I and this giant who had never known defeat. In sheer strength and bulk he had the edge. But I was strong, too, in those days, and I knew that I was the faster man and the more scientific boxer.

He came at me like a charging bull and I met him half-way. Mine was the skill or fortune to get in the first punch, a smashing left hook square to the jaw. It stopped him dead in his tracks. But he roared and came on again, shaking his lion-like head. I went under his gigantic swings to rip both hands to his body. I was fast enough and skilled enough to avoid his mightiest blows for a time, but let it not be thought that I back-pedalled and ran, or fought a merely defensive fight. Men do not fight that way on the beach--or anywhere in the raw edges of the world.

I stood up to him and he stood up to me. My head was singing with his blows and the blood trickled from my mouth. Blue welts showed on his ribs and one of his eyes was closing.

He loomed like a giant over me as I ducked his terrible swing. It whistled over my head and my glancing return tore the skin on his ribs. Gad, his right hand whistled past my face like a white hot brick, and when he landed he shook me from head to heel. But my battles with men and with the Seven Seas had toughened me into steel and *Whale*-bone endurance. I stood up to it.

I was landing the more and cleaner blows. Again and again I had him floundering, but always he came back with a crashing, bone-crushing attack I could not altogether avoid. I bulled in close, ducking inside his wide looping smashes, and ripped both hands to body and head. I had the better at the infighting. But, staggering under a machine-gun fire of short hooks and uppercuts, he suddenly ripped up an uppercut of his own. Gad, my head snapped back as if my neck was broken. Only blind instinct made me fall into Big John and clinch before he could strike again. And I held on with a grizzly grip not even he could break, until my head cleared.

The onlookers had formed a tense ring about us. Their nails bit into their clenching palms and their breaths came in swift gasps. There was no other sound save the scruff of our feet on the beach, the thud and smash of savagely driven blows, an occasional grunt, and Bill's low, incessant growling.

CLANCY'S HUGE FIST banged against my eye, half closing it. My right crashed full into his mouth and he spit out a shattered tooth.

My left hook was doing most of the damage. Big John was too fond of using his right. He drew it back too far before he let it go. Again and again I beat him to the punch with my left, and I made raw beef out of the right side of his jaw. Sometimes he would duck clumsily and my hook would smash on his ear, which was a beautiful cauliflower before the fight was over. But I was not unmarked.

Things floated in a red mist. I saw Big John's face before me, with the lips smashed and pulped, one eye closed and blood streaming from his nose. My arms were growing heavy, my feet slow. I stumbled as I side-stepped. The taste of blood was in my mouth. How long we had stood toe to toe, exchanging terrific smashes, I did not know. It seemed like ages. In chaotic, flashing glances, I saw the strained, white, tense faces of the onlookers.

From somewhere smashed Big John's thundering right hand. Square on the jaw it crashed. I felt myself falling into an abyss of blackness, shot with a million gleams and darts of light. I struck the beach hard, and the jolt of the fall jarred me back into my senses. I looked up, shaking the blood and sweat out of my eyes, and saw Big John looming above me. He was swaying, wide-braced on his mighty legs. His great, hairy chest was heaving as his breath came in panting gasps. I dragged myself to my feet. The knowledge that he was in as bad a way as I, nerved my weary muscles.

"You must be made outa iron," he croaked, lurching toward me. I took a deep breath and braced myself to meet his right. The blow was a glancing one and I blasted both hands under his heart. He reeled like a ship in rough weather, but came back with a left swing that staggered me. Again he swung his right, like a club. I ducked and straightened with a left hook that cracked on the side of his head. But it was high. I felt my knuckles crumple. His knees buckled and I put all I had behind my right. Like a swinging maul, it smashed on Big John Clancy's jaw. And he swayed and fell.

I felt men about me, heard their awed congratulations, felt Bill's cold wet nose shoved into my hand. Froggy was staring down at the senseless form of Big John in a sort of unbelieving horror.

Then came memory of Yuen Lao and the Yo Thans. I shook the blood and sweat from my eyes, pulling away from the men who were pawing over me. The sun was setting. If I expected to see that sun rise again, I must meet Yuen Lao and go with him to Yun Lai Kao.

Snatching up my clothes, I tore away from the amazed men and reeled drunkenly up the beach. Out of sight of the group, I dropped from sheer exhaustion. It was minutes before I could rise and go on.

My mind cleared as I walked, and my head ceased to sing from Big John's smashes. I was fiercely weary, sore and bruised. It seemed impossible for me to get my wind back. My left hand was swollen and sore, and the skin was torn on my right knuckles. One of my eyes was partly closed, my lips were smashed and cut, my ribs battered black and blue. But the cool wind from the sea helped me, and with the recuperative powers of youth and an iron frame, I regained my wind, shook off some of my weariness and felt fairly fit as I neared the Alley of Bats, in the growing darkness.

I FOUND TIME TO WONDER why the Yo Thans had not struck again. There was something unnatural about the whole business, it seemed to me. Since that knife had been flung at me earlier in the day, I had had no sign at all of the existence of that murderous gang.

I came unharmed to the narrow, stinking rat-den in the heart of the native quarter which the Chinese call, for some unknown reason, the Alley of Bats. It was pitch-dark there. I felt cold shivers creep up and down my spine. Suddenly a figure loomed up beside me and Bill snarled. In my nervousness I almost struck out at the figure, when Yuen Lao's voice halted me. He was like a ghost in the deep shadows. Bill growled savagely.

"Come with me," whispered Yuen Lao. And I groped after him. Down that alley he led me. Across another even darker and nastier. Through a wide shadowy courtyard. Down a narrow side street, deep in the heart of what I knew must be a mysterious native quarter seldom seen by white men. Down another alley and into a dimly lighted courtyard. He stopped before a heavy arched doorway.

As he rapped upon it, I realized the utter silence, eeriness and brooding mystery of the place. Truly, I was in the very heart of ancient and enigmatic China, as surely as if I had been five hundred miles in the interior. The very shadows seemed lurking perils. I shuddered involuntarily.

Three times Yuen Lao rapped. Then the door swung silently inward, to disclose a veritable well of darkness. I could not even see who had opened the door. Yuen Lao entered first, motioning me to follow. I stepped in, Bill crowding close after me. The door slammed between us, leaving the dog on the outside. I heard the click of a heavy lock. Bill was clawing and whining outside the door. And then the lights came on. While I blinked like a blinded owl, I heard a low throaty chuckle that sent involuntary shivers up and down my spine. My eyes became accustomed to the light. I saw that I was in a big room, furnished in true Oriental style. The walls were covered with velvet and silken hangings, ornamented with silver dragons worked into the fabric. A faint scent of some Eastern incense or perfume pervaded the atmosphere.

Ranged about me were ten big, dark, wicked-faced men, naked except for loin-cloths. Malays they were, tougher and stronger than any Chinese. On a kind of tiger-skin covered dais across the room an unmistakable Chinaman sat on a lacquer-worked chair. He was clad in robes worked in dragons like those on the hangings, and his keen piercing eyes gleamed through holes in the mask which hid his features. But it was the figure which stood image-like beside the lacquered chair which drew and held my gaze. It was the hatchet-man from whom I had rescued Yotai T'sao on the wharfs that morning.

In a sickening instant I realized that I was trapped. Blind fool that I was, to walk into the snare. A child might have suspected that mask-faced snake of a Yuen Lao. He too was a Yo Than, I realized. And he had not brought me to the Honorable and Benevolent Yun Lai Kao. He had brought me before the nameless and mysterious chief of the Yo Thans, to die like a butchered sheep.

And there he stood before me, Yuen Lao, smiling evilly. I acted instinctively. Square into his mouth I crashed my right before he could move. His teeth caved in and he dropped like a log.

The masked man on the dais laughed. And in his laughter sounded all the ancient and heartless cruelty of the Orient.

"The white barbarian is strong and fierce," he mocked. "But this night, my bold savage, you shall learn what it is to interfere with the plans of Kang Kian of the Yo Thans. Fool, to pit your paltry powers against mine. You, with the striding arrogance of your breed.

"Know, fool, before you die, that the ancient dragon that is China is waking slowly beneath the feet of the foreign dogs, and their doom is not far off. Soon I, Kang Kian, master of the Yo Thans, will come from the shadows, raise the dragon banner of revolution and mount again the ancient throne of my ancestors. Your fate will be the fate of all your race who oppose me. I laugh at you. Do you deem yourself important because the future emperor of China deigns to see personally to your removal? Bah! I merely crush you as I crush the gnat that annoys me."

Then he spoke shortly to the Malays: "Kill him."

THEY CLOSED IN ON me silently, drawing knives, strangling cords and loaded cudgels. It looked like trail's end for Steve Costigan. I, with two black eyes, ribs pounded black and blue, one hand broken, from one fierce fight, pitted against these trained killers. They approached warily. Bill, outside, sensing my peril, began to roar and hurl himself against the bolted door. I tensed myself for one last rush. The thought flashed through me that perhaps Bill would escape my fate. I hoped that it might be so.

I drew back, tensed and watchful as a hawk. The ring was closing in on me. The nearest Malay edged within reach. He raised his knife for the death leap. I smashed my heel to his knee and distinctly heard the bone snap. He went down. I leaped across him and hit that closing ring as a plunging fullback hits a line.

Cudgels swished past my head. I felt a knife lick along my ribs. Then I was through, bounding across the room and onto the dais.

Kang Kian screamed. He jerked a pistol from his robes. How he missed me at that range, I cannot say. The powder flash burned my face, but before he could fire again I knocked him head over heels with a blow that was backed with the power of desperation. The pistol flew out of reach.

The hatchet-man was on me like a clawing cat. He drove a long knife deep into my chest muscles. Then I got in a solid smash. His jaw was brittle. It crunched like an egg-shell. I swung his limp form up bodily above my head and hurled him into the clump of Malays who came leaping up on the dais, bowling over the front line like ten-pins. The rest came at me.

Carried beyond myself on a red wave of desperate battle fury, I caught up the lacquered chair and swung it with all my strength. Squarely it landed and I felt my victim's shoulder bone give way. But the chair flew into splinters. Then a whistling cudgel stroke laid my scalp open and knocked me to my knees. The whole pack piled on me, hacking and slashing. But their very numbers hindered them. Somehow, I managed to shake them off momentarily and stagger up.

A big Chinaman I had not seen before bobbed up from nowhere and got a bone-breaking wrestling hold on my right arm. A giant Malay was thrusting for my life. I could not wrench my right free. So, setting my teeth, I slugged him with my broken left. I went sick and dizzy from the pain of it, but the Malay dropped like a sack.

But they downed me again, as my berserk fighting frenzy waned. They swarmed over me and forced me down by sheer weight of man-power. I heard Kang Kian yelling to them with the rage of a fiend in his voice, and a big dark-skinned devil raised his knife and drove it down for my heart. Somehow, I managed to throw up my left arm and take the blade through it. That arm felt like I'd bathed in molten lead.

Then I heard the door crash and splinter. A familiar voice roared like a high sea. And something like a white cannon-ball hit the clump of natives on top of me.

The press slackened as the group flew apart. I reeled up, sick, dizzy and weak from loss of the blood that was spurting from me in half a dozen places. As in a daze, I saw Bill leaping and tearing at dark, howling figures which fell over each other trying to get away. And I saw a white giant ploughing through them as a battleship goes through breakers.

Big John Clancy!

I saw him seize a Malay in each hand, by the neck, crack their heads together and throw them into a corner. A dusky giant ran in, lunging upward with a stroke meant to disembowel, only to be stretched senseless by one blow of Big John's mighty fist. The big Chinaman--a wrestler, by his looks--got a headlock on Clancy. But Big John broke the hold, wheeled and threw the wrestler clear over his shoulders, head over heels. The Chinaman hit on his head and he didn't get up.

That was enough for the Yo Thans. They scattered like a flock of birds, all except Kang Kian, the masked lord. He sprang for the fallen pistol. Before he could reach it, Bill, jaws already streaming red, dragged him down. One fearful scream broke from the Yo Than's yellow lips and then Bill's iron jaws tore out his throat.

BIG JOHN CAME QUICKLY toward me. "By golly, Costigan," he rumbled, "you look like you been through a sawmill. Here, lemme tie up some of them stabs before you bleed to death. You've lost a gallon of blood already. We got to git you where you can git dressed right. But for the time bein' we'll see can we stop the bleedin'."

He ripped strips from his shirt and began to bandage me. Bill climbed all over me, wagging his stump of a tail and licking my hand.

I gazed at Big John in amazement. I had thought my own vitality unusual, but Big John's endurance was beyond belief. He looked as if he'd been mauled by a gorilla. I was astounded to realize the extent to which I had punished him in our battle. Yet he seemed almost as fresh and fit as ever. My smashes which had blackened his eyes, smashed his lips, ripped his ears, shattered some of his teeth and laid open his jaw, had battered him down and out, but had not sapped the vast reservoir of his vitality. I had merely weakened him momentarily and knocked him out, that was all, and accomplishing that feat had taken more of my strength than it had his.

"I supposed you'd be laid up for a week after our fight," I said bluntly.

He snorted. "You must think I'm effeminate. I wasn't out but a few minutes. And when I'd got back my breath, I was ready to go on with the fight. Of course I'm kinda stiff and sore and tired-like, right now, but that amounts to nothing.

"When I'd got my bearin's I looked around for you. Froggy and them had a hard time convincin' me that I'd been licked, for the first time in my life. I'll swear, I still don't see how it could of happened. Anyway, I started right out to find you and take you apart, because I was mighty near blind mad. A coolie had seen you go into the Alley of Bats and I followed, not long behind you. I know Canton better'n most white men, but I got clean tangled up in all them alley-ways and courtyards.

"Then I heard your dog makin' a big racket. I knowed it was yours, because they ain't but one dog in China with a voice like his. So I come and found him roarin' and plungin' at the door and I heard the noise inside. So knowin' you must be in some kind of a jamb, I just up and busted in. Who was them thugs, anyhow?"

I told him quickly about Yotai T'sao and the Yo Thans. He growled: "I mighta knowed it. I've heard of 'em. I bet they won't put no snake sign on no more Americans very soon. Come on, let's get outa here."

"I don't know how to thank you, Clancy," I said. "You certainly saved my hide...."

"Aw, don't thank me," he grunted. "I couldn't see them mutts bump off a white man. And you'd sure give 'em a tussle by yourself. Naw, don't thank me. Remember I was lookin' for you to beat you up."

"Well," said I, "I hate to fight a man whose saved my life, but if you're set on it..."

He laughed gustily and slapped me on the back. "Thunderation, Steve, I wouldn't hit a man which has just stopped as many knives as you have. Anyway, I'm beginnin' to like you. Who's this?"

A tall man in European clothes stepped suddenly into the doorway, with a revolver in one hand.

"Wells!" I exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Following a tip-off I got earlier in the evening," he said crisply. "I got wind of a secret session of the Yo Thans to be held here."

"So you are a Secret Service man after all," I said slowly. "If I'd known that, I might not have all these knife-stabs in my hide."

"I've been trailing the Yo Thans for some time," he answered. "Working with special powers invested in me by British and Chinese authorities. Whose this dead man?"

"He called himself Kang Kian and boasted that he was the mysterious lord of the Yo Thans and the next emperor of China," I answered, with an involuntary shudder, as I glanced at the grisly havoc Bill's ripping fangs had wrought. Wells' eyes blazed. He stepped forward and tore away the blood stained mask, revealing the smooth yellow face and clean-cut aristocrat features of a middle-aged China-man.

Wells recoiled with an exclamation.

"My word! Can it be possible! No wonder he delayed the aid he promised the government, and only promised, I can see now, to avert suspicion. And no wonder he was able to keep his true identity a secret. Clancy, Costigan, this is the Honorable and Eminent Yun Lai Kao."

"What, the philosopher and philanthropist?" Clancy, who knew Canton, was even more amazed than I.

Wells nodded slowly. "What strange quirk in his nature led him along this path?" he said half to himself. "What a mind he had. What heights he might have risen to, but for that one twist in his soul. Who can explain it?"

Clancy, who knew the Orient, seemed to be groping for words to frame a thought.

"China," he said, "is China. And there's no use in a white man tryin' to figger her out."

Aye, China is China--vast, aloof, inscrutable, the Sphynx of the nations.

THE END

Contents

THE SLUGGER'S GAME

By Robert E. Howard

I WAS BROODING over my rotten luck in the Sweet Dreams bar on the Hong Kong waterfront, when in come that banana peel on the steps of progress, Smoky Jones. I ain't got no use for Smoky, and he likes me just about as much. But he is broad-minded, as he quickly showed.

"Quick!" quoth he. "Lemme have fifty bucks, Steve."

"Why shouldst I loan you fifty smackers?" I demanded.

"I got a sure-fire tip," he yipped, jumping up and down with impatience. "A hundred-to-one shot which can't lose! You'll get back your dough tomorrer. C'mon, kick in."

"If I had fifty bucks," I returned bitterly, "do you think I'd be wasting my time in a port which don't appreciate no fistic talent?"

"What?" hollered Smoky. "No fifty bucks? After all I've did for you?"

"Well, I can't help it if these dopey promoters won't gimme a fight, can I?" I said fiercely. "Fifty bucks! Fifty bucks would get me to Singapore, where I can always talk myself into a scrap. I'm stuck here with my white bulldog, Mike, and can't even get a ship to sign on. If I don't scram away from here soon, I'll be on the beach, and you demands fifty bucks!"

A number of men at the bar was listening to our altercation with great interest, and one of 'em, a big, tough-looking guy, bust into a loud guffaw, and said: "Blimey! If the regular promoters turn you down, mate, why don't you try Li Yun?"

"What d'you mean?" I demanded suspiciously.

All the others was grinning like jassacks eating prickly pears.

"Well," he said, with a broad smirk, "Li Yun runs a small menagerie to cover his real business which is staging animal fights, like mongooses and cobras, and pit-terriers, and game-cocks. He's got a big gorilla he ought to sign you up with. I'd like to see the bloody brawl myself; with that pan of yours, it'd be like twin brothers fighting."

"Lissen here, you," I said, rising in righteous wrath--I never did like a limey much anyhow--"I may have a mug like a gorilla, but I figger your'n could be improved some--like this!"

And so saying, I rammed my right fist as far as it would go into his mouth. He reeled and come back bellowing like a typhoon. We traded some lusty swats and then clinched and went head-long into the bar, which splintered at our impact, and the swinging lamp fell down from the ceiling. It busted on the floor, and you should of heard them fellers holler when the burning ile splashed down their necks. Everything was dark in there, and some was scrambling out of winders and doors, and some was stomping out the fire, and somehow me and my opponent got tore loose from each other in the rush.

My eyes was full of smoke, but as I groped around I felt a table-leg glance off my head, so I made a grab and got hold of a human torso. So I throwed him and fell on him and begun to maul him. I musta softened him considerable already, I thought, because he felt a lot flabbier than he done before, and he was hollering a lot louder. Then somebody struck a light, and I found I was hammering the fat Dutch bartender. The limey was gone, and somebody hollered the cops was coming. So I riz and fled out the back way in disgust. That limey had had the last lick, and it's a p'int of honor with me to have the last lick myself. I hunted him for half a hour, aiming to learn him to hit a man with a table-leg and then run, but I didn't find him.

Well, my clothes was singed and tore, so I headed for my boarding-house, the Seamen's Delight, which was down on the waterfront and run by a fat half-caste. He was lying in the hall dead-drunk as usual, and I was glad because when he was sober he was all the time bellyaching about my board bill. Didn't seem to be nobody else in the house.

I went upstairs to my room and opened the door, calling Mike. But Mike didn't come, and I smelt a peculiar smell in the air. I smelt that same smell once when some crimps tried to shanghai me. And the room was empty. My bed was still warm where Mike had been curled up on it, sleeping, but he was gone. I started to go outside and call him, when I seen a note stuck to the wall. I read it and turned cold all over.

It said:

If you want to ever see yure dog agane leeve fiftey dolers in the tin can outside the alley dore of the Bristol Bar at the stroak of leven-thirty tonight. Put the money in the can and go back in the sloon and cloase the dore. Count a hunderd and then you will find yure dog in the ally.

--A Man What Meens Bizziness.

I run downstairs and shook the landlord and hollered: "Who's been here since I been gone?"

But all he done was grunt and mutter: "Fill 'er up again, Joe!"

I give him a hearty kick in the pants and run out on the street, plumb distracted. Me and Mike has kicked around together for years; he's saved my worthless life a dozen times. Mike is about the only difference between me and a bum. I don't give a cuss what people think about me, but I always try to conduct myself so my dog won't be ashamed of me. And now some dirty mug had stole him and I hadn't no dough to buy him back.

I sot down on the curb and held my throbbing head and tried to think, but the more I thought, the more mixed up things got. When I'm up against something I can't maul with my fists, I'm plumb off my course and no chart to steer by. Finally I riz up and sot out at a run for the Quiet Hour Arena. They was a fight card on that night, and though I'd already tried to get signed up and been turned down by the promoter, in my desperation I thought I'd try again. I intended appealing to his better nature, if he had one.

From the noise which issued from the building as I approached, I knowed the fights had already started, and my heart sunk, but I didn't know nothing else to try. The back door was locked, but I give it a kind of tug and it come off the hinges and I went in.

They was nobody in sight in the narrer hallway running between the dressing-rooms, but as I run up the hall, a door opened and a big man come out in a bathrobe, follered by a feller with towels and buckets. The big man ripped out a oath and throwed out his arm to stop me. It was the limey I'd fit in the Sweet Dreams bar.

"So that table-leg didn't do the business, eh?" he inquired nastily. "Looking for another dose of the same, are you?"

"I got no time to fight you now," I muttered, trying to crowd past him. "I'm lookin' for Bisly, the promoter."

"What you shaking about?" he sneered, and I seen he had his hands taped. "Why are you so pale and sweating? Scared of me, eh? Well, I'm due up in that ring right now, but first I'm going to polish you off, you Yankee swine!" And with that he give me a open-handed swipe across the face.

I dunno when anybody ever dared _slap_ me. For a second everything floated in a crimson haze. I dunno what kind of a lick I handed that Limey ape. I don't even remember hitting him. But I must of, because when I could see again, there he was on the floor, with his jaw split open from the corner of his mouth to the rim of his chin, and his head gashed where it hit the door jamb.

The handler was trying to hide under a bench, and somebody else was hollering like he had a knife stuck in him. It was the promoter of the joint, and he was jumping up and down like a cat on a red-hot hatch.

"What 'ave you done?" he squalled. "Oh, blimey, what _'ave_ you done? A packed 'ouse 'owlin' for h'action, and one of the principals wyting in the bleedin' ring--and 'ere you've lyed out the other! Oh, my 'at! What a bloody go!"

"You mean this here scut was goin' to fight in the main event?" I asked stupidly, because my head was still going around.

"What else?" he howled. "Ow, murder! What am I to do?"

"Well, you limeys certainly stick together," I said. And then a vast light dazzled me. I gasped with the force of the idea which had just hit me, so to speak. I laid hold on Bisly so forcibly he squealed, thinking I was attacking him.

"How much you payin' this rat?" I demanded, shaking him in my urgency.

"Fifty dollars, winner tyke all!" he moaned.

"Then I'm your man!" I roared, releasing him so vi'lently he sprawled his full length on the floor. "You been refusin' to let me fight in your lousy club account of your prejudice against Americans, but this time you ain't got no choice! That mob out there craves gore, and if they don't see some, they'll tear down your joint! Lissen at 'em!"

He done so, and shuddered at the ferocious yells with which the house was vibrating. The crowd was tired of waiting and was demanding action in the same tone them old Roman crowds used when they yelped for another batch of gladiators to be tossed to the lions.

"You want to go out there and tell 'em the main event's called off?" I demanded.

"No! No!" he said hastily, mopping his brow with a shaky hand. "Have you got togs and a handler?"

"I'll get 'em," I answered. "Hop out there and tell them mugs that the main event will go on in a minute!"

So he went out like a man going to keep a date with the hangman, and I turned to the feller which was still trying to wedge hisself under the bench--a dumb cluck hired by the club to scrub floors and second fighters which didn't have none theirselves. I handed him a hearty kick in the rear, and sternly requested, "Come out here and help me with this stiff!"

He done so in fear and trembling, and we packed the limey battler into his dressing-room, and laid him on a table. He was beginning to show some faint signs of life. I took off his bathrobe and togs and clamb into 'em myself, whilst the handler watched me in a kind of pallid silence.

"Pick up them buckets and towels," I commanded. "I don't like your looks, but you'll have to do. Any handler is better'n none--and the best is none too good. Come on!"

Follered close by him, I hurried into the arener to be greeted by a ferocious uproar as I come swinging down the aisle. Bisly was addressing 'em, and I caught the tag-end of his remarks which went as follows: "--and so, if you gents will be pytient, Battler Pembroke will be ready for the go in a moment--in fact, 'ere 'e comes now!"

And so saying, Bisly skipped down out of the ring and disappeared. He hadn't had nerve enough to tell 'em that a substitution had been made. They glanced at me, and then they glared, with their mouths open, and then, just as I reached the ring, a big stoker jumped and roared: _"You_ ain't Battler Pembroke! At him, mates--!"

I clouted him on the button and he done a nose-dive over the first row ringside. I then faced the snarling crowd, expanding my huge chest and glaring at 'em from under my battered brows, and I roared: "Anybody else thinks I ain't Battler Pembroke?"

They started surging towards me, growling low in their throats, but they glanced at my victim and halted suddenly, and crowded back from me. With a snort of contempt, I turned and clamb into the ring. My handler clumb after me and commenced to massage my legs kind of dumb-like. He was one of these here sap-heads, and things was happening too fast for him to keep up with 'em.

"What time is it?" I demanded, and he pulled out his watch, looked at it carefully, and said, "Five minutes after ten."

"I got well over a hour," I muttered, and glanced at my opponent in the oppersite corner. I knowed he must be popular, from the size of the purse; most performers at the Quiet Hour got only ten bucks apiece, win, lose or draw, and generally had to lick the promoter to get that. He was well built, but pallid all over, with about as much expression as a fish. They was something familiar about him, but I couldn't place him.

The crowd was muttering and growling, but the announcer was a stolid mutt which didn't have sense enough to be afraid of anybody, even the customers which frequents the Quiet Hour. To save time, he announced whilst the referee was giving the usual instructions, and said he: "In that corner, Sailor Costigan, weight--"

"Where's Pembroke?" bellered the crowd. "That ain't Pembroke! That's a bloody Yankee, the low-lifed son of a canine!"

"Nevertheless," said the announcer, without blinking, "he weighs one-ninety; and the other blighter is Slash Jackson, of Cardiff; weight, one-eighty-nine."

The maddened mob frothed and commenced throwing things, but then the gong clanged and they calmed down reluctantly to watch the show, like a fight crowd will. After all, what they want is a fight.

At the whang of the gong I tore out of my corner with the earnest ambition of finishing that fight with the first punch, if possible. It was my intention to lay my right on his jaw, and I made no secret of it. I scorns deception. If he'd ducked a split second slower, the scrap would of ended right there.

But I didn't pause to meditate. I sent my left after my right, and he grunted poignantly as it sunk under his heart. Then his right flicked up at my jaw, and from the way it cut the air as it whistled past, I knowed it was loaded with dynamite. Giving him no time to get set, I slugged him back across the ring and into the ropes on the other side. The crowd screamed blue murder, but I wasn't hurting him as much as they thought, or as much as I wanted to. He was clever at rolling with a punch, and he was all elbows. Nor he wasn't too careful where he put 'em, neither. He put one in my stummick and t'other'n in my eye, which occasioned some bitter profanity on my part. He also stomped heartily on my insteps.

Little things like them is ignored in the Quiet Hour; the audience merely considers 'em the spice of the sport, and the referee is above noticing 'em.

But I was irritated, and in my eagerness to break Jackson's neck with a swinging overhand punch, I exposed myself to his right, which licked out again like the flipper of a seal. I just barely managed to duck it, and it ripped the skin off my chin as it grazed me. And as I stabbed him off balance with a straight left to the mouth, that peculiar lick of his set me to wondering again, because it reminded me of something, I couldn't remember what.

He now brung his left into play with flashy jabs and snappy hooks, but it didn't pack the power his right did, and all he done was to cut my lips a little. He kept his right cocked, but I was watching it, and when he shot it again I went inside it and battered away at his midriff with both hands. He was steel springs and *Whale*-bone under his white skin, but he didn't like 'em down below. He was backing and breaking ground when the gong ended the round.

I sunk onto my stool in time to receive a swipe across the eyes with the towel my handler was trying to fan me with, and whilst I was shaking the stars out of my vision, he emptied a whole bucket of ice water over my head. This was wholly unnecessary, as I p'inted out to him with free and fervent language, but he had a one-track mind. He'd probably seen a fighter doused thusly, and thought it _had_ to be did, whether the fighter needed it or not.

I was still remonstrating with him concerning his dumbness when the bell rung, and as a result, Jackson, who shot out of his corner like a catapult, caught me before I could get into the center of the ring, shooting his left and throwing his right after it. _Zip!_ It come through the air like a hammer on a steel spring!

I side-stepped and ripped my left to his midriff. He gasped and staggered, and I set myself like a flash and throwed my right at his head with all my beef behind it. But I'd forgot I was standing where the canvas was soaked with the water my dumb handler had poured over me. My foot slipped on a sliver of ice just as I let go my swing, and before I could recover myself, that T.N.T. right licked out, and this time it didn't miss.

Jerusha! It wasn't like being hit by a human being. I felt like a fire-works factory hadst exploded in my skull. I seen comets and meteors and sky-rockets, and somebody was trying to count the stars as they flew past. Then things cleared a little bit, and I realized it was the referee which was counting, and he was counting over me.

I was on my belly in the resin, and bells seemed to be ringing all over the house. I could'st hardly hear the referee for 'em, but he said "Nine!" so I riz. That's a habit of mine. I make a specialty of getting up. I have got up off the floor of rings from Galveston to Shanghai.

My legs wasn't exactly right--one had a tendency to steer south by west, while the other'n wanted to go due east--and I had a dizzy idee that a typhoon was raging outside. I could'st hear the waters rising and the winds roaring, but realized that it was my own ears ringing after that awful clout.

Jackson was on me like a hunting panther, just about as light and easy. He was too anxious to use his right again. He thought I was out on my feet and all he had to do was to hit me. Any old-timer could of told him that leading to me with his right, whether I was groggy or not, was violating a rule of safety which is already becoming a ring tradition.

He simply cocked his right and let it go, and I beat it with a left hook to the body. He turned kinda green in the face, like anybody is liable to which has just had a iron fist sunk several inches into their belly. And before he could strike again, I fell into him and hugged him like a grizzly.

I knowed him now! They wasn't but one man in the world with a right-hand clout like that--Torpedo Willoughby, the Cardiff Murderer. Whiskey and women kept him from being a champ, and kept him broke so much he often performed in dumps like the Quiet Hour under a assumed name, but he was a mankiller, the worst England ever produced.

I shook the blood and sweat outa my eyes, and took my time about coming out of that clinch, and when the referee finally broke us, I was ready. Willoughby come slugging in, and I crouched and covered up, weaving always to his left, and hooking my left to his ribs and belly. My left carried more dynamite than his left did, and I didn't leave no openings for that blasting right. I didn't tin-can; I dunno how and wouldn't if I could. But I retired into my shell whilst pounding his mid-section, and he got madder and madder, and flailed away with that right fiercer than ever. But it was glancing off my arms and the top of my head, and my left was digging into his guts deeper and deeper. It ain't a spectacular way of battling, but it gets results in the long run.

I was purty well satisfied at the end of that round. Fighting like I was didn't give Willoughby no chance to blast me, and eventually he was going to weaken under my body-battering. It might take five or six rounds, but the bout was scheduled for fifteen frames, and I had plenty of time.

But that don't mean I was happy as I sot in my corner whilst my handler squirted lemon juice in my eye, trying to moisten my lips, and give me a long, refreshing drink of iodine in his brainless efforts to daub a cut on my chin. I was thinking of Mike, and a chill trickled down my spine as I wondered what them devils which stole him wouldst do to him if the money wasn't in the tin can at exactly eleven-thirty.

"What time is it?" I demanded, and my handler hauled out his watch and said, "Five minutes after ten."

"That's what you said before!" I howled in exasperation. "Gimme that can!"

I grabbed it and glared, and then I shook it. It wasn't running. It didn't even sound like they was any works inside of it. Stricken by a premonishun, I yelled to the referee, "What time is it?"

He glanced at his watch. "Seconds out!" he said, and then: "Fifteen minutes after eleven!"

Fifteen minutes to go! Cold sweat bust out all over me, and I jumped up offa my stool so suddenly my handler fell backwards through the ropes. _Fifteen minutes!_ I couldn't take no five or six rounds to lick Willoughby! I had to do it in this round if winning was going to do me any good.

I throwed all my plans to the winds. I was trembling in every limb and glaring across at Willoughby, and when he met the glare in my eyes he stiffened and his muscles tensed. He sensed the change in me, though he couldn't know why; he knowed the battle was to be to the death.

The gong whanged and I tore out of my corner like a typhoon, to kill or be killed. I'm always a fighter of the iron-man type. When I'm nerved up like I was then, the man ain't born which can stop me. There wasn't no plan or plot or science about that round--it was just raw, naked, primitive manhood, sweat and blood and fists flailing like mallets without a second's let-up.

I tore in, swinging like a madman, and in a second Willoughby was fighting for his life. The blood spattered and the crowd roared and things got dim and red, and all I seen was the white figger in front of me, and all I knowed was to hit and hit and keep hitting till the world ended.

I dunno how many times I was on the canvas.

Every time he landed solid with that awful right I went down like a butchered ox. But every time I come up again and tore into him more furious than ever. I was crazy with fear, like a man in a nightmare, thinking of Mike and the minutes that was slipping past.

His right was the concentrated essence of hell. Every time it found my jaw I felt like my skull was caved in and every vertebrae of my spine was dislocated. But I'm used to them sensations. They're part of the slugger's game. Let these here classy dancing-masters quit when their bones begins to melt like wax, and their brains feels like they was being jolted loose from their skull. A slugger lowers his head and wades in again. That's his game. His ribs may be splintered in on his vitals, and his guts may be mashed outa place, and his ears may be streaming blood from veins busted inside his skull, but them things don't matter; the important thing is winning.

No white man ever hit me harder'n Torpedo Willoughby hit me, but I was landing too, and every time I sunk a mauler under his heart or smashed one against his temple, I seen him wilt. If he could of took it like he handed it out, he'd been champeen. But at last I seen his pale face before me with his lips open wide as he gulped for air, and I knowed I had him, though I was hanging to the ropes and the crowd was yelling for the kill. They couldn't see the muscles in his calves quivering, nor his belly heaving, nor the glaze in his eyes. They couldn't understand that he'd hammered me till his shoulder muscles was dead and his gloves was like they was weighted with lead, and the heart was gone out of him. All they couldst see was me, battered and bloody, clinging to the ropes, and him cocking his right for the finisher.

It come over, slow and ponderous, and glanced from my shoulder as I lurched off the ropes. And my own right smashed like a caulking mallet against his jaw, and down he went, face-first in the resin.

When they fall like that, they don't get up. I didn't even wait to hear the referee count him out. I run across the ring, getting stronger at every step, tore off my gloves and held out my hand for my bathrobe. My gaping handler put the sponge in it.

I throwed it in his face with a roar of irritation, and he fell outa the ring headfirst into a water bucket, which put the crowd in such a rare good humor that they even cheered as I run down the aisle, and not over a dozen empty beer bottles was throwed at me.

Bisly was waiting in the corridor, and I grabbed the fifty bucks outa his hand as I went by on the run. He follered me into the dressing-room and offered to help me put on my clothes, but knowing he hoped to steal my wad whilst helping me, I throwed him out bodily, jerked on my street clothes, and sallied forth at top speed.

The Bristol Bar was a low-class dive down on the edge of the native quarters. It took me maybe five minutes to get there, and a clock behind the bar showed me that it lacked about a minute and a fraction of eleven-thirty.

"Tony," I panted to the bartender, who gaped at my bruised and bloody face, "I want the back room to myself. See that nobody disturbs me."

I run to the back door and throwed it open. It was dark in the alley, but I seen a empty tobacco tin setting close to the door. I quickly wadded the money into it, stepped into the room and shut the door. I reckon somebody was hiding in the alley watching, because as soon as I shut the door, I heard a stirring around out there. I didn't look. I wasn't taking no chances on them doing anything to Mike.

I heard the tin scrape against the stones, and they was silence whilst I hurriedly counted up to a hundred. Then I jerked open the door, and joyfully yelled: "_Mike!"_ They was no reply. The tin can was gone, but Mike wasn't there.

Cold, clammy sweat bust out all over me, and my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I rushed down the alley like a wild man, and just before I reached the street, where a dim street-lamp shone, I fell over something warm and yielding which groaned and said: "Oh, my head!"

I grabbed it and dragged it into the light, and it was Smoky Jones. He had a lump on his head and the tin can in his hand, but it was empty.

I must of went kinda crazy then. Next thing I knowed I had Smoky by the throat, shaking him till his eyes crossed, and I was mouthing, "What you done with Mike, you dirty gutter rat? _Where is he?"_

His hands were waving around, and I seen he couldn't talk. His face was purple and his eyes and tongue stuck out remarkable. So I eased up a bit, and he gurgled, "I dunno!"

"You do know!" I roared, digging my thumbs into his unwashed neck. "You was the one which stole him. You wanted that fifty bucks to bet on a horse. I see it all, now. It's so plain even a dumb mutt like me can figure it out. You got the money--where's Mike?"

"I'll tell you everything," he gasped. "Lemme up, Steve. You're chockin' me to death. Lissen--it was me which stole Mike. I snuck in and doped him and packed him off in a sack. But I didn't aim to hurt him. All I wanted was the fifty. I figgered you could raise it if you had to ... I'd taken Mike to Li Yun's house, to hide him. We put him in a cage before he come to--that there dog is worse'n a tiger ... I was to hide in the alley till you put out the dough, and meanwhile one of Li Yun's Chinees was to bring Mike in a auto, and wait at the mouth of the alley till I got the money. Then, if everything was OK, we was going to let the dog out into the alley and beat it in the car.... Well, whilst I hid in the alley I seen the Chinee drive up and park in the shadows like we'd agreed, so I signalled him and went on after the dough. But as I come up the alley with the money, _wham!_ that double-crossin' heathen riz up out of the dark and whacked me with a blackjack. And now he's gone and the auto's gone and the fifty bucks is gone!"

"And where's Mike?" I demanded.

"I dunno," he said. "I doubt if that Chinee ever brung him here at all. Oh, my head!" he said, holding onto his skull.

"That ain't a scratch to what I'm goin' to do to you when you get recovered," I promised him. "Where at does Li Yun live at?"

"In that old warehouse down near the wharf the natives call the Dragon Pier," said Smoky. "He's fixed up some rooms for livin' quarters, and--"

That was all I wanted to know. The next second I was headed for the Dragon Pier. I run down alleys, crossed dark courts, turned off the narrer side street that runs to the wharf, ducked through a winding alley, and come to the back of the warehouse I was looking for. As I approached, I seen a back door hanging open; and a light shining through.

I didn't hesitate, but bust through with both fists cocked. Then I stopped short. They was nobody there. It was a great big room, electrically lighted, with a switch on the wall, and purty well fixed up generally. Leastways it had been. But now it was littered with busted tables and splintered chairs, and there was blood and pieces of silk on the floor. They had been some kind of a awful fight in there, and my heart was in my mouth when I seen a couple of empty cages. There was white dog hair scattered on the floor, and some thick darkish hair in big tufts that couldn't of come from nothing but a gorilla.

I looked at the cages. One was a bamboo cage, and some of the bars had been gnawed in two. The lock on the steel cage was busted from the inside. It didn't take no detective to figger out what had happened. Mike had gnawed his way out of the bamboo cage and the gorilla had busted out of his cage to get at him. But where was they now? Was the Chinees and their gorilla chasing poor old Mike down them dark alleys, or had they took his body off to dispose of it after the gorilla had finished him?

I felt weak and sick and helpless; Mike is about the only friend I got. Then things begun to swim red around me again. They was one table in that room yet unbusted. I attended to that. They was no human for me to lay hands on, and I had to wreck something.

Then a inner door opened and a fat white man with a cigar in his mouth stuck his head in and stared at me.

"What was that racket?" he said. "Hey, who are you? Where's Li Yun?"

"That's what I want to know," I snarled. "Who are you?"

"Name's Wells, if it's any of your business," he said, coming on into the room. His belly bulged out his checked vest, and his swagger put my teeth on edge.

"What a mess!" he said, flicking the ashes offa his cigar in a way which made me want to kill him. It's the little things in life which causes murder. "Where the devil is Li Yun? The crowd's gettin' impatient."

"Crowd?" I interrogated. As I spoke, it seemed like I did hear a hum up towards the front of the building.

"Why," he said, "the crowd which has come to watch the battle between Li Yun's gorilla and the fightin' bull-dog."

"Huh?" I gawped.

"Sure," he said. "Don't you know about it? It's time to start now. I'm Li Yun's partner. I finances these shows. I've been up at the front of the buildin', sellin' tickets. Thought I heard a awful racket back here awhile ago, but was too busy haulin' in the dough to come back and see. What's happened, anyhow? Where's the Chinees and the animals? Huh?"

I give a harsh, rasping laugh that made him jump. "I see now," I said betwixt my teeth. "Li Yun wanted Mike for his dirty fights. He seen a chance to make fifty bucks and stage a show too. So he double-crossed Smoky, and--"

"Go find Li Yun!" snapped Wells, biting off the end of another cigar. "That crowd out there is gettin' mad, and they're the scrapin's off the docks. Hurry up, and I'll give you half a buck--"

I then went berserk. All the grief and fury which had been seething in me exploded and surged over like hot lava out of a volcano. I give one yell, and went into action.

"Halp!" hollered Wells. "He's gone crazy!" He grabbed for a gun, but before he could draw I caught him on the whiskers with a looping haymaker and he done a classy cart-wheel head-on into the wall. The back of his skull hit the light-switch so hard it jolted it clean outa the brackets, and the whole building was instantly plunged in darkness. I felt around till my groping hands located a door, and I ripped it open and plunged recklessly down a narrer corridor till I hit another door with my head so hard I split the panels. I jerked it open and lunged through.

I couldn't see nothing, but I felt the presence of a lot of people. They was a confused noise going up, a babble of Chinese and Malay and Hindu, and some loud cussing in English and German. Somebody bawled, "Who turned out them lights? Turn on the lights! How can we see the scrap without no lights?"

Somebody else hollered, "They've turned the animals into the cage! I hear 'em!"

Everybody begun to cuss and yell for lights, and I groped forward until I was stopped by iron bars. Then I knowed where I was. That corridor I'd come through served as a kind of chute or runway into the big cage where the fights was fit. I reached through the bars, groped around and found a key sticking in the lock of the cage door. I give a yell of exultation which riz above the clamor, turned the key, throwed open the door and come plunging out. Them rats enjoyed a fight, hey? Well, I aimed they shouldn't be disappointed. Two men fighting for money, of their own free will, is one thing. Making a couple of inoffensive animals butcher each other just for the amusement of a gang of wharf rats is another'n.

I came out of that cage crazy-mad and flailing with both fists. Somebody grunted and dropped, and somebody else yelled, "Hey, who hit me?" and then the whole crowd began to mill and holler and strike out wild at random, not knowing what it was all about. It was a regular bedlam, with me swinging in the dark and dropping a man at each slam, and then a window got busted, and as I moved across a dim beam of light which come through, one guy give a frantic yell, "Run! Run! _The griller's loose!"_

At that, hell bust loose. Everybody stampeded, screaming and hollering and cussing and running over each other, and me in the middle of 'em, slugging right and left.

"You all wants a fight, does you?" I howled. "Well, here's some to tote home with you!"

They hit the door like a herd of steers and splintered it and went storming through, them which was able to storm. Some had been stomped in the rush, and plenty had stopped my iron fists in the dark. I come ravin' after 'em. Just because them rats wanted to see gore spilt--by somebody else--Mike, my only friend in the Orient, had to be sacrificed. I could of kilt 'em all.

Well, they streamed off down the street in full cry, and as I emerged, I fell over a innocent passerby which had been knocked down by the stampede. By the time I riz, they was out of my reach, though the sounds of their flight come back to me.

The fire of my rage died down to ashes. I felt old and sick and worn out. I wasn't young no more, and Mike was gone. I stooped to pick up the man I had fell over, idly noticing that he was a English captain whose ship was tied up at a nearby wharf, discharging cargo.

"Say," he said, gasping to get his breath back, "aren't you Steve Costigan?"

"Yeah," I admitted, without enthusiasm.

"Good!" he said. "I was looking for you. They told me it was your dog."

I sighed. "Yeah," I said. "A white bulldog that answered to the name of Mike. Where'd you find his body?"

"Body?" he said. "My word! The bally brute has been pursuing four Chinamen and a bloody gorilla up and down the docks for half an hour, and now he has them treed in the rigging of my ship, and I want you to come and call him off. Can't have that, you know!"

"Good old Mike!" I whooped, jumping straight into the air with joy and exultation. "Still the fightin'est dog in the Asiatics! Lead on, matey! I craves words with his victims. I got nothin' against the griller, but them Chinees has got fifty bucks belongin' to me and Mike!"

THE END

Contents

THE TNT PUNCH

By Robert E. Howard

The first thing that happened in Cape Town, my white bulldog Mike bit a policeman and I had to come across with a fine of ten dollars, to pay for the cop's britches. That left me busted, not more'n an hour after the *Sea Girl* docked.

The next thing who should I come on to but Shifty Kerren, manager of Kid Delrano, and the crookedest leather-pilot which ever swiped the gate receipts. I favored this worthy with a hearty scowl, but he had the everlasting nerve to smile welcomingly and hold out the glad hand.

"Well, well! If it ain't Steve Costigan! Howdy, Steve!" said the infamous hypocrite. "Glad to see you. Boy, you're lookin' fine! Got good old Mike with you, I see. Nice dawg."

He leaned over to pat him.

"Grrrrrr!" said good old Mike, fixing for to chaw his hand. I pushed Mike away with my foot and said to Shifty, I said: "A big nerve you got, tryin' to fraternize with me, after the way you squawked and whooped the last time I seen you, and called me a dub and all."

"Now, now, Steve!" said Shifty. "Don't be foolish and go holdin' no grudge. It's all in the way of business, you know. I allus did like you, Steve."

"Gaaahh!" I responded ungraciously. I didn't have no wish to hobnob none with him, though I figgered I was safe enough, being as I was broke anyway.

I've fought that palooka of his twice. The first time he outpointed me in a ten-round bout in Seattle, but didn't hurt me none, him being a classy boxer but kinda shy on the punch.

Next time we met in a Frisco ring, scheduled for fifteen frames. Kid Delrano give me a proper shellacking for ten rounds, then punched hisself out in a vain attempt to stop me, and blowed up. I had him on the canvas in the eleventh and again in the twelfth and with the fourteenth a minute to go, I rammed a right to the wrist in his solar plexus that put him down again. He had sense enough left to grab his groin and writhe around.

And Shifty jumped up and down and yelled: "Foul!" so loud the referee got scared and rattled and disqualified me. I swear it wasn't no foul. I landed solid above the belt line. But I officially lost the decision and it kinda rankled.

SO NOW I GLOWERED at Shifty and said: "What you want of me?"

"Steve," said Shifty, putting his hand on my shoulder in the old comradely way his kind has when they figger on putting the skids under you, "I know you got a heart of gold! You wouldn't leave no feller countryman in the toils, would you? Naw! Of course you wouldn't! Not good old Steve. Well, listen, me and the Kid is in a jam. We're broke--and the Kid's in jail.

"We got a raw deal when we come here. These Britishers went and disqualified the Kid for merely bitin' one of their ham-and-eggers. The Kid didn't mean nothin' by it. He's just kinda excitable thataway."

"Yeah, I know," I growled. "I got a scar on my neck now from the rat's fangs. He got excitable with me, too."

"Well," said Shifty hurriedly, "they won't let us fight here now, and we figgered on movin' upcountry into Johannesburg. Young Hilan is tourin' South Africa and we can get a fight with him there. His manager--er, I mean a promoter there--sent us tickets, but the Kid's in jail. They won't let him out unless we pay a fine of six pounds. That's thirty dollars, you know. And we're broke.

"Steve," went on Shifty, waxing eloquent, "I appeals to your national pride! Here's the Kid, a American like yourself, pent up in durance vile, and for no more reason than for just takin' up for his own country--"

"Huh!" I perked up my ears. "How's that?"

"Well, he blows into a pub where three British sailors makes slanderous remarks about American ships and seamen. Well, you know the Kid--just a big, free-hearted, impulsive boy, and terrible proud of his country, like a man should be. He ain't no sailor, of course, but them remarks was a insult to his countrymen and he wades in. He gives them limeys a proper drubbin' but here comes a host of cops which hauls him before the local magistrate which hands him a fine we can't pay.

"Think, Steve!" orated Shifty. "There's the Kid, with thousands of admirin' fans back in the States waitin' and watchin' for his triumphal return to the land of the free and the home of the brave. And here's him, wastin' his young manhood in a stone dungeon, bein' fed on bread and water and maybe beat up by the jailers, merely for standin' up for his own flag and nation. For defendin' the honor of American sailors, mind you, of which you is one. I'm askin' you, Steve, be you goin' to stand by and let a feller countryman languish in the 'thrallin' chains of British tyranny?"

"Not by a long ways!" said I, all my patriotism roused and roaring. "Let bygones be bygones!" I said.

It's a kind of unwritten law among sailors ashore that they should stand by their own kind. A kind of waterfront law, I might say.

"I ain't fought limeys all over the world to let an American be given the works by 'em now," I said. "I ain't got a cent, Shifty, but I'm goin' to get some dough.

"Meet me at the American Seamen's Bar in three hours. I'll have the dough for the Kid's fine or I'll know the reason why.

"You understand, I ain't doin' this altogether for the Kid. I still intends to punch his block off some day. But he's an American and so am I, and I reckon I ain't so small that I'll let personal grudges stand in the way of helpin' a countryman in a foreign land."

"Spoken like a man, Steve!" applauded Shifty, and me and Mike hustled away.

A short, fast walk brung us to a building on the waterfront which had a sign saying: "The South African Sports Arena." This was all lit up and yells was coming forth by which I knowed fights was going on inside.

The ticket shark told me the main bout had just begun. I told him to send me the promoter, "Bulawayo" Hurley, which I'd fought for of yore, and he told me that Bulawayo was in his office, which was a small room next to the ticket booth. So I went in and seen Bulawayo talking to a tall, lean gent the sight of which made my neck hair bristle.

"Hey, Bulawayo," said I, ignoring the other mutt and coming direct to the point, "I want a fight. I want to fight tonight--right now. Have you got anybody you'll throw in with me, or if not willya let me get up in your ring and challenge the house for a purse to be made up by the crowd?"

"By a strange coincidence," said Bulawayo, pulling his big mustache, "here's Bucko Brent askin' me the same blightin' thing."

Me and Bucko gazed at each other with hearty disapproval. I'd had dealings with this thug before. In fact, I built a good part of my reputation as a bucko-breaker on his lanky frame. A bucko, as you likely know, is a hard-case mate, who punches his crew around. Brent was all that and more. Ashore he was a prize-fighter, same as me.

Quite a few years ago I was fool enough to ship as A.B. on the Elinor, which he was mate of then. He's an Australian and the Elinor was an Australian ship. Australian ships is usually good crafts to sign up with, but this here Elinor was a exception. Her cap'n was a relic of the old hellship days, and her mates was natural-born bullies. Brent especially, as his nickname of "Bucko" shows. But I was broke and wanted to get to Makassar to meet the *Sea Girl* there, so I shipped aboard the Elinor at Bristol.

Brent started ragging me before we weighed anchor.

Well, I stood his hazing for a few days and then I got plenty and we went together. We fought the biggest part of one watch, all over the ship from the mizzen cross trees to the bowsprit. Yet it wasn't what I wouldst call a square test of manhood because marlin spikes and belaying pins was used free and generous on both sides and the entire tactics smacked of rough house.

In fact, I finally won the fight by throwing him bodily offa the poop. He hit on his head on the after deck and wasn't much good the rest of the cruise, what with a broken arm, three cracked ribs and a busted nose. And the cap'n wouldn't even order me to scrape the anchor chain less'n he had a gun in each hand, though I wasn't figgering on socking the old rum-soaked antique.

Well, in Bulawayo's office me and Bucko now set and glared at each other, and what we was thinking probably wasn't printable.

"Tell you what, boys," said Bulawayo, "I'll let you fight ten rounds as soon as the main event's over with. I'll put up five pounds and the winner gets it all."

"Good enough for me," growled Bucko.

"Make it six pounds and it's a go," said I.

"Done!" said Bulawayo, who realized what a break he was getting, having me fight for him for thirty dollars.

Bucko give me a nasty grin.

"At last, you blasted Yank," said he, "I got you where I want you. They'll be no poop deck for me to slip and fall off this time. And you can't hit me with no hand spike."

"A fine bird you are, talkin' about hand spikes," I snarled, "after tryin' to tear off a section of the main-rail to sock me with."

"Belay!" hastily interrupted Bulawayo. "Preserve your ire for the ring."

"Is they any *Sea Girl* men out front?" I asked. "I want a handler to see that none of this thug's henchmen don't dope my water bottle."

"Strangely enough, Steve," said Bulawayo, "I ain't seen a *Sea Girl* bloke tonight. But I'll get a handler for you."

WELL, THE MAIN EVENT went the limit. It seemed like it never would get over with and I cussed to myself at the idea of a couple of dubs like them was delaying the performance of a man like me. At last, however, the referee called it a draw and kicked the both of them outa the ring.

Bulawayo hopped through the ropes and stopped the folks who'd started to go, by telling them he was offering a free and added attraction--Sailor Costigan and Bucko Brent in a impromptu grudge bout. This was good business for Bulawayo. It tickled the crowd who'd seen both of us fight, though not ag'in each other, of course. They cheered Bulawayo to the echo and settled back with whoops of delight.

Bulawayo was right--not a *Sea Girl* man in the house. All drunk or in jail or something, I suppose. They was quite a number of thugs there from the Nagpur--Brent's present ship--and they all rose as one and gimme the razz. Sailors is funny. I know that Brent hazed the liver outa them, yet they was rooting for him like he was their brother or something.

I made no reply to their jeers, maintaining a dignified and aloof silence only except to tell them that I was going to tear their pet mate apart and strew the fragments to the four winds, and also to warn them not to try no monkey-shines behind my back, otherwise I wouldst let Mike chaw their legs off. They greeted my brief observations with loud, raucous bellerings, but looked at Mike with considerable awe.

The referee was an Englishman whose name I forget, but he hadn't been outa the old country very long, and had evidently got his experience in the polite athletic clubs of London. He says: "Now understand this, you blighters, w'en H'I says break, H'I wants no bally nonsense. Remember as long as H'I'm in 'ere, this is a blinkin' gentleman's gyme."

But he got in the ring with us, American style.

Bucko is one of these long, rangy, lean fellers, kinda pale and rawboned. He's got a thin hatchet face and mean light eyes. He's a bad actor and that ain't no lie. I'm six feet and weigh one ninety. He's a inch and three-quarters taller'n me, and he weighed then, maybe, a pound less'n me.

BUCKO COME OUT STABBING with his left, but I was watching his right. I knowed he packed his T.N.T. there and he was pretty classy with it.

In about ten seconds he nailed me with that right and I seen stars. I went back on my heels and he was on top of me in a second, hammering hard with both hands, wild for a knockout. He battered me back across the ring. I wasn't really hurt, though he thought I was. Friends of his which had seen me perform before was yelling for him to be careful, but he paid no heed.

With my back against the ropes I failed to block his right to the body and he rocked my head back with a hard left hook.

"You're not so tough, you lousy mick--" he sneered, shooting for my jaw. Wham! I ripped a slungshot right uppercut up inside his left and tagged him flush on the button. It lifted him clean offa his feet and dropped him on the seat of his trunks, where he set looking up at the referee with a goofy and glassy-eyed stare, whilst his friends jumped up and down and cussed and howled: "We told you to be careful with that gorilla, you conceited jassack!"

But Bucko was tough. He kind of assembled hisself and was up at the count of "Nine," groggy but full of fight and plenty mad. I come in wide open to finish him, and run square into that deadly right. I thought for a instant the top of my head was tore off, but rallied and shook Bucko from stem to stern with a left hook under the heart. He tin-canned in a hurry, covering his retreat with his sharp-shooting left. The gong found me vainly follering him around the ring.

The next round started with the fans which was betting on Bucko urging him to keep away from me and box me. Them that had put money on me was yelling for him to take a chance and mix it with me.

But he was plenty cagey. He kept his right bent across his midriff, his chin tucked behind his shoulder and his left out to fend me off. He landed repeatedly with that left and brung a trickle of blood from my lips, but I paid no attention. The left ain't made that can keep me off forever. Toward the end of the round he suddenly let go with that right again and I took it square in the face to get in a right to his ribs.

Blood spattered when his right landed. The crowd leaped up, yelling, not noticing the short-armed smash I ripped in under his heart. But he noticed it, you bet, and broke ground in a hurry, gasping, much to the astonishment of the crowd, which yelled for him to go in and finish the blawsted Yankee.

Crowds don't see much of what's going on in the ring before their eyes, after all. They see the wild swings and haymakers but they miss most of the real punishing blows--the short, quick smashes landed in close.

Well, I went right after Brent, concentrating on his body. He was too kind of long and rangy to take much there. I hunched my shoulders, sunk my head on my hairy chest and bulled in, letting him pound my ears and the top of my head, while I slugged away with both hands for his heart and belly.

A left hook square under the liver made him gasp and sway like a mast in a high wind, but he desperately ripped in a right uppercut that caught me on the chin and kinda dizzied me for a instant. The gong found us fighting out of a clinch along the ropes.

My handler was highly enthusiastic, having bet a pound on me to win by a knockout. He nearly flattened a innocent ringsider showing me how to put over what he called "The Fitzsimmons Smoker." I never heered of the punch.

Well, Bucko was good and mad and musta decided he couldn't keep me away anyhow, so he come out of his corner like a bounding kangaroo, and swarmed all over me before I realized he'd changed his tactics. In a wild mix-up a fast, clever boxer can make a slugger look bad at his own game for a few seconds, being as the cleverer man can land quicker and oftener, but the catch is, he can't keep up the pace. And the smashes the slugger lands are the ones which really counts.

THE CROWD WENT CLEAN crazy when Bucko tore into me, ripping both hands to head and body as fast as he couldst heave one after the other. It looked like I was clean swamped, but them that knowed me tripled their bets. Brent wasn't hurting me none--cutting me up a little, but he was hitting too fast to be putting much weight behind his smacks.

Purty soon I drove a glove through the flurry of his punches. His grunt was plainly heered all over the house. He shot both hands to my head and I come back with a looping left to the body which sunk in nearly up to the wrist.

It was kinda like a bull fighting a tiger, I reckon. He swarmed all over me, hitting fast as a cat claws, whilst I kept my head down and gored him in the belly occasionally. Them body punches was rapidly taking the steam outa him, together with the pace he was setting for hisself. His punches was getting more like slaps and when I seen his knees suddenly tremble, I shifted and crashed my right to his jaw with everything I had behind it. It was a bit high or he'd been out till yet.

Anyway, he done a nose dive and hadn't scarcely quivered at "Nine," when the gong sounded. Most of the crowd was howling lunatics. It looked to them like a chance blow, swung by a desperate, losing man, hadst dropped Bucko just when he was winning in a walk.

But the old-timers knowed better. I couldst see 'em lean back and wink at each other and nod like they was saying: "See, what did I tell you, huh?"

Bucko's merry men worked over him and brung him up in time for the fourth round. In fact, they done a lot of work over him. They clustered around him till you couldn't see what they was doing.

Well, he come out fairly fresh. He had good recuperating powers. He come out cautious, with his left hand stuck out. I noticed that they'd evidently spilt a lot of water on his glove; it was wet.

I glided in fast and he pawed at my face with that left. I didn't pay no attention to it. Then when it was a inch from my eyes I smelt a peculiar, pungent kind of smell! I ducked wildly, but not quick enough. The next instant my eyes felt like somebody'd throwed fire into 'em. Turpentine! His left glove was soaked with it!

I'd caught at his wrist when I ducked. And now with a roar of rage, whilst I could still see a little, I grabbed his elbow with the other hand and, ignoring the smash he gimme on the ear with his right, I bent his arm back and rubbed his own glove in his own face.

He give a most ear-splitting shriek. The crowd bellered with bewilderment and astonishment and the referee rushed in to find out what was happening.

"I say!" he squawked, grabbing hold of us, as we was all tangled up by then. "Wot's going on 'ere? I say, it's disgryceful--OW!"

By some mischance or other, Bucko, thinking it was me, or swinging blind, hit the referee right smack between the eyes with that turpentine-soaked glove.

Losing touch with my enemy, I got scared that he'd creep up on me and sock me from behind. I was clean blind by now and I didn't know whether he was or not. So I put my head down and started swinging wild and reckless with both hands, on a chance I'd connect.

Meanwhile, as I heered afterward, Bucko, being as blind as I was, was doing the same identical thing. And the referee was going around the ring like a race horse, yelling for the cops, the army, the navy or what have you!

THE CROWD WAS CLEAN off its nut, having no idee as to what it all meant.

"That blawsted blighter Brent!" howled the cavorting referee in response to the inquiring screams of the maniacal crowd. "'E threw vitriol in me blawsted h'eyes!"

"Cheer up, cull!" bawled some thug. "Both of 'em's blind too!"

"'Ow can H'I h'officiate in this condition?" howled the referee, jumping up and down. "Wot's tyking plyce in the bally ring?"

"Bucko's just flattened one of his handlers which was climbin' into the ring, with a blind swing!" the crowd whooped hilariously. "The Sailor's gone into a clinch with a ring post!"

Hearing this, I released what I had thought was Brent, with some annoyance. Some object bumping into me at this instant, I took it to be Bucko and knocked it head over heels. The delirious howls of the multitude informed me of my mistake. Maddened, I plunged forward, swinging, and felt my left hook around a human neck. As the referee was on the canvas this must be Bucko, I thought, dragging him toward me, and he proved it by sinking a glove to the wrist in my belly.

I ignored this discourteous gesture, and, maintaining my grip on his neck, I hooked over a right with all I had. Having hold of his neck, I knowed about where his jaw oughta be, and I figgered right. I knocked Bucko clean outa my grasp and from the noise he made hitting the canvas I knowed that in the ordinary course of events, he was through for the night.

I groped into a corner and clawed some of the turpentine outa my eyes. The referee had staggered up and was yelling: "'Ow in the blinkin' 'Ades can a man referee in such a mad-'ouse? Wot's 'ere, wot's 'ere?"

"Bucko's down!" the crowd screamed. "Count him out!"

"W'ere is 'e?" bawled the referee, blundering around the ring.

"Three p'ints off yer port bow!" they yelled and he tacked and fell over the vaguely writhing figger of Bucko. He scrambled up with a howl of triumph and begun to count with the most vindictive voice I ever heered. With each count he'd kick Bucko in the ribs.

"--H'eight! Nine! Ten! H'and you're h'out, you blawsted, blinkin' blightin', bally h'assassinatin' pirate!" whooped the referee, with one last tremendjous kick.

I climb over the ropes and my handler showed me which way was my dressing-room. Ever have turpentine rubbed in your eyes? Jerusha! I don't know of nothing more painful. You can easy go blind for good.

But after my handler hadst washed my eyes out good, I was all right. Collecting my earnings from Bulawayo, I set sail for the American Seamen's Bar, where I was to meet Shifty Kerren and give him the money to pay Delrano's fine with.

IT WAS QUITE A BIT past the time I'd set to meet Shifty, and he wasn't nowhere to be seen. I asked the barkeep if he'd been there and the barkeep, who knowed Shifty, said he'd waited about half an hour and then hoisted anchor. I ast the barkeep if he knowed where he lived and he said he did and told me. So I ast him would he keep Mike till I got back and he said he would. Mike despises Delrano so utterly I was afraid I couldn't keep him away from the Kid's throat, if we saw him, and I figgered on going down to the jail with Shifty.

Well, I went to the place the bartender told me and went upstairs to the room the landlady said Shifty had, and started to knock when I heard men talking inside. Sounded like the Kid's voice, but I couldn't tell what he was saying so I knocked and somebody said: "Come in."

I opened the door. Three men was sitting there playing pinochle. They was Shifty, Bill Slane, the Kid's sparring partner, and the Kid hisself.

"Howdy, Steve," said Shifty with a smirk, kinda furtive eyed, "whatcha doin' away up here?"

"Why," said I, kinda took aback, "I brung the dough for the Kid's fine, but I see he don't need it, bein' as he's out."

Delrano hadst been craning his neck to see if Mike was with me, and now he says, with a nasty sneer: "What's the matter with your face, Costigan? Some street kid poke you on the nose?"

"If you wanta know," I growled, "I got these marks on your account. Shifty told me you was in stir, and I was broke, so I fought down at The South African to get fine-money."

At that the Kid and Slane bust out into loud and jeering laughter--not the kind you like to hear. Shifty joined in, kinda nervous-like.

"Whatcha laughin' at?" I snarled. "Think I'm lyin'?"

"Naw, you ain't lyin'," mocked the Kid. "You ain't got sense enough to. You're just the kind of a dub that would do somethin' like that."

"You see, Steve," said Shifty, "the Kid--"

"Aw shut up, Shifty!" snapped Delrano. "Let the big sap know he's been took for a ride. I'm goin' to tell him what a sucker he's been. He ain't got his blasted bulldog with him. He can't do nothin' to the three of us."

DELRANO GOT UP AND stuck his sneering, pasty white face up close to mine.

"Of all the dumb, soft, boneheaded boobs I ever knew," said he, and his tone cut like a whip lash, "you're the limit. Get this, Costigan, I ain't broke and I ain't been in jail! You want to know why Shifty spilt you that line? Because I bet him ten dollars that much as you hate me and him, we could hand you a hard luck tale and gyp you outa your last cent.

"Well, it worked! And to think that you been fightin' for the dough to give me! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You big chump! You're a natural born sucker! You fall for anything anybody tells you. You'll never get nowheres. Look at me--I wouldn't give a blind man a penny if he was starvin' and my brother besides. But you--oh, what a sap!

"If Shifty hadn't been so anxious to win that ten bucks that he wouldn't wait down at the bar, we'd had your dough, too. But this is good enough. I'm plenty satisfied just to know how hard you fell for our graft, and to see how you got beat up gettin' money to pay my fine! Ha-ha-ha!"

By this time I was seeing them through a red mist. My huge fists was clenched till the knuckles was white, and when I spoke it didn't hardly sound like my voice at all, it was so strangled with rage.

"They's rats in every country," I ground out. "If you'd of picked my pockets or slugged me for my dough, I coulda understood it. If you'd worked a cold deck or crooked dice on me, I wouldn'ta kicked. But you appealed to my better nature, 'stead of my worst.

"You brung up a plea of patriotism and national fellership which no decent man woulda refused. You appealed to my natural pride of blood and nationality. It wasn't for you I done it--it wasn't for you I spilt my blood and risked my eyesight. It was for the principles and ideals you've mocked and tromped into the muck--the honor of our country and the fellership of Americans the world over.

"You dirty swine! You ain't fitten to be called Americans. Thank gosh, for everyone like you, they's ten thousand decent men like me. And if it's bein' a sucker to help out a countryman when he's in a jam in a foreign land, then I thanks the Lord I am a sucker. But I ain't all softness and mush--feel this here for a change!"

And I closed the Kid's eye with a smashing left hander. He give a howl of surprise and rage and come back with a left to the jaw. But he didn't have a chance. He'd licked me in the ring, but he couldn't lick me bare-handed, in a small room where he couldn't keep away from my hooks, not even with two men to help him. I was blind mad and I just kind of gored and tossed him like a charging bull.

If he hit at all after that first punch I don't remember it. I know I crashed him clean across the room with a regular whirlwind of smashes, and left him sprawled out in the ruins of three or four chairs with both eyes punched shut and his arm broke. I then turned on his cohorts and hit Bill Slane on the jaw, knocking him stiff as a wedge. Shifty broke for the door, but I pounced on him and spilled him on his neck in a corner with a open-handed slap.

I THEN STALKED FORTH in silent majesty and gained the street. As I went I was filled with bitterness. Of all the dirty, contemptible tricks I ever heered of, that took the cake. And I got to thinking maybe they was right when they said I was a sucker. Looking back, it seemed to me like I'd fell for every slick trick under the sun. I got mad. I got mighty mad.

I shook my fist at the world in general, much to the astonishment and apprehension of the innocent by-passers.

"From now on," I raged, "I'm harder'n the plate on a battleship! I ain't goin' to fall for nothin'! Nobody's goin' to get a blasted cent outa me, not for no reason what-the-some-ever--"

At that moment I heered a commotion going on nearby. I looked. Spite of the fact that it was late, a pretty good-sized crowd hadst gathered in front of a kinda third-class boarding-house. A mighty purty blonde-headed girl was standing there, tears running down her cheeks as she pleaded with a tough-looking old sister who stood with her hands on her hips, grim and stern.

"Oh, please don't turn me out!" wailed the girl. "I have no place to go! No job--oh, please. Please!"

I can't stand to hear a hurt animal cry out or a woman beg. I shouldered through the crowd and said: "What's goin' on here?"

"This hussy owes me ten pounds," snarled the woman. "I got to have the money or her room. I'm turnin' her out."

"Where's her baggage?" I asked.

"I'm keepin' it for the rent she owes," she snapped. "Any of your business?"

The girl kind of slumped down in the street. I thought if she's turned out on the street tonight they'll be hauling another carcass outa the bay tomorrer. I said to the landlady, "Take six pounds and call it even."

"Ain't you got no more?" said she.

"Naw, I ain't," I said truthfully.

"All right, it's a go," she snarled, and grabbed the dough like a sea-gull grabs a fish.

"All right," she said very harshly to the girl, "you can stay another week. Maybe you'll find a job by that time--or some other sap of a Yank sailor will come along and pay your board."

She went into the house and the crowd give a kind of cheer which inflated my chest about half a foot. Then the girl come up close to me and said shyly, "Thank you. I--I--I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate what you've done for me."

Then all to a sudden she throwed her arms around my neck and kissed me and then run up the steps into the boarding-house. The crowd cheered some more like British crowds does and I felt plenty uplifted as I swaggered down the street. Things like that, I reflected, is worthy causes. A worthy cause can have my dough any time, but I reckon I'm too blame smart to get fooled by no shysters.

I COME INTO THE AMERICAN Seamen's Bar where Mike was getting anxious about me. He wagged his stump of a tail and grinned all over his big wide face and I found two American nickels in my pocket which I didn't know I had. I give one of 'em to the barkeep to buy a pan of beer for Mike. And whilst he was lapping it, the barkeep, he said: "I see Boardin'-house Kate is in town."

"Whatcha mean?" I ast him.

"Well," said he, combing his mustache, "Kate's worked her racket all over Australia and the West Coast of America, but this is the first time I ever seen her in South Africa. She lets some landlady of a cheap boardin'-house in on the scheme and this dame pretends to throw her out. Kate puts up a wail and somebody--usually some free-hearted sailor about like you--happens along and pays the landlady the money Kate's supposed to owe for rent so she won't kick the girl out onto the street. Then they split the dough."

"Uh huh!" said I, grinding my teeth slightly. "Does this here Boardin'-house Kate happen to be a blonde?"

"Sure thing," said the barkeep. "And purty as hell. What did you say?"

"Nothin'," I said. "Here. Give me a schooner of beer and take this nickel, quick, before somebody comes along and gets it away from me."

THE END

Contents

VIKINGS OF THE GLOVES

By Robert E. Howard

NO SOONER HAD the *Sea Girl* docked in Yokohama than Mushy Hansen beat it down the waterfront to see if he couldst match me at some good fight club. Purty soon he come back and said: "No chance, Steve. You'd have to be a Scandinavian to get a scrap right now."

"What you mean by them remarks?" I asked, suspiciously.

"Well," said Mushy, "the sealin' fleet's in, and so likewise is the *Whaler*s, and the port's swarmin' with squareheads."

"Well, what's that got to do--?"

"They ain't but one fight club on the waterfront," said Mushy, "and it's run by a Dutchman named Neimann. He's been puttin' on a series of elimination contests, and, from what I hear, he's been cleanin' up. He matches Swedes against Danes, see? Well, they's hundreds of squareheads in port, and naturally each race turns out to support its countryman. So far, the Danes is ahead. You ever hear of Hakon Torkilsen?"

"You bet," I said. "I ain't never seen him perform, but they say he's the real goods. Sails on the Viking, outa Copenhagen, don't he?"

"Yeah. And the Viking's in port. Night before last, Hakon flattened Sven Tortvigssen, the Terrible Swede, in three rounds, and tonight he takes on Dirck Jacobsen, the Gotland Giant. The Swedes and the Danes is fightin' all over the waterfront," said Mushy, "and they're bettin' their socks. I sunk a few bucks on Hakon myself. But that's the way she stands, Steve. Nobody but Scandinavians need apply."

"Well, heck," I complained, "how come I got to be the victim of race prejerdice? I need dough. I'm flat broke. Wouldn't this mug Neimann gimme a preliminary scrap? For ten dollars I'll fight any three squareheads in port--all in the same ring."

"Naw," said Mushy, "they ain't goin' to be no preliminaries. Neimann says the crowd'll be too impatient to set through 'em. Boy, oh boy, will they be excitement! Whichever way it goes, they's bound to be a rough-house."

"A purty lookout," I said bitterly, "when the *Sea Girl*, the fightenest ship on the seven seas, ain't represented in the melee. I gotta good mind to blow in and bust up the whole show--"

At this moment Bill O'Brien hove in sight, looking excited.

"Hot dawg!" he yelled. "Here's a chance for us to clean up some dough!"

"Stand by to come about," I advised, "and give us the lay."

"Well," Bill said, "I just been down along the waterfront listening to them squareheads argy--and, boy, is the money changin' hands! I seen six fights already. Well, just now they come word that Dirck Jacobsen had broke his wrist, swinging for a sparrin' partner and hittin' the wall instead. So I run down to Neimann's arena to find out if it was so, and the Dutchman was walkin' the floor and tearin' his hair. He said he'd pay a hundred bucks extra, win or lose, to a man good enough to go in with Torkilsen. He says if he calls the show off, these squareheads will hang him. So I see where we can run a *Sea Girl* man in and cop the jack!"

"And who you think we can use?" I asked skeptically.

"Well, there's Mushy," began Bill. "He was raised in America, of course, but--"

"Yeah, there's Mushy!" snapped Mushy, bitterly. "You know as well as I do that I ain't no Swede. I'm a Dane myself. Far from wantin' to fight Hakon, I hope he knocks the block offa whatever fool Swede they finds to go against him."

"That's gratitude," said Bill, scathingly. "How can a brainy man like me work up anything big when I gets opposition from all quarters? I lays awake nights studyin' up plans for the betterment of my mates, and what do I get? Argyments! Wisecracks! Opposition! I tellya--"

"Aw, pipe down," I said. "There's Sven Larson--he's a Swede."

"That big ox would last about fifteen seconds against Hakon," said Mushy, with gloomy satisfaction. "Besides, Sven's in jail. He hadn't been in port more'n a half hour when he got jugged for beatin' up a cop."

Bill fixed a gloomy gaze on me, and his eyes lighted.

"Hot dawg!" he whooped. "I got it! Steve, you're a Swede!"

"Listen here, you flat-headed dogfish," I began, in ire, "me and you ain't had a fight in years, but by golly--"

"Aw, try to have some sense," said Bill. "This is the idee: You ain't never fought in Yokohama before. Neimann don't know you, nor anybody else. We'll pass you off for Swede--"

"Pass him off for a Swede?" gawped Mushy.

"Well," said Bill, "I'll admit he don't look much like a Swede--"

"Much like a Swede!" I gnashed, my indignation mounting. "Why, you son of a--"

"Well, you don't look nothin' like a Swede then!" snapped Bill, disgustedly, "but we can pass you off for one. I reckon if we tell 'em you're a Swede, they can't prove you ain't. If they dispute it, we'll knock the daylights outa 'em."

I thought it over.

"Not so bad," I finally decided. "We'll get that hundred extra--and, for a chance to fight somebody, I'd purtend I was a Eskimo. We'll do it."

"Good!" said Bill. "Can you talk Swedish?"

"Sure," I said. "Listen: Yimmy Yackson yumped off the Yacob-ladder with his monkey-yacket on. Yimminy, what a yump!"

"Purty good," said Bill. "Come on, we'll go down to Neimann's and sign up. Hey, ain't you goin', Mushy?"

"No, I ain't," said Mushy sourly. "I see right now I ain't goin' to enjoy this scrap none. Steve's my shipmate but Hakon's my countryman. Whichever loses, I won't rejoice none. I hope it's a draw. I ain't even goin' to see it."

Well, he went off by hisself, and I said to Bill, "I gotta good mind not to go on with this, since Mushy feels that way about it."

"Aw, he'll get over it," said Bill. "My gosh, Steve, this here's a matter of business. Ain't we all busted? Mushy'll feel all right after we split your purse three ways and he has a few shots of hard licker."

"Well, all right," I said. "Let's get down to Neimann's."

SO ME AND Bill and my white bulldog, Mike, went down to Neimann's, and, as we walked in, Bill hissed, "Don't forget to talk Swedish."

A short, fat man, which I reckoned was Neimann, was setting and looking over a list of names, and now and then he'd take a long pull out of a bottle, and then he'd cuss fit to curl your toes, and pull his hair.

"Well, Neimann," said Bill, cheerfully, "what you doin'?"

"I got a list of all the Swedes in port which think they can fight," said Neimann, bitterly. "They ain't one of 'em would last five seconds against Torkilsen. I'll have to call it off."

"No you won't," said Bill. "Right here I got the fightin'est Swede in the Asiatics!"

Neimann faced around quick to look at me, and his eyes flared, and he jumped up like he'd been stung.

"Get outa here!" he yelped. "You should come around here and mock me in my misery! A sweet time for practical jokes--"

"Aw, cool off," said Bill. "I tell you this Swede can lick Hakon Torkilsen with his right thumb in his mouth."

"Swede!" snorted Neimann. "You must think I'm a prize sucker, bringin' this black-headed mick around here and tellin' me--"

"Mick, baloney!" said Bill. "Lookit them blue eyes--"

"I'm lookin' at 'em," snarled Neimann, "and thinkin' of the lakes of Killarney all the time. Swede? Ha! Then so was Jawn L. Sullivan. So you're a Swede, are you?"

"Sure," I said. "Aye bane Swedish, Mister."

"What part of Sweden?" he barked.

"Gotland," I said, and simultaneous Bill said, "Stockholm," and we glared at each other in mutual irritation.

"Cork, you'd better say," sneered Neimann.

"Aye am a Swede," I said, annoyed. "Aye want dass fight."

"Get outa here and quit wastin' my valuable time," snarled Neimann. "If you're a Swede, then I'm a Hindoo Princess!"

At this insulting insinuation I lost my temper. I despises a man that's so suspicious he don't trust his feller men. Grabbing Neimann by the neck with a viselike grip, and waggling a huge fist under his nose, I roared, "You insultin' monkey! Am I a Swede or ain't I?"

He turned pale and shook like an aspirin-leaf.

"You're a Swede," he agreed, weakly.

"And I get the fight?" I rumbled.

"You get it," he agreed, wiping his brow with a bandanner. "The squareheads may stretch my neck for this, but maybe, if you keep your mouth shut, we'll get by. What's your name?"

"Steve--" I began, thoughtlessly, when Bill kicked me on the shin and said, "Lars Ivarson."

"All right," said Neimann, pessimistically, "I'll announce it that I got a man to fight Torkilsen."

"How much do I--how much Aye bane get?" I asked.

"I guaranteed a thousand bucks to the fighters," he said, "to be split seven hundred to the winner and three hundred to the loser."

"Give me das loser's end now," I demanded. "Aye bane go out and bet him, you betcha life."

So he did, and said, "You better keep offa the street; some of your countrymen might ask you about the folks back home in dear old Stockholm." And, with that, he give a bitter screech of raucous and irritating laughter, and slammed the door; and as we left, we heered him moaning like he had the bellyache.

"I don't believe he thinks I'm a Swede," I said, resentfully.

"Who cares?" said Bill. "We got the match. But he's right. I'll go place the bets. You keep outa sight. Long's you don't say much, we're safe. But, if you go wanderin' around, some squarehead'll start talkin' Swedish to you and we'll be sunk."

"All right," I said. "I'll get me a room at the sailor's boardin' house we seen down Manchu Road. I'll stay there till it's time for the scrap."

SO BILL WENT off to lay the bets, and me and Mike went down the back alleys toward the place I mentioned. As we turned out of a side street into Manchu Road, somebody come around the corner moving fast, and fell over Mike, who didn't have time to get outa the way.

The feller scrambled up with a wrathful roar. A big blond bezark he was, and he didn't look like a sailor. He drawed back his foot to kick Mike, as if it was the dog's fault. But I circumvented him by the simple process of kicking him severely on the shin.

"Drop it, cull," I growled, as he begun hopping around, howling wordlessly and holding his shin. "It wasn't Mike's fault, and you hadn't no cause to kick him. Anyhow, he'd of ripped yore laig off if you'd landed--"

Instead of being pacified, he gave a bloodthirsty yell and socked me on the jaw. Seeing he was one of them bull-headed mugs you can't reason with, I banged him once with my right, and left him setting dizzily in the gutter picking imaginary violets.

Proceeding on my way to the seamen's boardin's house, I forgot all about the incident. Such trifles is too common for me to spend much time thinking about. But, as it come out, I had cause to remember it.

I got me a room and stayed there with the door shut till Bill come in, jubilant, and said the crew of the *Sea Girl* hadst sunk all the money it could borrow at heavy odds.

"If you lose," said he, "most of us will go back to the ship wearin' barrels."

"Me lose?" I snorted disgustedly. "Don't be absurd. Where's the Old Man?"

"Aw, I seen him down at that dive of antiquity, the Purple Cat Bar, a while ago," said Bill. "He was purty well lit and havin' some kind of a argyment with old Cap'n Gid Jessup. He'll be at the fight all right. I didn't say nothin' to him; but he'll be there."

"He'll more likely land in jail for fightin' old Gid," I ruminated. "They hate each other like snakes. Well, that's his own lookout. But I'd like him to see me lick Torkilsen. I heered him braggin' about the squarehead the other day. Seems like he seen him fight once some place."

"Well," said Bill, "it's nearly time for the fight. Let's get goin'. We'll go down back alleys and sneak into the arena from the rear, so none of them admirin' Swedes can get ahold of you and find out you're really a American mick. Come on!"

So we done so, accompanied by three Swedes of the *Sea Girl*'s crew who was loyal to their ship and their shipmates. We snuck along alleys and slunk into the back rooms of the arena, where Neimann come in to us, perspiring freely, and told us he was having a heck of a time keeping Swedes outa the dressing-room. He said numbers of 'em wanted to come in and shake hands with Lars Ivarson before he went out to uphold the fair name of Sweden. He said Hakon was getting in the ring, and for us to hustle.

So we went up the aisle hurriedly, and the crowd was so busy cheering for Hakon that they didn't notice us till we was in the ring. I looked out over the house, which was packed, setting and standing, and squareheads fighting to get in when they wasn't room for no more. I never knowed they was that many Scandinavians in Eastern waters. It looked like every man in the house was a Dane, a Norwegian, or a Swede--big, blond fellers, all roaring like bulls in their excitement. It looked like a stormy night.

NEIMANN WAS WALKING around the ring, bowing and grinning, and every now and then his gaze wouldst fall on me as I set in my corner and he wouldst shudder viserbly and wipe his forehead with his bandanner.

Meanwhile, a big Swedish sea captain was acting the part of the announcer, and was making quite a ceremony out of it. He wouldst boom out jovially, and the crowd wouldst roar in various alien tongues, and I told one of the Swedes from the *Sea Girl* to translate for me, which he done so in a whisper, while pertending to tie on my gloves.

This is what the announcer was saying: "Tonight all Scandinavia is represented here in this glorious forthcoming struggle for supremacy. In my mind it brings back days of the Vikings. This is a Scandinavian spectacle for Scandinavian sailors. Every man involved in this contest is Scandinavian. You all know Hakon Torkilsen, the pride of Denmark!" Whereupon, all the Danes in the crowd bellered. "I haven't met Lars Ivarson, but the very fact that he is a son of Sweden assures us that he will prove no mean opponent for Denmark's favored son." It was the Swedes' turn to roar. "I now present the referee, Jon Yarssen, of Norway! This is a family affair. Remember, whichever way the fight goes, it will lend glory to Scandinavia!"

Then he turned and pointed toward the opposite corner and roared, "Hakon Torkilsen, of Denmark!"

Again the Danes thundered to the skies, and Bill O'Brien hissed in my ear. "Don't forget when you're interjuiced say 'Dis bane happiest moment of my life!' The accent will convince 'em you're a Swede."

The announcer turned toward me and, as his eyes fell on me for the first time, he started violently and blinked. Then he kind of mechanically pulled hisself together and stammered, "Lars Ivarson--of--of--Sweden!"

I riz, shedding my bathrobe, and a gasp went up from the crowd like they was thunderstruck or something. For a moment a sickening silence reigned, and then my Swedish shipmates started applauding, and some of the Swedes and Norwegians took it up, and, like people always do, got louder and louder till they was lifting the roof.

Three times I started to make my speech, and three times they drowned me out, till I run outa my short stock of patience.

"Shut up, you lubbers!" I roared, and they lapsed into sudden silence, gaping at me in amazement. With a menacing scowl, I said, "Dis bane happiest moment of my life, by thunder!"

They clapped kind of feebly and dazedly, and the referee motioned us to the center of the ring. And, as we faced each other, I gaped, and he barked, "Aha!" like a hyena which sees some critter caught in a trap. The referee was the big cheese I'd socked in the alley!

I didn't pay much attention to Hakon, but stared morbidly at the referee, which reeled off the instructions in some Scandinavian tongue. Hakon nodded and responded in kind, and the referee glared at me and snapped something and I nodded and grunted, "Ja!" just as if I understood him, and turned back toward my corner.

He stepped after me, and caught hold of my gloves. Under cover of examining 'em he hissed, so low my handlers didn't even hear him, "You are no Swede! I know you. You called your dog 'Mike.' There is only one white bulldog in the Asiatics by that name! You are Steve Costigan, of the *Sea Girl*."

"Keep it quiet," I muttered nervously.

"Ha!" he snarled. "I will have my revenge. Go ahead--fight your fight. After the bout is over, I will expose you as the imposter you are. These men will hang you to the rafters."

"Gee whiz," I mumbled, "what you wanta do that for? Keep my secret and I'll slip you fifty bucks after the scrap."

He merely snorted, "Ha!" in disdain, pointing meaningly at the black eye which I had give him, and stalked back to the center of the ring.

"What did that Norwegian say to you?" Bill O'Brien asked.

I didn't reply. I was kinda wool-gathering. Looking out over the mob, I admit I didn't like the prospects. I hadst no doubt that them infuriated squareheads would be maddened at the knowledge that a alien had passed hisself off as one of 'em--and they's a limit to the numbers that even Steve Costigan can vanquish in mortal combat! But about that time the gong sounded, and I forgot everything except the battle before me.

FOR THE FIRST time I noticed Hakon Torkilsen, and I realized why he had such a reputation. He was a regular panther of a man--a tall, rangy, beautifully built young slugger with a mane of yellow hair and cold, steely eyes. He was six feet one to my six feet, and weighed 185 to my 190. He was trained to the ounce, and his long, smooth muscles rippled under his white skin as he moved. My black mane musta contrasted strongly with his golden hair.

He come in fast and ripped a left hook to my head, whilst I come back with a right to the body which brung him up standing. But his body muscles was like iron ridges, and I knowed it wouldst take plenty of pounding to soften him there, even though it was me doing the pounding.

Hakon was a sharpshooter, and he begunst to shoot his left straight and fast. All my opponents does, at first, thinking I'm a sucker for a left jab. But they soon abandons that form of attack. I ignores left jabs. I now walked through a perfect hail of 'em and crashed a thundering right under Hakon's heart which brung a astonished grunt outa him. Discarding his jabbing offensive, he started flailing away with both hands, and I wanta tell you he wasn't throwing no powder-puffs!

It was the kind of scrapping I like. He was standing up to me, giving and taking, and I wasn't called on to run him around the ring like I gotta do with so many of my foes. He was belting me plenty, but that's my style, and, with a wide grin, I slugged merrily at his body and head, and the gong found us in the center of the ring, banging away.

The crowd give us a roaring cheer as we went back to our corners, but suddenly my grin was wiped off by the sight of Yarssen, the referee, cryptically indicating his black eye as he glared morbidly at me.

I determined to finish Torkilsen as quick as possible, make a bold break through the crowd, and try to get away before Yarssen had time to tell 'em my fatal secret. Just as I started to tell Bill, I felt a hand jerking at my ankle. I looked down into the bewhiskered, bewildered and bleary-eyed face of the Old Man.

"Steve!" he squawked. "I'm in a terrible jam!"

Bill O'Brien jumped like he was stabbed. "Don't yell 'Steve' thataway!" he hissed. "You wanta get us all mobbed?"

"I'm in a terrible jam!" wailed the Old Man, wringing his hands. "If you don't help me, I'm a rooined man!"

"What's the lay?" I asked in amazement, leaning through the ropes.

"It's Gid Jessup's fault," he moaned. "The serpent got me into a argyment and got me drunk. He knows I ain't got no sense when I'm soused. He hornswoggled me into laying a bet on Torkilsen. I didn't know you was goin' to fight--"

"Well," I said, "that's tough, but you'll just have to lose the bet."

"I can't!" he howled.

Bong! went the gong, and I shot outa my corner as Hakon ripped outa his.

"I can't lose!" the Old Man howled above the crowd. "I bet the *Sea Girl*!"

"What!" I roared, momentarily forgetting where I was, and half-turning toward the ropes. Bang! Hakon nearly tore my head off with a free-swinging right. Bellering angrily, I come back with a smash to the mush that started the claret, and we went into a slug-fest, flailing free and generous with both hands.

That Dane was tough! Smacks that would of staggered most men didn't make him wince. He come ploughing in for more. But, just before the gong, I caught him off balance with a blazing left hook that knocked him into the ropes, and the Swedes arose, whooping like lions.

BACK ON MY stool I peered through the ropes. The Old Man was dancing a hornpipe.

"What's this about bettin' the *Sea Girl*?" I demanded.

"When I come to myself a while ago, I found I'd wagered the ship," he wept, "against Jessup's lousy tub, the Nigger King, which I find is been condemned by the shippin' board and wouldn't clear the bay without goin' to the bottom. He took a unfair advantage of me! I wasn't responsible when I made that bet!"

"Don't pay it," I growled, "Jessup's a rat!"

"He showed me a paper I signed while stewed," he groaned. "It's a contrack upholdin' the bet. If it weren't for that, I wouldn't pay. But if I don't, he'll rooin my reputation in every port of the seven seas. He'll show that contrack and gimme the name of a welsher. You got to lose!"

"Gee whiz!" I said, badgered beyond endurance. "This is a purty mess--"

Bong! went the gong, and I paced out into the ring, all upset and with my mind elsewhere. Hakon swarmed all over me, and drove me into the ropes, where I woke up and beat him off, but, with the Old Man's howls echoing in my ears, I failed to follow up my advantage, and Hakon come back strong.

The Danes raised the roof as he battered me about the ring, but he wasn't hurting me none, because I covered up, and again, just before the gong, I snapped outa my crouch and sent him back on his heels with a wicked left hook to the head.

The referee gimme a gloating look, and pointed at his black eye, and I had to grit my teeth to keep from socking him stiff. I set down on my stool and listened gloomily to the shrieks of the Old Man, which was getting more unbearable every minute.

"You got to lose!" he howled. "If Torkilsen don't win this fight, I'm rooined! If the bet'd been on the level, I'd pay--you know that. But, I been swindled, and now I'm goin' to get robbed! Lookit the rat over there, wavin' that devilish paper at me! It's more'n human flesh and blood can stand! It's enough to drive a man to drink! You got to lose!"

"But the boys has bet their shirts on me," I snarled, fit to be tied with worry and bewilderment. "I can't lay down! I never throwed a fight. I don't know how--"

"That's gratitood!" he screamed, busting into tears. "After all I've did for you! Little did I know I was warmin' a serpent in my bosom! The poorhouse is starin' me in the face, and you--"

"Aw, shut up, you old sea horse!" said Bill. "Steve--I mean Lars--has got enough to contend with without you howlin' and yellin' like a maneyack. Them squareheads is gonna get suspicious if you and him keep talkin' in English. Don't pay no attention to him, Steve--I mean Lars. Get that Dane!"

Well, the gong sounded, and I went out all tore up in my mind and having just about lost heart in the fight. That's a most dangerous thing to have happen, especially against a man-killing slugger like Hakon Torkilsen. Before I knowed what was goin' on, the Swedes rose with a scream of warning and about a million stars bust in my head. I realized faintly that I was on the canvas, and I listened for the count to know how long I had to rest.

I heered a voice droning above the roar of the fans, but it was plumb meaningless to me. I shook my head, and my sight cleared. Jon Yarssen was standing over me, his arm going up and down, but I didn't understand a word he said! He was counting in Swedish!

Not daring to risk a moment, I heaved up before my head had really quit singing an' Hakon come storming in like a typhoon to finish me.

But I was mad clean through and had plumb forgot about the Old Man and his fool bet. I met Hakon with a left hook which nearly tore his head off, and the Swedes yelped with joy. I bored in, ripping both hands to the wind and heart, and, in a fast mix-up at close quarters, Hakon went down--more from a slip than a punch. But he was wise and took a count, resting on one knee.

I watched the referee's arm so as to familiarize myself with the sound of the numerals--but he wasn't counting in the same langwidge as he had over me! I got it, then; he counted over me in Swedish and over Hakon in Danish. The langwidges is alike in many ways, but different enough to get me all mixed up, which didn't know a word in either tongue, anyhow. I seen then that I was going to have a enjoyable evening.

Hakon was up at nine--I counted the waves of the referee's arm--and he come up at me like a house afire. I fought him off half-heartedly, whilst the Swedes shouted with amazement at the change which had come over me since that blazing first round.

Well, I've said repeatedly that a man can't fight his best when he's got his mind on something else. Here was a nice mess for me to worry about. If I quit, I'd be a yeller dog and despize myself for the rest of my life, and my shipmates would lose their money, and so would all the Swedes which had bet on me and was now yelling and cheering for me just like I was their brother. I couldn't throw 'em down. Yet if I won, the Old Man would lose his ship, which was all he had and like a daughter to him. It wouldst beggar him and break his heart. And, as a minor thought, whether I won or lost, that scut Yarssen was going to tell the crowd I wasn't no Swede, and get me mobbed. Every time I looked at him over Hakon's shoulder in a clinch, Yarssen wouldst touch his black eye meaningly. I was bogged down in gloom, and I wished I could evaporate or something.

Back on my stool, between rounds, the Old Man wept and begged me to lay down, and Bill and my handlers implored me to wake up and kill Torkilsen, and I thought I'd go nuts.

I WENT OUT for the fourth round slowly, and Hakon, evidently thinking I'd lost my fighting heart, if any, come with his usual tigerish rush and biffed me three times in the face without a return.

I dragged him into a grizzly-like clinch which he couldn't break, and as we rassled and strained, he spat something at me which I couldn't understand, but I understood the tone of it. He was calling me yellow! Me, Steve Costigan, the terror of the high seas!

With a maddened roar, I jerked away from him and crashed a murderous right to his jaw that nearly floored him. Before he couldst recover his balance, I tore into him like a wild man, forgetting everything except that I was Steve Costigan, the bully of the toughest ship afloat.

Slugging right and left, I rushed him into the ropes, where I pinned him, while the crowd went crazy. He crouched and covered up, taking most of my punches on the gloves and elbows, but I reckoned it looked to the mob like I was beating him to death. All at once, above the roar, I heered the Old Man screaming, "Steve, for cats' sake, let up! I'll go on the beach, and it'll be your fault!"

That unnerved me. I involuntarily dropped my hands and recoiled, and Hakon, with fire in his eyes, lunged outa his crouch like a tiger and crashed his right to my jaw.

Bang! I was on the canvas again, and the referee was droning Swedish numerals over me. Not daring to take a count, and maybe get counted out unknowingly, I staggered up, and Hakon come lashing in. I throwed my arms around him in a grizzly hug, and it took him and the referee both to break my hold.

Hakon drove me staggering into the ropes with a wild-man attack, but I'm always dangerous on the ropes, as many a good man has found out on coming to in his dressing room. As I felt the rough strands against my back, I caught him with a slung-shot right uppercut which snapped his head right back betwixt his shoulders, and this time it was him which fell into a clinch and hung on.

Looking over his shoulder at that sea of bristling blond heads and yelling faces, I seen various familiar figgers. On one side of the ring--near my corner--the Old Man was dancing around like he was on a red-hot hatch, shedding maudlin tears and pulling his whiskers; and, on the other side, a skinny, shifty-eyed old seaman was whooping with glee and waving a folded paper. Cap'n Gid Jessup, the old cuss! He knowed the Old Man would bet anything when he was drunk--even bet the *Sea Girl*, as sweet a ship as ever rounded the Horn, against that rotten old hulk of a Nigger King, which wasn't worth a cent a ton. And, near at hand, the referee, Yarssen, was whispering tenderly in my ear, as he broke our clinch, "Better let Hakon knock you stiff--then you won't feel so much what the crowd does to you when I tell them who you are!"

Back on my stool again, I put my face on Mike's neck and refused to listen either to the pleas of the Old Man or to the profane shrieks of Bill O'Brien. By golly, that fight was like a nightmare! I almost hoped Hakon would knock my brains out and end all my troubles.

I went out for the fifth like a man going to his own hanging. Hakon was evidently puzzled. Who wouldn't of been? Here was a fighter--me--who was performing in spurts, exploding in bursts of ferocious battling just when he appeared nearly out, and sagging half heartedly when he looked like a winner.

He come in, lashed a vicious left to my mid-section, and dashed me to the canvas with a thundering overhand right. Maddened, I arose and dropped him with a wild round-house swing he wasn't expecting. Again the crowd surged to its feet, and the referee got flustered and started counting over Hakon in what sounded like Swedish.

Hakon bounded up and slugged me into the ropes, offa which I floundered, only to slip in a smear of my own blood on the canvas, and again, to the disgust of the Swedes, I found myself among the resin.

I looked about, heard the Old Man yelling for me to stay down, and saw Old Cap'n Jessup waving his blame-fool contrack. I arose, only half aware of what I was doing, and bang! Hakon caught me on the ear with a hurricane swing, and I sprawled on the floor, half under the ropes.

Goggling dizzily at the crowd from this position, I found myself staring into the distended eyes of Cap'n Gid Jessup, which was standing up, almost touching the ring. Evidently froze at the thought of losing his bet--with me on the canvas--he was standing there gaping, his arm still lifted with the contrack which he'd been waving at the Old Man.

With me, thinking is acting. One swoop of my gloved paw swept that contrack outa his hand. He yawped with suprise and come lunging half through the ropes. I rolled away from him, sticking the contrack in my mouth and chawing as fast as I could. Cap'n Jessup grabbed me by the hair with one hand and tried to jerk the contrack outa my jaws with the other'n, but all he got was a severely bit finger.

At this, he let go of me and begun to scream and yell. "Gimme back that paper, you cannibal! He's eatin' my contrack! I'll sue you--!"

MEANWHILE, THE DUMBFOUNDED referee, overcome with amazement, had stopped counting, and the crowd, not understanding this by-play, was roaring with astonishment. Jessup begun to crawl through the ropes, and Yarssen yelled something and shoved him back with his foot. He started through again, yelling blue murder, and a big Swede, evidently thinking he was trying to attack me, swung once with a fist the size of a caulking mallet, and Cap'n Jessup bit the dust.

I arose with my mouth full of paper, and Hakon promptly banged me on the chin with a right he started from his heels. Ow, Jerusha! Wait'll somebody hits you on the jaw when you're chawing something! I thought for a second every tooth in my head was shattered, along with my jaw-bone. But I reeled groggily back into the ropes and begun to swaller hurriedly.

Bang! Hakon whanged me on the ear. "Gulp!" I said. Wham! He socked me in the eye. "Gullup!" I said. Blop! He pasted me in the stummick. "Oof--glup!" I said. Whang! He took me on the side of the head. "Gulp!" I swallered the last of the contrack, and went for that Dane with fire in my eyes.

I banged Hakon with a left that sunk outa sight in his belly, and nearly tore his head off with a paralyzing right before he realized that, instead of being ready for the cleaners, I was stronger'n ever and ra'ring for action.

Nothing loath, he rallied, and we went into a whirlwind of hooks and swings till the world spun like a merry-go-round. Neither of us heered the gong, and our seconds had to drag us apart and lead us to our corners.

"Steve," the Old Man was jerking at my leg and weeping with gratitude, "I seen it all! That old pole-cat's got no hold on me now. He can't prove I ever made that fool bet. You're a scholar and a gent--one of nature's own noblemen! You've saved the *Sea Girl*!"

"Let that be a lesson to you," I said, spitting out a fragment of the contrack along with a mouthful of blood. "Gamblin' is sinful. Bill, I got a watch in my pants pocket. Get it and bet it that I lay this squarehead within three more rounds."

And I come out for the sixth like a typhoon. "I'm going to get mobbed by the fans as soon as the fight's over and Yarssen spills the beans," I thought, "but I'll have my fun now."

For once I'd met a man which was willing and able to stand up and slug it out with me. Hakon was as lithe as a panther and as tough as spring-steel. He was quicker'n me, and hit nearly as hard. We crashed together in the center of the ring, throwing all we had into the storm of battle.

Through a red mist I seen Hakon's eyes blazing with a unearthly light. He was plumb berserk, like them old Vikings which was his ancestors. And all the Irish fighting madness took hold of me, and we ripped and tore like tigers.

We was the center of a frenzied whirlwind of gloves, ripping smashes to each other's bodies which you could hear all over the house, and socks to each other's heads that spattered blood all over the ring. Every blow packed dynamite and had the killer's lust behind it. It was a test of endurance.

At the gong, we had to be tore apart and dragged to our corners by force, and, at the beginning of the next round, we started in where we'd left off. We reeled in a blinding hurricane of gloves. We slipped in smears of blood, or was knocked to the canvas by each other's thundering blows.

The crowd was limp and idiotic, drooling wordless screeches. And the referee was bewildered and muddled. He counted over us in Swedish, Danish and Norwegian alike. Then I was on the canvas, and Hakon was staggering on the ropes, gasping, and the befuddled Yarssen was counting over me. And, in the dizzy maze, I recognized the langwidge. He was counting in Spanish!

"You ain't no Norwegian!" I said, glaring groggily up at him.

"Four!" he said, shifting into English. "--As much as you're a Swede! Five! A man's got to eat. Six! They wouldn't have given me this job--seven!--if I hadn't pretended to be a Norwegian. Eight! I'm John Jones, a vaudeville linguist from Frisco. Nine! Keep my secret and I'll keep yours."

THE GONG! OUR handlers dragged us off to our corners and worked over us. I looked over at Hakon. I was marked plenty--a split ear, smashed lips, both eyes half closed, nose broken--but them's my usual adornments. Hakon wasn't marked up so much in the face--outside of a closed eye and a few gashes--but his body was raw beef from my continuous body hammering. I drawed a deep breath and grinned gargoylishly. With the Old Man and that fake referee offa my mind, I couldst give all my thoughts to the battle.

The gong banged again, and I charged like a enraged bull. Hakon met me as usual, and rocked me with thundering lefts and rights. But I bored in, driving him steadily before me with ripping, bone-shattering hooks to the body and head. I felt him slowing up. The man don't live which can slug with me!

Like a tiger scenting the kill, I redoubled the fury of my onslaught, and the crowd arose, roaring, as they foresaw the end. Nearly on the ropes, Hakon rallied with a dying burst of ferocity, and momentarily had me reeling under a fusillade of desperate swings. But I shook my head doggedly and plowed in under his barrage, ripping my terrible right under his heart again and again, and tearing at his head with mallet-like left hooks.

Flesh and blood couldn't stand it. Hakon crumpled in a neutral corner under a blasting fire of left and right hooks. He tried to get his legs under him, but a child couldst see he was done.

The referee hesitated, then raised my right glove, and the Swedes and Norwegians came roaring into the ring and swept me offa my feet. A glance showed Hakon's Danes carrying him to his corner, and I tried to get to him to shake his hand, and tell him he was as brave and fine a fighter as I ever met--which was the truth and nothing else--but my delirious followers hadst boosted both me and Mike on their shoulders and were carrying us toward the dressing-room like a king or something.

A tall form come surging through the crowd, and Mushy Hansen grabbed my gloved hand and yelled, "Boy, you done us proud! I'm sorry the Danes had to lose, but, after a battle like that, I can't hold no grudge. I couldn't stay away from the scrap. Hooray for the old *Sea Girl*, the fightin'est ship on the seven seas!"

And the Swedish captain, which had acted as announcer, barged in front of me and yelled in English, "You may be a Swede, but if you are, you're the most unusual looking Swede I ever saw. But I don't give a whoop! I've just seen the greatest battle since Gustavus Adolphus licked the Dutch! Skoal, Lars lvarson!"

And all the Swedes and Norwegians thundered, "Skoal, Lars lverson!"

"They want you to make a speech," said Mushy.

"All right," I said. "Dis bane happiest moment of my life!"

"Louder," said Mushy. "They're makin' so much noise they can't understand you, anyhow. Say somethin' in a foreign langwidge."

"All right," I said, and yelled the only foreign words I couldst think of, "Parleyvoo Francais! Vive le Stockholm! Erin go bragh!"

And they bellered louder'n ever. A fighting man is a fighting man in any langwidge!

THE END

Contents

WATERFRONT FISTS

By Robert E. Howard

THE *SEA GIRL* hadn't been docked in Honolulu more'n three hours before Bill O'Brien come legging it down to the pool hall where I was showing Mushy Hansen the fine points of the game, to tell me that he'd got me matched to fight some has-been at the American Arena that night.

"The Ruffian is in," said Bill, "and they got a fellow which they swear can take any man aboard the *Sea Girl* to a royal cleanin'. I ain't seen him, but they say he growed up in the back country of Australia and run wild with the kangaroos till he was shanghaied aboard a ship at an early age. They say he's licked everybody aboard the Ruffian from the cap'n down to the mess boy--"

"Stow the gab and lead me to some Ruffian idjits which is cravin' to risk their jack on this tramp," I interrupted. "I got a hundred and fifty bucks that's burnin' my pockets up."

Well, it was easy to find some lunatics from the Ruffian, and after putting up our money at even odds, with a bartender for stakeholder, and knowing I had a tough battle ahead of me and needed some training, I got me a haircut and then went down to the Hibernian Bar for a few shots of hard licker. While me and Bill and Mushy was lapping up our drinks, in come Sven Larsen. This huge and useless Swede has long been laboring under the hallucination that he oughta be champion of the *Sea Girl*, and no amount of battering has been able to quite wipe the idee outa what he supposes to be his brain.

Well, this big mistake come up to me, and scowling down at me, he said: "You Irisher, put oop your hands!"

I set my licker down with a short sigh of annoyance. "With a thousand sailors in port itchin' for a scrap," I said, "you got to pick on me. G'wan--I don't want to fight no shipmate now. Anyway, I got to fight the Ruffian's man in a few hours."

"Aye shood be fightin' him," persisted the deluded maniac. "Aye ought to be champ of dey *Sea Girl*. Come on, you big stiffer!" And so saying he squared off in what he fondly believed was a fighting pose. At this moment my white bulldog, Mike, sensing trouble, bristled and looked up from the bowl of beer he was lapping up on the floor, but seeing it was nobody but Sven, he curled up and went to sleep.

"Don't risk your hands on the big chump, Steve," said Bill disgustedly. "I'll fix him--"

"You stay oot of dis, Bill O'Brien," said the Swede waving his huge fists around menacingly. "Aye will see to you after Aye lick Steve."

"Aw, you're drunk," I said. "A fine shipmate you are."

"Aye am not droonk!" he roared. "My girl told me--"

"I didn't know you had a girl here," said Bill.

"Well, Aye have. And she said a big man like me shood be champion of his ship and she wouldn't have nothings to do with me till Aye was. So put oop your hands--"

"Aw, you're crazy," I snapped, turning back to the bar, but watching him close from the corner of my eye. Which was a good thing because he started a wild right swing that had destruction wrote all over it. I side-stepped and he crashed into the bar. Rebounding with a bloodthirsty beller he lunged at me, and seeing they was no arguing with the misguided heathen, I stepped inside his swing and brought up a right uppercut to the jaw that lifted his whole two hundred and forty-five pounds clean off the floor and stood him on the back of his neck, out cold. Mike, awakened by the crash, opened one eye, raised one ear, and then went back to sleep with a sort of gentle canine smile.

"Y'oughta be careful," growled Bill, while Mushy sloshed a pitcher of dirty water over the Swede. "You mighta busted yore hand. Whyn't you hit him in the stummick?"

"I didn't wanta upset his stummick," I said. "I've skinned my knuckles a little, but they ain't even bruised much. I've had 'em in too many buckets uh brine."

AT LAST SVEN was able to sit up and cuss me, and he mumbled something I didn't catch.

"He says he's got a date with his girl tonight," Mushy said, "but he's ashamed to go back to her with that welt on his jaw and tell her he got licked."

"Ya," said Sven, rubbing his jaw, "you got to go tell her I can't come, Steve."

"Aw, well," I said, "all right. I'll tell her you fell off the docks and sprained your ankle. Where's she live?"

"She dances at the Striped Cat Cabaret," said Sven.

After downing a finger of Old Jersey Cream, I tightened my belt and me and Mike sauntered forth.

Bill followed me out into the street and said: "Dawg-gone it, Steve, you ought not to go cruisin' off this way, with the fight just a few hours in the offin'. That Ruffian crew is crooked as a buncha snakes--and you know what a soft head you are where women is concerned."

"Your remarks is highly insultin', Bill," I returned with my well-known quiet dignity. "I don't reckon no woman ever made a fool outa me. I know 'em like a book. Anyhow, you don't think I'd fall for a dame as encouraged a sap like Sven, do you? Heck, she's probably some big fat wench with a face like a bull terrier. What'd he say her name was--oh, yes, Gloria Flynn. Don't you worry about me. I'll be at the American in plenty uh time."

It was after dark when me and Mike got to the Striped Cat Cabaret which is located in a tough waterfront section of the city. I asked the manager for Gloria Flynn, and he said she'd just finished a dance and was in her dressing room, changing to street clothes. He told me to wait for her at the back exit, which I done. I was standing there when the door opened and some girls come out. I said, taking off my cap, politely, "Which one of you frails is Gloria Flynn, if any?"

You could of knocked me over with a pile-driver when the snappiest, prettiest one of the bunch up and said, "I'm her--and what of it?"

"Well," I said, eyeing her with great admiration, "all I can say is, what does a girl like you want to waste her time with such tripe as Sven Larsen when they is men like me in port?"

"Don't get fresh!" she snapped.

"Oh, I ain't fresh," I assured her. "I just come to tell you that Sven fell off a dock and broke his neck--I mean sprained his ankle, and he can't make the date tonight."

"Oh," she murmured. Then looking close at me, she said, "Who are you?"

"I'm Steve Costigan, the fellow that licked him," I replied thoughtlessly.

"Oh!" she said, kind of breathlessly. "So you're Steve Costigan!"

"Yeah, I am," I said, having spilled the beans anyway. "Steve Costigan, A. B. mariner, and heavyweight champion aboard the trader *Sea Girl*. I knowed you didn't know me, or you wouldn't of persuaded your boy friend to risk his life by takin' a swing at me."

She looked kind of bewildered. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, it's all right," I hastened to assure her. "Sven told me about you urgin' him to climb me, but it's natural for a frail to want her fellow to be a champ of somethin'. What I can't understand is, what you see in a galoot like Sven."

She gave a kind of hysterical laugh. "Oh, I see. Why, Mr. Costigan--"

"Call me Steve," I beamed.

"Well--Steve," she said with a little embarrassed laugh, "I didn't urge him anything of the sort. I just said he was such a big fellow I bet he could whip anybody aboard his ship--and he said one of the other sailors, Steve Costigan, was champion, and I said I was surprised that anybody could lick him--Sven, I mean. Why, I had no idea he'd get it into his head I wanted him to fight anybody. I do hope you didn't hurt the poor boy."

"Oh, not much," I said, unconsciously swelling out my huge chest, "I always handle my shipmates easy as possible. Though uh course, I'm so powerful some times I hit harder'n I intend to. But say, sister, I know a swell little girl like you wasn't takin' that big squarehead serious. You was just sorry for him because he's so kind of big and awkward and dumb, wasn't you?"

"Well," she admitted, "that was the way of it; he looked lonesome--"

"Well, that's mighty fine of you," I said. "But forget about him now; after the beltin' I give him, he won't want to come back to you, and anyway, he'll find a native girl or a Chinese or somethin'. He ain't like me; a woman's a woman to him and he'll fall for anything in skirts that comes along. Me, I'm a one-woman man. Anyway, kid, it ain't right for you to trail around with a galoot like him. You owe it to yourself to keep company with only the best--me, for instance."

"Maybe you're right," she said, with downcast eyes.

"Sure, I'm always right," I answered modestly. "Now what say we go in and lap up something. All this talkin' I been doin's got my throat dry."

"Oh, I never drink intoxicants," she said with a bright smile. "If you don't mind let's go over here to this ice-cream parlor."

"O.K. with me," I said, "but first lemme introduce you to Mike who can lick his weight both in wildcats and dog biscuits."

Well, Mike, he shook hands with her but he wasn't particular enthusiastic. He ain't no ladies' dog; he treats 'em politely but coldly. Then we went over to the joint where they sold ice cream, and while we was dawdling over the stuff, I let my eyes wander over my charming companion. She was a beauty, no doubt about it; curly yellow hair and big trusting violet eyes.

"WHAT'S A NICE girl like you doin' workin' in a dump like the Striped Cat?" I asked her, and she kind of sighed and hung her head.

"A girl has to do lots of things she don't like to," she said. "I was in a high class stock company which went broke here on account of the manager getting delirium tremens and having to be sent back to his home in England. I had to eat, and this was the only job open for me. Some day I'm going home; my folks live on a dairy farm in New Jersey, and I was a fool ever to leave there. Right now I can see the old white farm house, and the green meadows with the babbling brooks running through them, and the cows grazing."

I thought she was going to cry for a minute, then she kind of sighed and smiled: "It's all in a lifetime, isn't it?"

"You're a brave kid," I said, touched to my shoe soles, "and I wanta see more of you. I'm fightin' some guy at the American Arena in a little while. How about holdin' down a nice ringside seat there, and then havin' supper and a little dancin' afterwards? I can't dance much, but I'm a bear at the supper table."

"Oh," said she, "you're the man that's going to fight Red Roach?"

"Is that his name?" I asked. "Yeah, if he's the man from the Ruffian."

"I'd like to go," she said, "but I have to go on in another dance number in half an hour."

"Well," I said, "the fight can't last more'n three or four rounds, not with me in there. How 'bout me droppin' around the Striped Cat afterwards? If you ain't through then, I'll wait for you."

"That's fine," she said, and noting my slightly unsatisfied expression, she said: "If I'd known you were going to fight so soon, I wouldn't have let you eat that ice cream."

"Oh, that won't interfere with my punchin' ability any," I said. "But I would like a shot of hard licker to kind of settle it on my stummick."

That's the truth; sailors is supposed to be hawgs about ice cream and I have seen navy boys eat it in digusting quantities, but it's poor stuff for my belly. Mike had ate the bowl full I give him, but he'd a sight rather had a pan of slush.

"Let's don't go in any of these saloons," said Gloria. "These waterfront bars sell you the same stuff rattlesnakes have in their teeth. I tell you, I've got a bottle of rare old wine not very far from here. I never touch it myself, but I keep it for my special friends and they say it's great. You've time for a nip, haven't you?"

"Lead on, sister," I said, "I've always got time to take a drink, or oblige a beautiful girl!"

"Ah, you flatterer," she said, giving me a little push. "I bet you tell that to every girl you meet."

WELL, TO MY surprise we halted before a kind of ramshackle gymnasium, and Gloria took out a key and unlocked the door.

"I didn't tell you I had a kid brother with me," she said in answer to my surprised glance. "He's a weakly sort of kid, and I have to support him as well as myself. Poor kid, he would come with me when I left home. Well, Mr. Salana, who owns the gym, lets him use the equipment to build himself up; it's healthy for him. This is the boy's key. I keep the wine hidden in one of the lockers."

"Ain't this where Tony Andrada trains?" I asked suspiciously. "'Cause if it is, it ain't no place for a nice girl. They is fighters and fighters, my child, and Tony is no credit to no business."

"He's always been a perfect gentleman towards me," she answered. "Of course I come here only occasionally when my brother is working out--" She opened the door and we went in and then she shut it. To my slight surprise I heard the click as she locked it. She switched on a light and I seen her bending over something. Then she swung around and--wow!--I got the most unexpected, dumfounding surprise of my life to date! When she turned she had a heavy Indian club in both hands, and she heaved it up and crashed it down on my head with everything she had behind it!

Well, I was so utterly dumfounded I just stood and gaped at her, and Mike, he nearly had a fit. I'd always taught him never to bite a woman, and he just didn't know what to do. Gloria was staring at me with eyes that looked like they was going to jump right out of her head. She glanced down at the broken fragments of the Indian club in a kind of stunned way, and then the color all ebbed out of her face, leaving her white as a ghost.

"That's a nice way to do a friend!" I said reproachfully. "I don't mind a joke, but you've made me bite my tongue."

She cringed back against the wall and held out both hands pitifully: "Don't hit me!" she cried, "please don't hit me! I had to do it!"

Well, if I ever seen a scared girl, it was then. She was shaking in every limb.

"You don't need to insult me on top of busting a club on my skull," I said with my quiet dignity. "I never hit no woman in my life and I ain't figurin' on it."

All to once she began to cry. "Oh," said she, "I'm ashamed of myself. But please listen--I've lied to you. My brother is a fighter too, and he just about had this fight with Red Roach, when the promoter at the American changed his mind and signed you up instead. This fight would have given us enough to get back to New Jersey where those cows are grazing by the babbling meadows. I--I--thought, when you told me you were the one that's going to fight Roach, I'd fix it so you wouldn't show up, and they'd have to use Billy--that's my brother--after all. I was going to knock you unconscious and tie you up till after the fight. Oh, I know you'll hate me, but I'm desperate. I'll die if I have to live this life much longer," she said passionately. And then she starts to bawl.

Well, I can't see as it was my fault, but I felt like a horse thief anyhow.

"Don't cry," I said. "I'd help you all I can, but I got all my jack sunk on the imbroblio to win by a k.o."

She lifted her tear stained face. "Oh, Steve, you can help me! Just stay here with me! Don't show up at the Arena! Then Billy will get the fight and we can go home! Please, Steve, please, please, please!"

She had her arms around my neck and was fairly shaking me in her eagerness. Well, I admit I got a soft spot in my heart for the weaker sex, but gee whiz!

"Great cats, Gloria," I said, "I'd dive off the Statue uh Liberty for you, but I can't do this. My shipmates has got every cent they got bet on me. I can't throw 'em down that way."

"You don't love me!" she mourned.

"Aw, I do too," I protested. "But dawg-gone it, Gloria, I just can't do it, and please don't coax me, 'cause it's like jerkin' a heart-string loose to say 'No' to you. Wait a minute! I got a idee! You and your brother got some money saved up, ain't cha?"

"Yes, some," she sniffed, dabbing at her eyes with a foolish little lace handkerchief.

"Well, listen," I said, "you can double it--sink every cent you got on me to win by a kayo! It'll be a cinch placin' the dough. Everybody on the waterfront's bettin' one way or the other."

"But what if you lose?" said she.

"Me lose?" I snorted. "Don't make me laugh! You do that--and I can't stay another minute, kid--I'm due at the Arena right now. And say, I'll have some dough myself after the battle, and I'm goin' to help you and your brother get back to them green cows and babblin' farm houses. Now I got to go!"

And before she had time to say another word, I kicked the lock off the door, being in too big a hurry to have her unlock it, and the next second me and Mike was sprinting for the Arena.

I FOUND BILL tearing his hair and walking the dressing room floor.

"Here you are at last, are you, you blankety-blank mick dipthong!" he yelled blood-thirstily. "Where you been? You want to make a nervous wreck outa me? You realize you been committin' the one unpardonable sin, by keepin' the crowd waitin' for fifteen minutes? They're yellin' bloody murder and the crew which is all out front in ringside seats, has been throwin' chairs at the Ruffian's men which has been howlin' you'd run out on us. The promoter says if you ain't in that ring in five minutes, he'll run in a substitute."

"And I'll run him into the bay," said I, sitting down and shucking my shoes. "I gotta get my wind back a little. Boy, we had Sven's girl down all wrong! She's a peach, as well as bein' a square-shootin'--"

"Shut up, and get into them trunks!" howled Bill, doing a war-dance on the cap I'd just took off. "You'll never learn nothin'. Listen to that crowd! We'll be lucky if they don't lynch all of us!"

Well, the maddened fans was making a noise like a flock of hungry lions, but that didn't worry me none. I'd just got into my fighting togs when the door opened and the manager of the Arena stuck a pale face in.

"I got a man in place of Costigan--" he began, when he saw me and stopped.

"Gangway!" I snarled, and as I pushed by him, I saw a fellow in trunks coming out of another dressing room. To my amazement it was Tony Andrada, which even had his hands taped. His jaw fell when he seen me, and his manager, Abe Gold, give a howl. They was two other thugs with them--Salana and Joe Cromwell--I'd been in Honolulu enough to know them yeggs.

"What do you think you're doin' here?" I snarled, facing Tony.

"They want me to fight Roach, when you run out--" he begun.

Bill grabbed my arm as I was making ready to slug him. "For cats' sake!" he snarled, "you can lick him after you flatten Roach if you want to! Come on!"

"It's mighty funny he should turn up, right at this time," I growled. "I thought Billy Flynn was to fight Roach if I didn't show up."

"Who's Billy Flynn?" asked Bill as he rushed me up the aisle between howling rows of infuriated fans.

"My new girl's kid brother," I answered as I clumb through the ropes. "If they've did anything to him, I'll--"

My meditations was drowned by the thunders of the mob, who give me cheers because I'd got there, and razzes because I hadn't got there sooner.

On one side of the ring the *Sea Girl*'s crew lifted the roof with their wild whoops and on the other side the Ruffian's roughnecks greeted me with coarse, rude squawks and impolite remarks.

Well, I glanced over to the opposite corner and saw Red Roach for the first, and I hope the last, time. He was tall and raw-boned, and the ugliest human I ever seen. He had freckles as big as mess pans all over him; his nose was flat, and his low slanting forehead was topped by a shock of the most scandalously red hair I ever looked at. When he rose from his stool I seen he was knock-kneed and when we came to the center of the ring to pretend to listen to instructions, I was disgusted to note that he was also cross-eyed. At first I thought he was counting the crowd, and it was slightly disconcerting to finally decide he was glaring at me!

WE WENT BACK to our corners, the gong sounded, the scrap started and I got another jolt.

Roach come out, right foot and right hand forward. He was left-handed! I was so disgusted I come near lighting in and giving him a good cussing. Red-headed, cross-eyed--and left-handed! And he was the first good port-sider I'd ever met in a ring.

I forgot to say our weights was 190 for me, and 193 for him. In addition, he was six feet three, or just three inches taller'n me, and he musta had a reach of anyways fifteen fathoms. We was still so far apart I didn't think he could reach me with a pole when--bam! his right licked out to my chin. I give a roar and plunged in, meaning to make it a quick fight. I wanted to crush this inhuman freak before the sight of him got on my nerves and rattled me.

But I was all at sea. A left-hander does everything backwards. He leads with his right and crosses his left. He side-steps to the left instead of the right ordinarily. This guy done everything a port-sider's supposed to do, and a lot more stuff he thought up for hisself. He had a fast hard straight right and a wicked left swing--oh boy, how he could hit with that left! Seemed like every time I did anything, I got that right in the eye or the mouth or on the nose, and whilst I was thinking about that, bam! come the left and nearly ripped my head clean off.

The long, lanky mutt--it looked like if I ever landed solid I'd bust him in two. But I couldn't get past that long straight right. My swings were all short and his straight right beat my left hook every time. When I tried trading jabs with him, his extra reach ruint that--anyway, I'm a natural hooker. My straight left is got force, but it ain't as accurate as it should be.

At the end of the first round my right ear was nearly mangled. In the second frame he half closed my eye with a sizzling right hook, and opened a deep gash on my forehead. At the beginning of the third he dropped me for no-count with a left hook to the body that nearly caved me in. The Ruffian's crew was getting crazier every second and the *Sea Girl*'s gang was yelling bloody murder. But I wasn't worried. I'm used to more punishment than I was getting and I wasn't weakening any.

But dawg-gone it, it did make me mad not to be able to hit Roach. To date I hadn't landed a single solid punch. He was a clever boxer in his way, and his style woulda made Dempsey look like a one-armed paperhanger carryin' a bucket.

He managed to keep me at long range, and he belted me plenty, but it wasn't his speed nor his punch that kept me all at sea; it was his cruel and unusual appearance! Dawg-gone--them eyes of his nearly had me batty. I couldn't keep from looking at 'em. I tried to watch his waist-line or his feet, but every time my gaze wouldst wander back to his distorted optics. They had a kinda fatal attraction for me. Whilst I wouldst be trying to figure out where they was looking--wham! would come that left winging in from a entirely unexpected direction--and this continued.

WELL, AFTER ARISING from that knock-down in the third frame, I was infuriated. And after chasing him all around the ring, and getting only another black eye for my pains, I got desperate. With the round half a minute to go, I wowed the audience by closing both my eyes and tearing in, swinging wild and regardless.

He was pelting me plenty, but I didn't care; that visage of his wasn't upsetting all my calculations as long as I couldn't see it, and in a second I felt my left crash against what I knew to be a human jaw. Instantly the crowd went into hystericals and I opened my eyes and looked for the corpse.

My eyes rested on a recumbent figure, but it was not Red Roach. To my annoyance I realized that one of my blind swings had connected with the referee. At the same instant Roach's swinging left crashed against my jaw and I hit the canvas. But even as I went down I swung a wild dying effort right which sunk in just above Red's waistline. The round ended with all three of us on the canvas.

Our respective handlers dragged us to our corners, and somebody throwed a bucket of water on the referee, who was able to answer the gong with us battlers by holding on to the ropes.

Well, as I sat in my corner sniffing the smelling salts and watching Red's handlers massaging his suffering belly, I thought deeply, a very rare habit of mine while fighting. I do not believe in too much thinking; it gives a fighter the headache. Still and all, with my jaw aching from Red's left and my eyes getting strained from watching his unholy face, I rubbed the nose Mike stuck into my glove, and meditated. A left-hander is a right-hander backwards. Nine times out of ten his straight right will beat your left jab. If you lead your right to a right-hander, he'll beat you to the punch with his left; but you can lead your right to a left-hander, because his left has as far to travel as your right.

So when we come out for the fourth round, instead of tearing in, I went in cautious-like for me, ignoring the yells of the Ruffian's crew that I was getting scared of their man. Red feinted with his right so clumsy even I knowed it was a feint and instantly shot my right with everything I had behind it. It beat his left swing and landed solid, but high. He staggered and I dropped him to his all fours with a whistling left hook under the heart. He was up at "Nine" and caught me with a wild left swing as I rushed in. It dizzied me but I kept coming, and every time he made a motion with his left I shot my right. Sometimes I landed first and sometimes he did, and sometimes we landed simultaneous, but my smashes had the most kick behind them. Like most port-siders when they're groggy, he'd clean forgot he had a right hand and was staking everything on his left swing.

I battered him back across the ring, and he rallied and smashed over a sledge-hammer left hook that rocked me to my heels and made the blood spatter, but I bored right in with a sizzling left hook under the heart. He gasped, his knees buckled, then he steadied hisself and shot over his left just as I crashed in with a right. Bam! Something exploded in my head, and then I heard the referee counting. To my chagrin I found I was on the canvas, but Roach was there too.

The still weaving and glassy-eyed referee was holding onto the ropes with one hand and counting over us both, but I managed to reel up at "Six!" Me and Red had landed square to the button at just the same second, but my jaw was just naturally tougher than his. He hadn't twitched at "Ten" and they had to carry him to his dressing room to bring him to.

Well, a few minutes' work on me with smelling salts, ammonia, sponges and the like made me as good as new. I couldn't hardly wait for Bill to dress my cuts with collodion, but the minute I got my clothes on and collected my winnings and bets from the bartender, who'd come to the ring under escort from both ships, I ducked out the back way. I even left Mike with Bill because he's always scrapping with some other dog on the streets and I was in a big hurry.

I was on my way to see if Gloria had followed my advice, also something else. One hundred and fifty bucks I won; with what I had that made three hundred. I got a hundred and fifty for the fracas. Altogether I had four hundred and fifty dollars all in greenbacks of large denomination in my jacket pocket. And I was going to give Gloria every cent of it, if she'd take it, so she could go back to New Jersey and the cows. This sure wasn't no place for a nice girl to be in, and I'll admit I indulged in some dreams as I hurried along--about the time I'd retire from the sea and maybe go into the dairy farming business in New Jersey.

I WAS HEADED for the Striped Cat, but on my way I passed Salana's gym, and I noticed that they was a light in one of the small rooms which served as a kind of office. As I passed the door I distinctly heard a voice I knowed was Gloria's. I stopped short and started to knock on the door, then something made me steal up close and listen--though I ain't a eavesdropper by nature. From the voices five people was in the room--Gloria, Salana, Abe Gold, Joe Cromwell, and Tony.

"Don't hand us no line, sister," Gold was saying in his nasty rasping voice. "You said leave it to you. Yeah, we did! And look what it got us! You was goin' to keep Costigan outa the way, so's we could run Tony in at the last minute. You know the promoter at the American was all set to match Tony with Roach when Costigan's ship docked and the big cheese changed his mind and matched the Mick instead, because the fool sailors wanted the scrap.

"Roach woulda been a spread for Tony, because the wop eats these port-siders up. The town sports know that, and they woulda sunk heavy on Tony. We was goin' to bet our shirts on Roach, and Tony would flop along about the third. Then we coulda all left this dump and gone to Australia.

"Well, we left it up to you to get rid of Costigan. And what does he do, I ask you? He walks in as big as you please, just when Tony was fixing to go in for him. I ask you!"

"Well, don't rag me," said Gloria in a voice which startled me, it was that hard, "I did my best. I got hold of a Swede aboard the *Sea Girl* and primed the big stiff proper. I stirred him up and sent him down to climb Costigan, thinking he'd bung the mick up so he couldn't come on tonight, or that Costigan would at least break his hands on him.

"But the harp flattened him without even spraining a thumb, and the first thing I knew, he was waiting for me outside the cabaret. I thought he'd come to smack me down for sicking the Swede on him, but the big slob had just come to tell me the square-head couldn't keep his date. Can you feature that? Well, he fell for me right off, naturally, and I got him into the gym here, intending to lay him cold and lock him up till after the fight. But say! That big mick must have a skull made of reinforced battleship steel! I shattered a five-pound Indian club over his dome without even making him bat his eyes!

"Well, I hope I never have a half-minute like that again! When I failed to even stagger him with that clout, I thought I was a gone goose! I had visions of him twisting my head off and feeding it to that ugly cannibal he calls his bulldog.

"But you can't tell about those tough looking sluggers like him. He didn't even offer to lay a hand on me, and when I got my second wind, I spun him a yarn about having a kid brother that needed this fight to get back home. He fell for it so easy that I thought I could coax him to run out on his own accord, but he balked there. All he'd do was to advise me to bet on him, and then all at once he said it was time for him to be at the stadium, and he busted right out through the door and took it on the lam, making some crack about coming back after the fight."

"A fine mess you've made!" sneered Salana. "You've gummed things up proper! We had everything set for a killing--"

"A high class brand of sports you are!" she snapped. "I'm ashamed to be seen with you, you cheap grafters! A big killing! You don't know what one is. Anyway, what do you want me to do, cry?"

"We want you to give back that hundred we paid you in advance," snarled Salana, "and if you don't, you'll cry plenty."

"And I guess you think I risk my life for such cheap welchers as you for nothing?" she sneered. "Not one cent--"

There was the sound of a blow and Gloria give a short, sharp cry which was cut short in a sort of gasp.

"Give her the works, Joe," Salana snarled. "You can't cross me, you little--!"

NEVER MIND WHAT he called her. I'd have half killed him for that alone. I tore the door clean off the hinges as I went through it, and I seen a sight that made a red mist wave in front of me so everything in that room looked bloody and grim.

Salana had Gloria down on a chair and was twisting both her arms up behind her back till it looked like they'd break. Joe Cromwell had the fingers of his left hand sunk deep in her white throat and his right drawed back to smash in her face. Tony and Abe Gold was looking on with callous, contemptuous sneers.

They all turned to look as the door crashed in, and I saw Salana go white as I give one roar and went into action. He turned loose of the girl, but before he could get his hands up, I crashed him with a left-hander that crushed his nose and knocked out four teeth, and my next smash tore Joe Cromwell's ear loose and left it hanging by a shred. Another of the same sort stood him on his head in a corner with a cracked jaw-bone, and almost simultaneous Abe Gold barely missed me with a pair of brass knuckles, and Tony landed hard on my ear. But I straightened with a right-hander that dropped Gold across Salana with three broken ribs, and missed a left swing that wouldst of decapitated Tony hadst it landed.

I ain't one of these fellows which has to be crazy mad to put up a good fight, but when I am crazy mad, they's no limit to the destruction I can hand out. Maybe in the ring, under ordinary circumstances, Tony could of cut me to ribbons, but here he never had a chance. I didn't even feel the punches he was raining on me, and after missing a flock of swings in a row, I landed under his jaw with a hay-making right-hander that I brought up from the floor. Tony turned a complete somersault in the air, and when he come down his head hit the wall with a force that laid his scalp open and wouldst of knocked him cold, if he hadn't already been unconscious before he landed.

Maybe a minute and a half after I busted through the door, I stood alone in the middle of the carnage, panting and glaring down at the four silent figures which littered the room. All I craved was for all the other yeggs in Honolulu to come busting in. Pretty soon I looked around for Gloria and saw her cringing in a corner like she was trying to flatten herself out against the wall. She was white-faced and her eyes was blazing with terror.

She give a kind of hunted cry when I looked at her. "Don't! Please, don't!"

"Please don't what?" I snapped in some irritation. "Ain't you learned by this time that I don't clout frails? I come in here to rescue you from these gypes, and you insult me!"

"Forgive me," she begged. "I can't help but be a little afraid of you--you look so much like a gorilla--"

"What!"

"I mean you're such a terrible fighter," she hastily amended. "Come on--let's get out of here before these welchers come to."

"Would that they wouldst," I brooded. "What I done to 'em was just a sample of what I'm goin' to do to 'em. Dawg-gone it, some of these days somebody's goin' to upset my temper, then I'll lose control of myself and hurt somebody."

Well, we went out on the street, which was mostly deserted and rather dimly lighted, and Gloria said pretty soon: "Thank you for rescuing me. If my brother had been there--"

"Gloria," I said wearily, "ain't you ever goin' to stop lyin'? I was outside the door and heard it all."

"Oh," said she.

"Well," I said, "I reckon I'm a fool when it comes to women. I thought I was stuck on you, and didn't have sense enough to know you was stringin' me. Why, I even brung the four hundred and fifty bucks I won, intendin' to give it to you."

And so saying I threw out the wad of bills, waved it reproachfully in front of her eyes and replaced it in my jacket pocket. All at once she started crying.

"Oh, Steve, you make me ashamed of myself! You're so fine and noble--"

"Well," I said with my quiet dignity, "I know it, but I can't help it. It's just my nature."

"I'm so ashamed," she sobbed. "There's no use lying; Salana paid me a hundred dollars to get you out of the way. But, Steve, I'm changing my ways right here! I'm not asking you to forgive me, because I guess it's too much to ask, and you've done enough for me. But I'm going home tomorrow. That stuff I told you about the dairy farm in New Jersey was the only thing

I told you that wasn't a lie. I'm going home and live straight, and I want to kiss you, just once, because you've showed me the error of my ways."

And so saying, she threw her arms around me and kissed me vigorously--and me not objectin' in no manner.

"I'm going back to the old, pure simple life," she said. "Back to the green meadows and babbling cows!"

And she made off down the street at a surprising rate of speed. I watched her go and a warm glow spread over me. After all, I thought, I do know women, and the hardest of them is softened by the influence of a strong, honest, manly heart like mine.

She vanished around a corner and I turned back toward the Hibernian Bar, at the same time reaching for my bank roll. Then I give a yell that woke up everybody in that section of Honolulu with cold sweat standing out on them. Now I knowed why she wanted to put her arms around me. My money was gone! She loved me--she loved me not!

THE END

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WINNER TAKE ALL
By Robert E. Howard

Winner Takes All

ME AND BILL O'Brien was flat broke when we come out of Jerry Rourke's American Bar. Yes, sir--half a hour ashore, and cleaned along by of a land shark with a pair of educated dice. Not having the coin to pay his fine in case my white bulldog Mike followed his usual custom of tearing off some cop's pants leg, I left him with Jerry till I could raise some dough.

Well, me and Bill sallied forth into the night looking for anything that might mean money, experience having told us that you can find mighty near anything in the wharf-side streets of Singapore. Well, what we did find was the last thing we'd of expected.

We was passing a dark alley in the native quarters when we heard a woman screaming: "Help! Help! Help!"

We dashed into the alley immediately, and in the faint light we seen a girl struggling with a big Chinee. I seen the flash of a knife and I yelled and dived for him, but he dropped the frail and scooted down the alley like a scared rabbit, ducking the cobble-stone Bill heaved after him.

"Are you hurt, Miss?" I asked with my usual courtesy, lifting her to her feet.

"No, but I'm scared stiff," she answered. "That was a close call--let's get out of here before the big Chinee comes back with a mob."

So we legged it out into the street. Under the light of the street lamps we saw she was a white girl--American by her accent, and not hard to look at either, with her big grey eyes and wavy black hair.

"Where at shall we take you to, Miss?" asked Bill.

"I dance at the Bristol Cabaret," said she. "But let's go into the saloon--the bar-keep's a friend of mine and I want to buy you men a drink. It's the least I can do, for saving my life."

"Don't mention it, Miss," said I with a courtly bow. "We was glad to be of service. Howthesomever, if it will give you any pleasure to buy us a drink, we would not think of refusin'."

"More especially as we have just lost all our jack in a crap game, and are slowly but surely perishin' of thirst," said Bill, who ain't got my natural tact.

So we went in and got a back room to ourselves, and while we was downing our liquor--me and Bill, that is, because the girl said she never even tasted the stuff--she cupped her chin in her hands and rested her elbows on the table and gazing deep in my eyes, she sighed deeply.

"If I had a big strong man like you to protect me," she said in open admiration, "I wouldn't have to work in joints like the Bristol, and be abused by such swipes as tried to slit my gullet tonight."

I involuntarily expanded my enormous chest and said: "Well, lady, as long as Steve Costigan, A.B. mariner, can stand on his feet and hit with either maulie, you got no call to be afraid of anybody. The best thing, next to fightin', that me and Bill O'Brien here do is aid ladies in distress."

She shook her head wistfully. "You've been very kind to me, but you sailors are all alike--a girl in every port. But--I haven't even introduced myself--my name is Joan Wells, and I'm from Philadelphia."

"We're mighty glad to meet somebody from the States," said Bill. "But why was that slant-eye tryin' to knife you?"

"I--I really shouldn't tell," said she, looking kind of frightened.

"We ain't tryin' to intrude in your private affairs none," I hastened to add.

"I couldn't keep a secret from a man like you," said she with a languishing glance that made my heart skip a beat, "so I'll tell you. Take a look out the door to see that nobody's listening at the key-hole."

Nobody wasn't, so she went on.

"Did you ever hear of the No Sen Tong?" We shook our heads. We knowed in a general way about the big tongs, or merchant houses, which just about controls the Orient, but we hadn't had no experience with them.

"Well," said she, "it's the richest, most secret tong in the world. When I first came here I worked as private secretary for old To Ying, who's one of its highest secret officials. He fired me because I wouldn't let him get fresh with me--the old slant-eyed snake--and I went to work at the Bristol. But once you've been on the inside of an organization like that, you have ways of knowing things that other people don't."

Her eyes sparkled and her fists clenched as she got all excited. "I'm in on the biggest coup of the century!" she exclaimed. "If I live, I'll be a rich woman! Did you ever hear of the Korean Copper Company? No? Well, it's about to go bankrupt. They've never paid a single dividend. Stock's selling at a dollar a share, with no buyers. But, listen! They've hit the biggest copper mine that the world has ever seen! The No Sens are quietly buying up all the stock they can get--at a dollar a share! As soon as I found this out I ran down to the broker's and bought a hundred shares. It took every cent I had. But one of the No Sen spies saw me, and that's why old To Ying tried to have me bumped off. He's afraid I'll squeal.

"Think what a riot there'll be on the stock market tomorrow when the word gets in! Tonight Korean Copper's selling for a dollar! Tomorrow it'll be worth a thousand dollars a share!"

"Hold everything!" I said, kind of dizzy. "You mean you shoot a buck and get a thousand on the spin of the wheel?"

"I sure do--say, why don't you men buy some stock? It's the chance of a lifetime! Most of it has been bought up by the No Sens, but I know where I can get you a few hundred shares."

Bill laughed bitterly. "Sister, it might as well be sellin' for a thousand per right now as far as we're concerned. We ain't got a dime! And my watch is in a pawn-shop in Hong Kong."

"I'd gladly lend you some money," said she, "but I spent all mine on stock--"

"Wait a minute," said I, getting on my feet, "I got a idee. Miss Wells--Joan, is it safe for you to be left alone for a few hours?"

"Sure; the bar-keep goes off duty in a few minutes, and he can see me home."

"All right. I think we can raise some dough. Where can we see you, in say about three hours?"

"Come to the Alley of the Seven Mandarins," said she, "and knock on the door with the green dragon carved on it. I'm going to hide there till the No Sens quit looking for me. I'll be waiting for you," said she, giving my rugged hand a timid, shy little squeeze that made my big, honest heart flutter like a boy's.

THEN ME AND Bill was out in the foggy dim lighted streets and making tracks. I led the way through narrow streets and garbage-strewn back alleys till we was in the toughest section of Singapore's waterfront. It's dangerous in the daytime; it's pure Hades at night.

Right on the wharfs we come to a big ramshackle building, which a struggling sign announced as Heinie Steinman's Grand International Fight Arena. This dump was all lighted up, and was shaking with the ferocious roars which went up inside.

"Hello, Steve; hello, Bill," said the fellow at the door, a dip who knowed us well. "How 'bout a couple good ringside seats?"

"Gangway," said I. "We ain't got no money--but I'm fightin' here tonight."

"G'wan," said he, "you ain't even matched with nobody--"

"One side!" I roared, drawing back my famous right. "I'm fightin' _somebody_ here tonight, get me?"

"Well, go in and fight somebody that's paid to git mutilated!" he squawked, turning slightly pale and climbing up on the ticket counter, so me and Bill stalked haughtily within.

If you want to study humanity in its crudest and most uncivilized form, take in one of Heinie Steinman's fight shows. The usual crowd was there--sailors, longshoremen, beach-combers, thugs and crooks; men of every breed and color and description, from the toughest ships and the worst ports in the world. Undoubtedly, the men which fights at the International performs to the toughest crowds in the world. The fighters is mostly sailors trying to pick up a few dollars by massacring each other.

Well, as me and Bill entered, the fans was voicing their disapproval in a tone that would of curled the hair of a head-hunter. The main event had just driven the patrons into a frenzy by going to the limit, and they was howling like a pack of wolves because they'd been no knockout. The crowd that comes to Heinie's Arena don't make no talk about being wishful to see a exhibition of boxing. What they want is gore and busted noses, and if somebody don't get just about killed they think they have been gypped, and wreck the joint.

Just as me and Bill come in, the principals scurried out of the ring followed by a offering of chair bottoms, bricks and dead cats, and Heinie, who'd been acting as referee, tried to calm the mob--which only irritated them more and somebody hit Heinie square between the eyes with a rotten tomato. The maddened crowd was fast reaching a point where they was liable to do anything, when me and Bill climbed into the ring. They knowed us, and they kind of quieted down a minute and then started yelling fiercer than ever.

"For my sake, Steve," said Heinie, kind of pale, wiping the vegetable out of his eyes, "say somethin' to 'em before they start a riot. Them two hams that just faded away only cake-walked through the bout and these wolves is ready to lynch everybody concerned, particularly includin' me."

"Have you got somebody I can fight?" I asked.

"No, I ain't," he said, "But I'll announce--"

"I don't see no announcer," I growled, and turning to the crowd I silenced them by the simple process of roaring: "_Shut up!"_ in a voice which drowned them all out.

"Listen here, you tin-horn sports!" I bellered. "You've already paid your dough, but do you think you've got your money's worth?"

"_No!_" they thundered in a voice that started Heinie's knees to knocking. "We been robbed! We been rooked! We been gypped! Give us our money back! Wreck the dump! Hang that Dutchman!"

"Shut up, you Port Mahon baboons!" I roared. "If you're sports enough to jar loose and make up a purse of twenty-five dollars, I'll fight any man in the house to a finish, winner take all!"

At that they lifted the roof. "'At's the stuff!" they whooped. "Shower down gents. We know Steve! He always gives us a run for our money!"

Coins and a few bills began to shower on the canvas, and two men jumped up from among the crowd and started for the ring. One was a red-headed Englishman and the other was a lithe black-haired fellow. They met just outside the ropes.

"One side, bloke," growled the red-head. "HI'm fightin' this bloody Yank!"

Black-head's right shot out like a battering ram and red-head kissed the floor, and laid still. The mob went into hysterics of joy and the winner hopped over the ropes, followed by three or four of the most villainous looking mugs I ever hope to see.

"I weel fight Costigan!" said he, and Heinie give a deep sigh of relief. But Bill swore under his breath.

"That's Panther Cortez," said he. "And you know you ain't been trainin' close lately."

"Never mind," I growled. "Count the money. Heinie, you keep your hands off that dough till Bill counts it."

"Thirty-six dollars and fifty cents," announced Bill, and I turned to the slit-eyed devil which called hisself Panther Cortez, and growled: "You willin' to fight for that much--winner take all, loser gets nothin' but a headache?"

He grinned with a flash of white fangs. "Sure!--I fight you just for the fun of knocking you cold!"

I turned my back on him with a snarl and, giving Heinie the money to hold, though it was a terrible risk to take, I strode to one of the make-shift dressing rooms, where I was given a pair of dingy trunks, which Heinie pulled off a preliminary boy which had gone on earlier in the evening and was still out.

I gave little thought to my opponent, though Bill kept grouching about the fact that I was going to get so little for knocking out such a man as Cortez.

"You oughta be gettin' at least a hundred and fifty," Bill grumbled. "This Cortez is a mean puncher, and shifty and dirty. He ain't never been knocked out."

"Well," said I, "it ain't never too late to begin. All I want you to do is watch and see that none of his handlers don't sneak around and hit me with a water bottle. Thirty-six shares means thirty-six thousand dollars for us. Tomorrer we'll kick the Old Man in the slats for a token of farewell, and start livin'! No more standin' watch and gettin' sunburnt and froze for somebody else--"

"Hey!" yelled Heinie, looking in at the door, "hurry up, will ya? This crowd's goin' clean nuts waitin'. The Panther's already in the ring."

AS I CLIMBED through the ropes I was greeted by a roar such as must of resembled them given by the Roman mobs when a favorite gladiator was throwed to the lions. Cortez was seated in his corner, smiling like a big lazy jungle cat, the lids drooping down over his glittering eyes in a way that always irritated me.

He was a mixed breed--Spanish, French, Malay and heck knows what else, but all devil. He was the choice fighting man aboard the _Water Snake,_ a British vessel with a shady reputation, and though I'd never fought him, I knowed he was a dangerous man. But, gosh, all he represented to me just then was thirty-six dollars and fifty cents, which in turn represented thirty-six thousand dollars.

Heinie waved his arms and said: "Gents, you all know these boys! Both of them has fought here plenty of times before, and--"

The crowd rose up and drowned him out: "Yeah, we know 'em. Cut the introductions and le's see gore spilt!"

"Weights," yelled Heinie to make hisself heard. "Sailor Costigan of the _*Sea Girl*,_ one hundred ninety pounds! Panther Cortez of the _Water Snake,_ one hundred eighty-five pounds!"

"That's a lie!" roared Bill. "He weighs one-ninety if he weighs a ounce!"

"Aw, stow yer gab, ye bleedin' mick!" snarled one of the Panther seconds, shoving out his lantern jaw. Bill bent his right on that jaw and the limey went over the ropes on his head. The mob applauded madly; things was going just to their taste! All they needed to make it a perfect evening was for me or Cortez to get our neck broke--preferably both of us.

Well, Heinie chased Cortez' handlers out of the ring, and Bill climbed out, and the slaughter was on. Heinie was referee, but he didn't give us no instructions. We'd fought enough there to know what we was supposed to do, and that was to sock and keep on socking till somebody kissed the canvas and stayed there. The gloves we wore was at least a ounce and a half lighter than the regular style, and nothing was a foul at the International as long as both fellows could stand on their feet.

The Panther was lithe, rangy, quick; taller than me, but not so heavy. We come together in the middle of the ring, and he hit with cat-like speed. Left to the face, right to the body and left to the jaw. Simultaneous I shot my right to his chin, and he hit the canvas on the seat of his trunks. The crowd howled, but he wasn't hurt much, mainly surprised and mad. His eyes blazed. He took the count of nine, though he could of got up sooner, and bounced up, stopping me in my tracks with a hard left to the mouth. I missed with a looping left, took a right to the ribs and landed hard under the heart. He spat in my face and began working his arms like pistons--left, right, left, right, to the face and body while the crowd went nuts. But that was my game; I grinned savagely and braced my feet, boring in and slugging hard with both hands.

A minute of this, and he backed away in a hurry, blood trickling from a cut on his cheek. I was after him and sank a left deep in his midriff that made him clinch and hold on. On the break he nailed me with a straight right to the head, and followed it up with a hard left to the eye, but failed to land his right, and got a wicked right hook to the ribs. I battered away at his body, but he was all elbows, and, irritated, I switched to his head and nearly tore it off with a blazing right hook just at the gong.

"That round was yours by a mile," said Bill, between exchanging insults with Cortez' handlers. "But watch out; he's dangerous and dirty--"

"I'm goin' to ask Joan to marry me," I said. "I can tell she's fell for me, right off. I dunno why it is, but it seems like they's a fatal fascination about me for women. They can't keep from floppin' for me at first sight--"

The gong sounded and I dashed out to collect that $36.50.

Well, the Panther had found out that he couldn't trade wallops with me, so he come out boxing. I don't mean he tin-canned and rode his bicycle, like some prominent fighters I could mention. He was one baby that could fight and box at the same time, if you get me. When I say he boxed, I mean he feinted me out of position, kept me off balance, speared me with cutting left jabs, ducked my ferocious returns, tied me up in the clinches, nearly ripped my head off with right uppercuts in close, stayed inside my wings, and generally made a sap outa me.

Inside of a minute he had me bleeding at the mouth and nose, and I hadn't landed solid once. The crowd was howling like wolves and Bill was cussing something terrible, but I wasn't worried. I had all night to lick him in, and I knowed I'd connect sooner or later, and I did quicker than I'd thought. It was a smashing right hook under the heart, and it bent Senyor Cortez double. While in this position I clouted him heartily behind the ear and drove him to his knees. He was up without a count, slipped the terrible swing I threw at him, and having clinched and tied me up, scraped his glove laces across my eyes and ground his heel into my instep. He hung on like a regular octopus regardless of my cruel and unusual oaths. Heinie wouldn't pull him loose, and finally we both went to the canvas still clinched in a vise-like embrace.

This mishap threw the crowd into a perfect delirium of delight, which was increased by Cortez earnestly chewing my ear while we writhed on the mat. Driven to frenzy I tore loose, arose and closed the Panther's left eye with a terrible right swing the minute he was on his feet. He came back with a slashing left hook to the body, ripped the same hand to my already battered face, and stopped a straight left with his own map. At that moment the gong rang.

"I'M GOIN' TO kick Heinie Steinman loose from his britches after the fight!" snarled Bill, shaking with rage as he mopped the blood off my mangled ear. "If that wasn't the dirtiest foul I ever seen--"

"I wonder if we couldn't buy a half share with that fifty cents," I meditated. "That'd be five hundred dollars--"

I rushed out for the third frame inclined to settle matters quick, but Cortez had other plans. He opened a cut over my eye with a left hook, ripped a right hook to my sore ear and went under my return. He come up with a venomous right under the heart, ducked my left swing and jabbed me three times on the nose without a return. Maddened, I hurtled into him headlong, grabbed him with my left and clubbed him with my right till he tied me up.

At close quarters we traded short arm rights and lefts to the body and he was the first to back away, not forgetting to flick me in the eye with his long left as he did so. I was right on top of him and suddenly he lowered his head and butted me square in the mouth, bringing a flow of claret that dyed my chin. He instantly ripped in a right uppercut that loosened a bunch of my teeth and backed me into the ropes with a perfect whirlwind of left and right hooks to the head.

With the ropes cutting into my back I rallied, steadied myself and smashed a right under his heart that stopped him in his tracks. A left to the jaw set him back on his heels and rattled his teeth like a castinet, and before I could hit again the gong sounded.

"This is lastin' considerably longer than I thought," I said to Bill, who was mopping blood and talking to Heinie with some heat.

"My gosh, Bill," said Heinie. "Be reasonable! If I stopped this fight and awarded it to Steve or anybody else on a foul, these thugs wouldst tear this buildin' down and hang me to the rafters. They craves a knockout--"

"They're goin' to get one!" I snarled. "Never mind the fouls. Say, Bill, did you ever see such clear, honest eyes as Joan's got? I know women, I wanta tell you, and I never seen a straighter, squarer jane in my life--"

At the gong we went into a clinch and pounded each other's midsections till Heinie broke us. Cortez wasn't taking much chances, fighting wary and cautious. He slashed away with his left, but he kept his right high and never let it go unless he was sure of landing. He was using his elbows plenty in the clinches, and butting every chance he got, but Heinie pretended not to see. The crowd didn't care; as long as a man fought, they didn't care _how_ he fought. Bill was making remarks that would of curled the toes of a Hottentot, but nobody seemed to mind.

About the middle of the lap, Cortez began making remarks about my ancestors that made me good and mad. My Irish got up, and I went for him like a wild bull, head down and arms hammering. He shot his left and side-stepped, but the left ain't made that can stop me when my temper's up, and I was right on top of him too fast for him to get away. I battered him across the ring, but just as I thought I had him pinned on the ropes he side-stepped and I fell into them myself.

This highly amused the crowd, and Cortez hooked three lefts to my head while I was untangling myself, and when I slewed around and swung, he ducked and crashed my jaw with a right hook he brought up from the floor and which had me groggy for the first time that night. Sensing victory, he shot the same hand three times to my head, knocking me back into the ropes where he sank his left to the wrist in my midriff.

I was dizzy and slightly sick, but I saw Cortez' snarling face in a sort of red haze and I smashed my right square into the middle of that face. He was off his guard--not expecting a return like that and his head went back like it was hinged. The blood splattered, and the crowd howled with relish. I plunged after him, but he crouched and as I came in he went under my swing and hooked his right hard to my groin. Oh Jerusha! I dropped like my legs had been cut from under me, and writhed and twisted on the canvas like a snake with a broken back.

I had to clench my teeth to keep from vomiting and I was sick--nauseated if you get what I mean. I looked up and Heinie, with his face white, was fixing to count over me.

"One!" he said. "Two! Three!"

"You hog-fat nit-wit!" screamed Bill. "If you count him out I'll blow your brains through the back of your skull!"

Heinie shivered like he had a chill; he took a quick look at Bill, then he shot a scared glance at the ravening crowd, and he ducked his head like a tortoise, shut his eyes and kept on counting.

"Four! Five! Six!"

"Thirty-six thousand dollars!" I groaned, reaching for the ropes. The cold sweat was standing out on my brow as I pulled myself up.

"Seven! Eight! Nine!"

I was up, feet braced wide, holding the top rope to keep from falling. Cortez came lunging in to finish me, and I knowed if I let go I'd fall again. I hunched my shoulder and blocked his right, but he ripped his left to my chin and crashed his right high on my temple--and then the gong sounded. He socked me again after the gong, before he went to his corner--but a little thing like that don't cause no comment in the International Fight Arena.

BILL HELPED ME to my corner, cursing between clenched teeth, but, with my usual recuperative powers, I was already recovering from the effects of that foul blow. Bill emptied a bucket-full of cold water over me, and much to Cortez' disgust I come out for the fifth frame as good as new. He didn't think so at first, but a wicked right-hander under the heart shook him to the toes and made him back pedal in a hurry.

I went for him like a whirlwind and, seeming somewhat discouraged, he began his old tactics of hit and run. A sudden thought hit me that maybe all the shares was bought up. This fight looked like it was going on forever; here I was chasing Panther Cortez around the ring and doing no damage, while the No Sens was buying up all the Korean Copper in sight. Every minute a fortune was slipping that much farther away from me, and this rat refused to stand up and be knocked out like a man. I nearly went crazy with fury.

"Come on and fight, you yellow skunk!" I raged, while the crowd yelled blood-thirstily, beginning to be irritated at Cortez' tactics, which was beginning to be more run than hit. "Stand up to it, you white-livered, yellow-bellied, Porchugeeze half-caste!"

They's always something that'll get under a fellow's hide. This got under Cortez'. Maybe he did have some breed blood in him. Anyway, he went clean crazy. He give a howl like a blood-mad jungle-cat, and in spite of the wild yells from his corner, he tore in with his eyes glaring and froth on his lips. _Biff! Bim! Bam!_ I was caught in a perfect whirlwind of punches; it was like being clawed by a real panther. But, with a savage grin, I slugged it out with him. That's my game! He hit three blows to my one, but mine were the ones that counted.

There was the salty tang of blood in my mouth, and blood in my eyes; it reddened Heinie's shirt, and stained the canvas under our feet. It spattered in the faces of the yelling ring-siders at every blow. But my gloves were sinking deep at every sock, and I was satisfied. Toe to toe we slashed and smashed, till the ring swum red and the thunder of our blows could be heard all over the house. But it couldn't last; flesh and blood couldn't stand it. Somebody had to go--and it was Cortez.

Flat on his back he hit, and bounced back up without a count. But I was on him like a blood-mad tiger. I took his left and right in the face without hardly feeling them, and smashed my right under his heart and my left to his jaw. He staggered, glassy eyed; a crashing right to the jaw dropped him under the ropes on his face. Maybe he's there yet. Anyhow, up to the count of ten he didn't bat an eyelash.

"Gimme that dough!" I snarled, jerking it out of Heinie's reluctant hand.

"Hey!" he protested. "What about my cut? Didn't I promote this show? Didn't I stand all the expense? You think you can fight in my ring for nothin'--"

"If I had your nerve I'd be King of Siam," I growled, shaking the blood outa my eyes, and at that moment Bill's right met Heinie's jaw like a caulking mallet meeting a ship's hull, and Heinie went to sleep. The crowd filed out, gabbling incoherently. That last touch was all that was needed to make the night a perfect success for them.

"Here, give this to Cortez when he wakes up!" I snarled, shoving a five-dollar bill--American money--into the hand of one of the Panther's seconds. "He's dirty, but he's game. And he don't know it, but it's the same as me givin' him five thousand dollars. Come on, Bill."

I CHANGED MY clothes in the dressing-room, noting in a cracked mirror that my face looked like I'd fallen afoul a wildcat, and likewise that I had a beautiful black eye or two. We skinned out a side door, but I reckon some thugs in the crowd had seen us get the money--and they's plenty of men in the Singapore waterfront who'd cut your throat for a dime. The second I stepped out into the dark alley-way something crashed against my head, and I went to my knees seeing about a million stars. I come up again and felt a knife-edge lick along my arm. I hit out blind and landed by sheer luck. My right lifted my unseen attacker clean off his feet and dropped him like a sack on the ground. Meanwhile Bill had grappled with two more and I heard the crack as he knocked their heads together.

"You hurt, Steve?" he asked, feeling for me, because it was that dark you couldn't see your hand before you.

"Scratched a little," I said, my head still ringing from the blackjack sock. "Let's get outa here. Looks like we got to lick everybody in Singapore before we get that stock."

We got out of the alley and beat it down the street, people looking kind of funny at us. Well, I guess I was a sight, what with my black eye and cut and battered face, the bump on my head, and my arm bleeding from the knife wound. But nobody said nothing. People in places like that have got a way of minding their own business that politer folks could well copy.

"We better stop by the Waterfront Mission before we go for that stock, Steve," said Bill. "The gospel-shark will bandage your arm and not charge a cent--and keep his mouth shut afterward."

"No, no, no!" said I, becoming irascible because of my hurts and the delay. "We're goin' to get that stock before we do anything else."

We was passing a gambling hall and Bill's eyes lighted as he heard the click and whir of the roulette wheel.

"I feel lucky tonight," he muttered. "I betcha I could run that thirty bucks up to a hundred in no time."

"And I'd give my arm for a shot of licker," I snapped. "But I tell you, we ain't takin' no chances. We can guzzle and play fan-tan and roulette all we want to after we get rich."

After what seemed a century we arrived at the dismal, dark and vile smelling alley that the Chinese call the Alley of the Seven Mandarins--why, I never could figure. We found the door with the green dragon and knocked, and my heart stood still for fear Joan wouldn't be there. But she was. The door opened and she give a gasp as she saw me.

"Quick, don't keep us in suspense," Bill gasped. "Is the stock all took up?"

"Why, no," she said. "I can get you--"

"Then do it, quick," I said, pressing the money into her hand. "There's thirty-one dollars and fifty-cents--"

"Is that all?" she said, like she was considerably disappointed.

"If you'd a seen how I won it, you'd think it was a lot," I said.

"Well," she said. "Wait a minute. The man who owns that stock lives down the alley."

She vanished down the dark alley-way, and we waited with our hearts knocking holes in our ribs for what seemed like hours. Then she came out of the darkness, looking kind of white and ghostly in the shadows, and slipped a long envelope into my hot and sweaty hand. I hove a vast sigh of relief and started to say something, but she put her finger to her lips.

"Shhh! I musn't be seen with you. I must go, now." And before I could say a word, she'd vanished in the dark.

"Open the envelope, Steve," urged Bill. "Let's see what a fortune looks like!"

I opened it and pulled out a slip of paper. I moved over to the lamp-light in the street to read what was wrote on it. Then I give a roar that brought faces to every window on the street. Bill jerked the paper from me and glared at it and then he give a maddened howl and joined me in a frenzied burst of horrible talk that brought a dozen cops on the run. We wasn't in no condition to make any coherent reply, and the ensuing riot didn't end till the reserves was called out.

On the paper which was in the envelope Joan Wells gave me in return for my hard-earned money was wrote:

This is to certify that you are entitled to thirty-one and a half shares of stock in the Korean Copper Company which was dissolved in the year 1875. Don't worry about the No Sen Tong; it was extinct before the Boxer Rebellion. Of all the suckers that have fallen for this graft, you saps were the easiest. But cheer up; you're out only $31.50, and I took one bonehead for $300. A girl has got to live.

THE END

Contents

ALLEYS OF DARKNESS

By Robert E. Howard

WHEN THE GONG ended my fight with Kid Leary in the Sweet Dreams Fight Club, Singapore, I was tired but contented. The first seven rounds had been close, but the last three I'd plastered the Kid all over the ring, though I hadn't knocked him out like I'd did in Shanghai some months before, when I flattened him in the twelfth round. The scrap in Singapore was just for ten; another round and I'd had him.

But anyway, I'd shaded him so thoroughly I knowed I'd justified the experts which had made me a three to one favorite. The crowd was applauding wildly, the referee was approaching, and I stepped forward and held out my glove hand--when to my utter dumfoundment, he brushed past me and lifted the glove of the groggy and bloody Kid Leary!

A instant's silence reigned, shattered by a nerve-racking scream from the ringside. The referee, Jed Whithers, released Leary, who collapsed into the rosin, and Whithers ducked through the ropes like a rabbit. The crowd riz bellowing, and recovering my frozen wits, I gave vent to lurid langwidge and plunged outa the ring in pursuit of Whithers. The fans was screaming mad, smashing benches, tearing the ropes offa the ring and demanding the whereabouts of Whithers, so's they could hang him to the rafters. But he had disappeared, and the maddened crowd raged in vain.

I found my way dazedly to my dressing-room, where I set down on a table and tried to recover from the shock. Bill O'Brien and the rest of the crew was there, frothing at the mouth, each having sunk his entire wad on me. I considered going into Leary's dressing-room and beating him up again, but decided he'd had nothing to do with the crooked decision. He was just as surprised as me when Whithers declared him winner.

Whilst I was trying to pull on my clothes, hindered more'n helped by my raging shipmates, whose langwidge was getting more appalling every instant, a stocky bewhiskered figger come busting through the mob, and done a fantastic dance in front of me. It was the Old Man, with licker on his breath and tears in his eyes.

"I'm rooint!" he howled. "I'm a doomed man! Oh, to think as I've warmed a sarpint in my boozum! Dennis Dorgan, this here's the last straw!"

"Aw, pipe down!" snarled Bill O'Brien. "It wasn't Denny's fault. It was that dashety triple-blank thief of a referee--"

"To think of goin' on the beach at my age!" screamed the Old Man, wringing the salt water outa his whiskers. He fell down on a bench and wept at the top of his voice. "A thousand bucks I lost--every cent I could rake, scrape and borrer!" he bawled.

"Aw, well, you still got your ship," somebody said impatiently.

"That's just it!" the Old Man wailed. "That thousand bucks was dough owed them old pirates, McGregor, McClune & McKile. Part of what I owe, I mean. They agreed to accept a thousand as part payment, and gimme more time to raise the rest. Now it's gone, and they'll take the ship! They'll take the Python! All I got in the world! Them old sharks ain't got no more heart than a Malay pirate. I'm rooint!"

The crew fell silent at that, and I said: "Why'd you bet all that dough?"

"I was lickered up," he wept. "I got no sense when I'm full. Old Cap'n Donnelly, and McVey and them got to raggin' me, and the first thing I knowed, I'd bet 'em the thousand, givin' heavy odds. Now I'm rooint!"

He throwed back his head and bellered like a walrus with the belly-ache.

I just give a dismal groan and sunk my head in my hands, too despondent to say nothing. The crew bust forth in curses against Whithers, and sallied forth to search further for him, hauling the Old Man along with them, still voicing his woes in a voice like a steamboat whistle.

PRESENTLY I RIZ with a sigh and hauled on my duds. They was no sound outside. Apparently I was alone in the building except for Spike, my white bulldog. All at once I noticed him smelling of a closed locker. He whined, scratched at it, and growled. With a sudden suspicion I strode over and jerked open the door. Inside I seen a huddled figger. I jerked it rudely forth and set it upright. It was Jed Whithers. He was pale and shaking, and he had cobwebs in his hair. He kind a cringed, evidently expecting me to bust into loud cusses. For once I was too mad for that. I was probably as pale as he was, and his eyes dilated like he seen murder in mine.

"Jed Whithers," I said, shoving him up against the wall with one hand whilst I knotted the other'n into a mallet, "this is one time in my life when I'm in the mood for killin'."

"For God's sake, Dorgan," he gurgled, "you can't murder me!"

"Can you think of any reason why I shouldn't put you in a wheel- chair for the rest of your life?" I demanded. "You've rooint my friends and all the fans which bet on me, lost my skipper his ship--"

"Don't hit me, Dorgan!" he begged, grabbing my wrist with shaking fingers. "I had to do it; honest to God, Sailor, I had to do it! I know you won--won by a mile. But it was the only thing I could do!"

"What you mean?" I demanded suspiciously.

"Lemme sit down!" he gasped.

I reluctantly let go of him, and he slumped down onto a near-by bench. He sat there and shook, and mopped the sweat offa his face. He was trembling all over.

"Are the customers all gone?" he asked.

"Ain't nobody here but me and my man-eatin' bulldog," I answered grimly, standing over him. "Go on--spill what you got to say before I start varnishin' the floor with you."

"I was forced to it, Sailor," he said. "There's a man who has a hold on me."

"What you mean, a hold?" I asked suspiciously.

"I mean, he's got me in a spot," he said. "I have to do like he says. It ain't myself I have to think of--Dorgan, I'm goin' to trust you. You got the name of bein' a square shooter. I'm goin' to tell you the whole thing.

"Sailor, I got a sister named Constance, a beautiful girl, innocent as a newborn lamb. She trusted a man, Sailor, a dirty, slimy snake in human form. He tricked her into signin' a document--Dorgan, that paper was a confession of a crime he'd committed himself!"

Whithers here broke down and sobbed with his face in his hands. I shuffled my feet uncertainly, beginning to realize they was always more'n one side to any question.

He raised up suddenly and said: "Since then, that man's been holdin' that faked confession over me and her like a club. He's forced me to do his filthy biddin' time and again. I'm a honest man by nature, Sailor, but to protect my little sister"--he kinda choked for a instant--"I've stooped to low deeds. Like this tonight. This man was bettin' heavy on Leary, gettin' big odds--"

"Somebody sure was," I muttered. "Lots of Leary money in sight."

"Sure!" exclaimed Whithers eagerly. "That was it; he made me throw the fight to Leary, the dirty rat, to protect his bets."

I begun to feel new wrath rise in my gigantic breast.

"You mean this low-down polecat has been blackmailin' you on account of the hold he's got over your sister?" I demanded.

"Exactly," he said, dropping his face in his hands. "With that paper he can send Constance to prison, if he takes the notion."

"I never heered of such infermy," I growled. "Whyn't you bust him on the jaw and take that confession away from him?"

"I ain't no fightin' man," said Whithers. "He's too big for me. I wouldn't have a chance."

"Well, I would," I said. "Listen, Whithers, buck up and quit cryin'. I'm goin' to help you."

His head jerked up and he stared at me kinda wild-eyed.

"You mean you'll help me get that paper?"

"You bet!" I retorted. "I ain't the man to stand by and let no innercent girl be persecuted. Besides, this mess tonight is his fault."

Whithers just set there for a second, and I thought I seen a slow smile start to spread over his lips, but I mighta been mistook, because he wasn't grinning when he held out his hand and said tremulously: "Dorgan, you're all they say you are!"

A remark like that ain't necessarily a compliment; some of the things said about me ain't flattering; but I took it in the spirit in which it seemed to be give, and I said: "Now tell me, who is this rat?"

He glanced nervously around, then whispered: "Ace Bissett!"

I grunted in surprize. "The devil you say! I'd never of thought it."

"He's a fiend in human form," said Whithers bitterly. "What's your plan?"

"Why," I said, "I'll go to his Diamond Palace and demand the confession. If he don't give it to me, I'll maul him and take it away from him."

"You'll get shot up," said Whithers. "Bissett is a bad man to fool with. Listen, I got a plan. If we can get him to a certain house I know about, we can search him for the paper. He carries it around with him, though I don't know just where. Here's my plan--"

I listened attentively, and as a result, perhaps a hour later I was heading through the narrer streets with Spike, driving a closed car which Whithers had produced kinda mysteriously. Whithers wasn't with me; he was gone to prepare the place where I was to bring Bissett to.

I driv up the alley behind Ace's big new saloon and gambling-hall, the Diamond Palace, and stopped the car near a back door. It was a very high-class joint. Bissett was friends with wealthy sportsmen, officials, and other swells. He was what they call a soldier of fortune, and he'd been everything, everywhere--aviator, explorer, big game hunter, officer in the armies of South America and China--and what have you.

A native employee stopped me at the door, and asked me what was my business, and I told him I wanted to see Ace. He showed me into the room which opened on the alley, and went after Bissett--which could not of suited my plan better.

Purty soon a door opened, and Bissett strode in--a tall, broad- shouldered young fellow, with steely eyes and wavy blond hair. He was in a dress suit, and altogether looked like he'd stepped right outa the social register. And as I looked at him, so calm and self-assured, and thought of poor Whithers being driv to crime by him, and the Old Man losing his ship on account of his crookedness, I seen red.

"Well, Dorgan, what can I do for you?" he asked.

I said nothing. I stepped in and hooked my right to his jaw. It caught him flat-footed, with his hands down. He hit the floor full length, and he didn't twitch.

I bent over him, run my hands through his clothes, found his six- shooter and throwed it aside. Music and the sounds of revelry reached me through the walls, but evidently nobody had seen or heard me slug Bissett. I lifted him and histed him onto my shoulders--no easy job, because he was as big as me, and limp as a rag.

But I done it, and started for the alley. I got through the door all right, which I was forced to leave open, account of having both hands full, and just as I was dumping Ace into the back part of the car, I heered a scream. Wheeling, I seen a girl had just come into the room I'd left, and was standing frozen, staring wildly at me. The light from the open door shone full on me and my captive. The girl was Glory O'Dale, Ace Bissett's sweetheart. I hurriedly slammed the car door shut and jumped to the wheel, and as I roared off down the alley, I was vaguely aware that Glory had rushed out of the building after me, screaming blue murder.

IT WAS PURTY late, and the route I took they wasn't many people abroad. Behind me I begun to hear Bissett stir and groan, and I pushed Spike over in the back seat to watch him. But he hadn't fully come to when I drawed up in the shadows beside the place Whithers had told me about--a ramshackle old building down by a old rotting, deserted wharf. Nobody seemed to live anywheres close around, or if they did, they was outa sight. As I clum outa the car, a door opened a crack, and I seen Whithers' white face staring at me.

"Did you get him, Sailor?" he whispered.

For answer I jerked open the back door, and Bissett tumbled out on his ear and laid there groaning dimly. Whithers started back with a cry.

"Is he dead?" he asked fearfully.

"Would he holler like that if he was?" I asked impatiently. "Help me carry him in, and we'll search him."

"Wait'll I tie him up," said Whithers, producing some cords, and to my disgust, he bound the unconscious critter hand and foot.

"It's safer this way," Whithers said. "He's a devil, and we can't afford to take chances."

We then picked him up and carried him through the door, into a very dimly lighted room, across that 'un, and into another'n which was better lit--the winders being covered so the light couldn't be seen from the outside. And I got the surprise of my life. They was five men in that room. I wheeled on Whithers. "What's the idee?" I demanded.

"Now, now, Sailor," said Whithers, arranging Bissett on the bench where we'd laid him. "These are just friends of mine. They know about Bissett and my sister."

I heered what sounded like a snicker, and I turned to glare at the assembled "friends". My gaze centered on a fat, flashy-dressed bird smoking a big black cigar; diamonds shone all over his fingers, and in his stick-pin. The others was just muggs.

"A fine lot of friends you pick out!" I said irritably to Whithers. "Diamond Joe Galt is been mixed up in every shady deal that's been pulled in the past three years. And if you'd raked the Seven Seas you couldn't found four dirtier thugs than Limey Teak, Bill Reynolds, Dutch Steinmann, and Red Partland."

"Hey, you--" Red Partland riz, clenching his fists, but Galt grabbed his arm.

"Stop it, Red," he advised. "Easy does it. Sailor," he addressed me with a broad smile which I liked less'n I'd liked a scowl, "they's no use in abuse. We're here to help our pal Whithers get justice. That's all. You've done your part. You can go now, with our thanks."

"Not so fast," I growled, and just then Whithers hollered: "Bissett's come to!"

We all turned around and seen that Bissett's eyes was open, and blazing.

"Well, you dirty rats," he greeted us all and sundry, "you've got me at last, have you?" He fixed his gaze on me, and said: "Dorgan, I thought you were a man. If I'd had any idea you were mixed up in this racket, you'd have never got a chance to slug me as you did."

"Aw, shut up," I snarled. "A fine nerve you've got, talkin' about men, after what you've did!"

Galt pushed past me and stood looking down at Bissett, and I seen his fat hands clenched, and the veins swell in his temples.

"Bissett," he said, "we've got you cold and you know it. Kick in-- where's that paper?"

"You cursed fools!" Bissett raved, struggling at his cords till the veins stood out on his temples too. "I tell you, the paper's worthless."

"Then why do you object to givin' it to us?" demanded Whithers.

"Because I haven't got it!" raged Bissett. "I destroyed it, just as I've told you before."

"He's lyin'," snarled Red Partland. "He wouldn't never destroy such a thing as that. It means millions. Here, I'll make him talk--"

He shouldered forward and grabbed Bissett by the throat. I grabbed Red in turn, and tore him away.

"Belay!" I gritted. "He's a rat, but just the same I ain't goin' to stand by and watch no helpless man be tortured."

"Why, you--" Red bellered, and swung for my jaw.

I ducked and sunk my left to the wrist in his belly and he dropped like his legs had been cut out from under him. The others started forward, rumbling, and I wheeled towards 'em, seething with fight. But Galt got between us and shoved his gorillas back.

"Here," he snapped. "No fightin' amongst ourselves! Get up, Red. Now, Sailor," he begun to pat my sleeves in his soothing way, which I always despises beyond words, "there ain't no need for hard feelin's. I know just how you feel. But we got to have that paper. You know that, Sailor--"

Suddenly a faint sound made itself evident. "What's that?" gasped Limey, going pale.

"It's Spike," I said. "I left him in the car, and he's got tired of settin' out there, and is scratchin' at the front door. I'm goin' to go get him, but I'll be right back, and if anybody lays a hand on Bissett whilst I'm gone, I'll bust him into pieces. We'll get that paper, but they ain't goin' to be no torturin'."

I strode out, scornful of the black looks cast my way. As I shut the door behind me, a clamor of conversation bust out, so many talking at wunst I couldn't understand much, but every now and then Ace Bissett's voice riz above the din in accents of anger and not pain, so I knowed they wasn't doing nothing to him. I crossed the dim outer room, opened the door and let Spike in, and then, forgetting to bolt it--I ain't used to secrecy and such--I started back for the inner room.

BEFORE I REACHED the other door, I heered a quick patter of feet outside. I wheeled--the outer door bust violently open, and into the room rushed Glory O'Dale. She was panting hard, her dress was tore, her black locks damp, and her dark eyes was wet and bright as black jewels after a rain. And she had Ace's six-shooter in her hand.

"You filthy dog!" she cried, throwing down on me.

I looked right into the muzzle of that .45 as she jerked the trigger. The hammer snapped on a faulty cartridge, and before she could try again, Spike launched hisself from the floor at her. I'd taught him never to bite a woman. He didn't bite Glory. He throwed hisself bodily against her so hard he knocked her down and the gun flew outa her hand.

I picked it up and stuck it into my hip pocket. Then I started to help her up, but she hit my hand aside and jumped up, tears of fury running down her cheeks. Golly, she was a beauty!

"You beast!" she raged. "What have you done with Ace? I'll kill you if you've harmed him! Is he in that room?"

"Yeah, and he ain't harmed," I said, "but he oughta be hung--"

She screamed like a siren. "Don't you dare! Don't you touch a hair of his head! Oh, Ace!"

She then slapped my face, jerked out a handful of hair, and kicked both my shins.

"What I can't understand is," I said, escaping her clutches, "is why a fine girl like you ties up with a low-down rat like Bissett. With your looks, Glory--"

"To the devil with my looks!" she wept, stamping on the door. "Let me past; I know Ace is in that room--I heard his voice as I came in."

They wasn't no noise in the inner room now. Evidently all of them was listening to what was going on out here, Ace included.

"You can't go in there," I said. "We got to search Ace for the incriminatin' evidence he's holdin' against Jed Whithers' sister--"

"You're mad as a March hare," she said. "Let me by!"

And without no warning she back-heeled me and pushed me with both hands. It was so unexpected I ignominiously crashed to the floor, and she darted past me and throwed open the inner door. Spike drove for her, and this time he was red-eyed, but I grabbed him as he went by.

Glory halted an instant on the threshold with a cry of mingled triumph, fear and rage. I riz, cussing beneath my breath and dusting off my britches. Glory ran across the room, eluding the grasping paws of Joe Galt, and throwed herself with passionate abandon on the prostrate form of Ace Bissett. I noticed that Ace, which hadn't till then showed the slightest sign of fear, was suddenly pale and his jaw was grim set.

"It was madness for you to come, Glory," he muttered.

"I saw Dorgan throw you into the car," she whimpered, throwing her arms around him, and tugging vainly at his cords. "I jumped in another and followed--blew out a tire a short distance from here--lost sight of the car I was following and wandered around in the dark alleys on foot for awhile, till I saw the car standing outside. I came on in--"

"Alone? My God!" groaned Ace.

"Alone?" echoed Galt, with a sigh of relief. He flicked some dust from his lapel, stuck his cigar back in his mouth at a cocky angle, and said: "Well, now, we'll have a little talk. Come here, Glory."

She clung closer to Ace, and Ace said in a low voice, almost a whisper: "Let her alone, Galt." His eyes was like fires burning under the ice.

Galt's muggs was grinning evilly and muttering to theirselves. Whithers was nervous and kept mopping perspiration. The air was tense. I was nervous and impatient; something was wrong, and I didn't know what. So when Galt started to say something, I took matters into my own hands.

"Bissett," I said, striding across the room and glaring down at him, "if they's a ounce of manhood in you, this here girl's devotion oughta touch even your snakish soul. Why don't you try to redeem yourself a little, anyway? Kick in with that paper! A man which is loved by a woman like Glory O'Dale loves you, oughta be above holdin' a forged confession over a innocent girl's head."

Bissett's mouth fell open. "What's he talking about?" he demanded from the world at large.

"I don't know," said Glory uneasily, snuggling closer to him. "He talked that way out in the other room. I think he's punch-drunk."

"Dorgan," said Bissett, "you don't belong in this crowd. Are you suffering from some sort of an hallucination?"

"Don't hand me no such guff, you snake!" I roared. "You know why I brung you here--to get the confession you gypped outa Whithers' sister, and blackmailed him with--just like you made him throw my fight tonight."

Bissett just looked dizzy, but Glory leaped up and faced me.

"You mean you think Ace made Whithers turn in that rotten decision?" she jerked out.

"I don't think," I answered sullenly. "I know. Whithers said so."

She jumped like she was galvanized.

"Why, you idiot!" she hollered, "they've made a fool of you! Jed Whithers hasn't any sister! He lied! Ace had nothing to do with it! Whithers was hired to throw the fight to Leary! Look at him!" Her voice rose to a shriek of triumph, as she pointed a accusing finger at Jed Whithers. "Look at him! Look how pale he is! He's scared witless!"

"It's a lie!" gulped Whithers, sweating and tearing at his crumpled collar like it was choking him.

"It's not a lie!" Glory was nearly hysterical by this time. "He was paid to throw the fight! And there's the man who paid him!" And she dramatically pointed her finger at Diamond Joe Galt!

GALT WAS ON HIS feet, his small eyes glinting savagely, his jaws grinding his cigar to a pulp.

"What about it, Galt?" I demanded, all at sea and bewildered.

He dashed down his cigar with a oath. His face was dark and convulsed.

"What of it?" he snarled. "What you goin' to do about it? I've stood all the guff out of you I'm goin' to!"

His hand snaked inside his coat and out, and I was looking into the black muzzle of a wicked stumpy automatic.

"You can't slug this like you did Red, you dumb gorilla," he smirked viciously. "Sure, the dame's tellin' the truth. Whithers took you in like a sucklin' lamb.

"When you caught him in your dressin'-room, he told you the first lie that come to him, knowin' you for a soft sap where women's concerned. Then when you fell for it, and offered to help him, he thought fast and roped you into this deal. We been tryin' to get hold of Bissett for a long time. He's got somethin' we want. But he was too smart and too tough for us. Now, thanks to you, we got him, and the girl. Now we're goin' to sweat what we want out of him, and you're goin' to keep your trap shut, see?"

"You mean they ain't no Constance Whithers, and no confession?" I said slowly, trying to get things straight. A raucous roar of mirth greeted the remark.

"No, sucker," taunted Galt; "you just been took in, you sap."

A wave of red swept across my line of vision. With a maddened roar, I plunged recklessly at Galt, gun and all. Everything happened at once. Galt closed his finger on the trigger just as Spike, standing beside him all this time, closed his jaws on Galt's leg. Galt screamed and leaped convulsively; the gun exploded in the air, missing me so close the powder singed my hair, and my right mauler crunched into Galt's face, flattening his nose, knocking out all his front teeth, and fracturing his jaw-bone. As he hit the floor Spike was right on top of him.

The next instant Galt's thugs was on top of me. We rolled across the room in a wild tangle of arms and legs, casually shattering tables and chairs on the way. Spike, finding Galt was out cold, abandoned him and charged to my aid. I heered Red Partland howl as Spike's iron fangs locked in his britches. But I had my hands full. Fists and hobnails was glancing off my carcass, and a thumb was feeling for my eye. I set my teeth in this thumb and was rewarded by a squeal of anguish, but the action didn't slow up any.

It was while strangling Limey Teak beneath me, whilst the other three was trying to stomp my ribs in and kick my head off, that I realized that another element had entered into the fray. There was the impact of a chair-leg on a human skull, and Jed Whithers give up the ghost with a whistling sigh. Glory O'Dale was taking a hand.

Dutch Steinmann next gave a ear-piercing howl, and Bill Reynolds abandoned me to settle her. Feeling Limey go limp beneath me, I riz, shaking Steinmann offa my shoulders, just in time to see Reynolds duck Glory's chair-leg and smack her down. Bissett give a most awful yell of rage, but he wasn't no madder than me. I left the floor in a flying tackle that carried Reynolds off his feet with a violence which nearly busted his skull against the floor. Too crazy-mad for reason, I set to work to hammer him to death, and though he was already senseless, I would probably of continued indefinite, had not Dutch Steinmann distracted my attention by smashing a chair over my head.

I riz through the splinters and caught him with a left hook that tore his ear nearly off and stood him on his neck in a corner. I then looked for Red Partland and seen him crawling out a winder which he'd tore the shutters off of. He was a rooin; his clothes was nearly all tore offa him, and he was bleeding like a stuck hawg and bawling like one, and Spike didn't show no intentions of abandoning the fray. His jaws was locked in what was left of Red's britches, and he had his feet braced against the wall below the sill. As I looked, Red gave a desperate wrench and tumbled through the winder, and I heered his lamentations fading into the night.

SHAKING THE BLOOD and sweat outa my eyes, I glared about at the battlefield, strewn with the dead and dying--at least with the unconscious, some of which was groaning loudly, whilst others slumbered in silence.

Glory was just getting up, dizzy and wobbly. Spike was smelling each of the victims in turn, and Ace was begging somebody to let him loose. Glory wobbled over to where he'd rolled offa the bench, and I followed her, kinda stiffly. At least one of my ribs had been broke by a boot-heel. My scalp was cut open, and blood was trickling down my side, where Limey Teak had made a ill-advised effort to knife me. I also thought one of them rats had hit me from behind with a club, till I discovered that sometime in the fray I'd fell on something hard in my hip pocket. This, I found, was Ace Bissett's pistol, which I'd clean forgot all about. I throwed it aside with disgust; them things is a trap and a snare.

I blinked at Ace with my one good eye, whilst Glory worked his cords offa him.

"I see I misjudged you," I said, lending her a hand. "I apolergize, and if you want satisfaction, right here and now is good enough for me."

"Good Lord, man," he said, with his arms full of Glory. "I don't want to fight you. I still don't know just what it was all about, but I'm beginning to understand."

I set down somewhat groggily on a bench which wasn't clean busted.

"What I want to know is," I said, "what that paper was they was talkin' about."

"Well," he said, "about a year ago I befriended a half-cracked Russian scientist, and he tried in his crazy way to repay me. He told me, in Galt's presence, that he was going to give me a formula that would make me the richest man on earth. He got blown up in an explosion in his laboratory shortly afterward, and an envelope was found in his room addressed to me, and containing a formula. Galt found out about it, and he's been hounding me ever since, trying to get it. He thought it was all the Russian claimed. In reality it was merely the disconnected scribblings of a disordered mind--good Lord, it claimed to be a process for the manufacture of diamonds! Utter insanity--but Galt never would believe it."

"And he thought I was dumb," I cogitated. "But hey, Glory, how'd you know it was Galt hired Whithers to throw my fight to Leary?"

"I didn't," she admitted. "I just accused Galt of it to start you fellows fighting among yourselves."

"Well, I'll be derned," I said, and just then one of the victims which had evidently come to while we was talking, riz stealthily to his all fours and started crawling towards the winder. It was Jed Whithers. I strode after him and hauled him to his feet.

"How much did Galt pay you for throwin' the bout to Leary?" I demanded.

"A thousand dollars," he stuttered.

"Gimme it," I ordered, and with shaking hands he hauled out a fold of bills. I fluttered 'em and saw they was intact.

"Turn around and look out the winder at the stars," I commanded.

"I don't see no stars," he muttered.

"You will," I promised, as I swung my foot and histed him clean over the sill.

As his wails faded up the alley, I turned to Ace and Glory, and said: "Galt must of cleaned up plenty on this deal, payin' so high for his dirty work. This here dough, though, is goin' to be put to a good cause. The Old Man lost all his money account of Whithers' crooked decision. This thousand bucks will save his ship. Now let's go. I wanta get hold of the promoter of the Sweet Dreams, and get another match tomorrer night with Kid Leary--this time with a honest referee."

THE END

Contents

APPARITION IN THE PRIZE RING

By Robert E. Howard

READERS OF THIS magazine will probably remember Ace Jessel, the big negro boxer whom I managed a few years ago. He was an ebony giant, four inches over six feet tall, with a fighting weight of 230 pounds. He moved with the smooth ease of a gigantic leopard and his pliant steel muscles rippled under his shiny skin. A clever boxer for so large a man, he carried the smashing jolt of a trip-hammer in each huge fist.

It was my belief that he was the equal of any man in the ring at that time--except for one fatal defect. He lacked the killer instinct. He had courage in plenty, as he proved on more than one occasion--but he was content to box mostly, outpointing his opponents and piling up just enough lead to keep from losing.

Every so often the crowds booed him, but their taunts only broadened his good-natured grin. However, his fights continued to draw a big gate, because, on the rare occasions when he was stung out of a defensive role or when he was matched with a clever man whom he had to knock out in order to win, the fans saw a real fight that thrilled their blood. Even so, time and again he stepped away from a sagging foe, giving the beaten man time to recover and return to the attack--while the crowd raved and I tore my hair.

The one abiding loyalty in Ace's happy-go-lucky life was a fanatical worship of Tom Molyneaux, first champion of America and a sturdy fighting man of color; according to some authorities, the greatest black ringman that ever lived.

Tom Molyneaux died in Ireland a hundred years ago but the memory of his valiant deeds in American and Europe was Ace Jessel's direct incentive to action. As a boy, toiling on the wharves, he had heard an account of Tom's life and battles and the story had started him on the fistic trail.

ACE'S MOST HIGHLY prized possession was a painted portrait of the old battler. He had discovered this--a rare find indeed, since even woodcuts of Molyneaux are rare--among the collection of a London sportsman, and had prevailed on the owner to sell it. Paying for it had taken every cent that Ace made in four fights but he counted it cheap at the price. He removed the original frame and replaced it with a frame of solid silver, which, considering the portrait was full length and life size, was more than extravagant.

But no honor was too great for "Mistah Tom" and Ace merely increased the number of his bouts to meet the cost.

Finally my brains and Ace's mallet fists had cleared us a road to the top of the game. Ace loomed up as a heavyweight menace and the champion's manager was ready to sign with us--when an unexpected obstacle blocked our path.

A form hove into view on the fistic horizon that dwarfed and overshadowed all other contenders, including my man. This was "Mankiller Gomez," and he was all that his name implies. Gomez was his ring name, given him by the Spaniard who discovered him and brought him to America. He was a full-blooded Senegalese from the West Coast of Africa.

ONCE IN A century, rings fans see a man like Gomez in action--a born killer who crashes through the general ruck of fighters as a buffalo crashes through a thicket of dead wood. He was a savage, a tiger. What he lacked in actual skill, he made up by ferocity of attack, by ruggedness of body and smashing power of arm. From the time he landed in New York, with a long list of European victories behind him, it was inevitable that he should batter down all opposition--and at last the white champion looked to see the black savage looming above the broken forms of his victims. The champion saw the writing on the wall, but the public was clamoring for a match and whatever his faults, the title-holder was a fighting champion.

Ace Jessel, who alone of all the foremost challengers had not met Gomez, was shoved into discard, and as early summer dawned on New York, a title was lost and won, and Mankiller Gomez, son of the black jungle, rose up as king of all fighting men.

The sporting world and the public at large hated and feared the new champion. Boxing fans like savagery in the ring, but Gomez did not confine his ferocity to the ring. His soul was abysmal. He was ape-like, primordial--the very spirit of that morass of barbarism from which mankind has so tortuously climbed, and toward which men look with so much suspicion.

There went forth a search for a White Hope, but the result was always the same. Challenger after challenger went down before the terrible onslaught of the Mankiller and at last only one man remained who had not crossed gloves with Gomez--Ace Jessel.

I hesitated to throw my man in with a battler like Gomez, for my fondness for the great good-natured negro was more than the friendship of manager for fighter. Ace was something more than a meal-ticket to me, for I knew the real nobility underlying Ace's black skin, and I hated to see him battered into a senseless ruin by a man I know in my heart to be more than Jessel's match. I wanted to wait a while, to let Gomez wear himself out with his terrific battles and the dissipations that were sure to follow the savage's success. These super-sluggers never last long, any more than a jungle native can withstand the temptations of civilization.

But the slump that follows a really great title-holder's gaining the belt was on, and matches were scarce. The public was clamoring for a title fight, sports writers were raising Cain and accusing Ace of cowardice, promoters were offering alluring purses, and at last I signed for a fifteen-round go between Mankiller Gomez and Ace Jessel.

At the training quarters I turned to Ace.

"Ace, do you think you can whip him?"

"Mistah John," Ace answered, meeting my eye with a straight gaze, "I'll do mah best, but I's mighty afeard I caint do it. Dat man ain't human."

This was bad; a man is more than half whipped when he goes into the fight in that frame of mind.

Later I went to Ace's room for something and halted in the doorway in amazement. I had heard the battler talking in a low voice as I came up, but had supposed one of the handlers or sparring partners was in the room with him. Now I saw that he was alone. He was standing before his idol--the portrait of Tom Molyneaux.

"Mistah Tom," he was saying humbly, "I ain't neveh met no man yet what could even knock me off mah feet, but I recon dat niggah can. I's gwine to need help mighty bad, Mistah Tom."

I felt almost as if I had interrupted a religious rite. It was uncanny; had it not been for Ace's evident deep sincerity, I would have felt it to be unholy. But to Ace, Tom Molyneaux was something more than a saint.

I stood in the doorway in silence, watching the strange tableaux. The unknown artist had painted the picture of Molyneaux with remarkable skill. The short black figure stood out boldly from the faded canvas. The breath of by-gone days, he seemed, clad in the long tights of that other day, the powerful legs braced far apart, the knotted arms held stiff and high--just as Molyneaux had appeared when he fought Tom Cribb of England over a hundred years ago.

Ace Jessel stood before the painted figure, his head sunk upon his mighty chest as if listening to some dim whisper inside his soul. And as I watched, a curious and fantastic idea came to me--the memory of a age-old superstition.

You know it had been said by students of the occult that statues and portraits have power to draw departed souls back from the void of eternity. I wondered if Ace had heard of this superstition and hoped to conjure his idol's spirit out of the realms of the dead, for advice and aid. I shrugged my shoulders at this ridiculous idea and turned away. As I did, I glanced again at the picture before which Ace still stood like a great image of black basalt, and was aware of a peculiar illusion; the canvas seemed to ripple slightly, like the surface of a lake across which a faint breeze is blowing....

When the day of the fight arrived, I watched Ace nervously. I was more afraid than ever that I had made a mistake in permitting circumstances to force my man into the ring with Gomez. However, I was backing Ace to the limit--and I was ready to do anything under heaven to help him win that fight.

The great crowd cheered Ace to the echo as he climbed into the ring; cheered again, but not so heartily, as Gomez appeared. They afforded a strange contrast, those two negroes, alike in color but so different in all other respects!

Ace was tall, clean-limbed and rangy, long and smooth of muscle, clear of eye and broad of forehead.

Gomez seemed stocky by comparison, though he stood a good six feet two. Where Jessel's sinews were long and smooth like great cables, his were knotty and bulging. His calves, thighs, arms and shoulders stood out in great bunches of muscles. His small bullet head was set squarely between gigantic shoulders, and his forehead was so low that his kinky wool seemed to grow just above his small, bloodshot eyes. On his chest was a thick grizzle of matted black hair.

He grinned insolently, thumped his breast and flexed his mighty arms with the assurance of the savage. Ace, in his corner, grinned at the crowd, but an ashy tint was on his dusky face and his knees were trembling.

THE USUAL FORMALITIES were carried out: instructions given by the referee, weights announced--230 for Ace, 248 for Gomez. Then over the great stadium the lights went off except those over the ring where two black giants faced each other like men alone on the ridge of the world.

At the gong Gomez whirled in his corner and came out with a breath-taking roar of pure ferocity. Ace, frightened though he must have been, rushed to meet him with the courage of a cave man charging a gorilla. They met headlong in the center of the ring.

The first blow was the Mankiller's, a left swing that glanced from Ace's ribs. Ace came back with a long left to the face and a stinging right to the body. Gomez "bulled in," swinging both hands; and Ace, after one futile attempt to mix it with him, gave back. The champion drove him across the ring, sending a savage left to the body as Ace clinched. As they broke, Gomez shot a terrible right to the chin and Ace reeled into the ropes.

A great "Ahhh!" went up from the crowd as the champion plunged after him like a famished wolf, but Ace managed to get between the lashing arms and clinch, shaking his head to clear it. Gomez sent in a left, which Ace's clutching arms partly smothered, and the referee warned the Senegalese.

At the break Ace stepped back, jabbing swiftly and cleverly with his left. The round ended with the champion bellowing like a buffalo, trying to get past the rapier-like arm.

Between rounds I cautioned Ace to keep away from in-fighting as much as possible, where Gomez' superior strength would count heavily, and to use his footwork to avoid punishment.

The second round started much like the first, Gomez rushing and Ace using all his skill to stave him off and avoid those terrible smashes. It's hard to get a shifty boxer like Ace in a corner, when he is fresh and unweakened, and at long range he had the advantage over Gomez, whose one idea was to get in close and batter down his foes by sheer strength and ferocity. Still, in spite of Ace's speed and skill, just before the gong sounded Gomez got the range and sank a vicious left in Ace's midriff and the tall negro weaved slightly as he returned to his corner.

I felt that it was the beginning of the end. The vitality and power of Gomez seemed endless; there was no wearing him down and it would not take many such blows to rob Ace of his speed of foot and accuracy of eye. If forced to stand and trade punches, he was finished.

Gomez came plunging out for the third round with murder in his eye. He ducked a straight left, took a hard right uppercut square in the face and hooked both hands to Ace's body, then straightened with a terrific right to the chin, which Ace robbed of most of its force by swaying with the blow.

WHILE THE CHAMPION was still off balance, Ace measured him coolly and shot in a fierce right hook, flush on the chin. Gomez' head flew back as if hinged to his shoulders and he was stopped in his tracks! But even as the crowd rose, hands clenched, lips parted, hoping he would go down, the champion shook his bullet head and came in, roaring. The round ended with both men locked in a clinch in the center of the ring.

At the beginning of the fourth round Gomez drove Ace about the ring almost at will. Stung and desperate, Ace made a stand in a neutral corner and sent Gomez back on his heels with a left and right to the body, but he received a savage left in the face in return. Then suddenly the champion crashed through with a deadly left to the solar plexus, and as Ace staggered, shot a killing right to the chin. Ace fell back into the ropes, instinctively raising his hands. Gomez' short, fierce smashes were partly blocked by his shielding gloves--and suddenly, pinned on the ropes as he was, and still dazed from the Mankiller's attack, Ace went into terrific action and, slugging toe to toe with the champion, beat him off and drove him back across the ring!

The crowd went mad. Ace was fighting as he had never fought before, but I waited miserably for the end. I knew no man could stand the pace the champion was setting.

Battling along the ropes, Ace sent a savage left to the body and a right and left to the face, but was repaid by a right-hand smash to the ribs that made him wince in spite of himself. Just at the gong, Gomez landed another of those deadly left-handers to the body.

Ace's handlers worked over him swiftly, but I saw that the tall black was weakening.

"Ace, can't you keep away from those body smashes?" I asked.

"Mistah John, suh, I'll try," he answered.

The gong!

Ace came in with a rush, his magnificent body vibrating with dynamic energy. Gomez met him, his iron muscles bunching into a compact fighting unit. Crash--crash--and again, crash! A clinch. As they broke, Gomez drew back his great right arm and launched a terrible blow to Ace's mouth. The tall negro reeled--went down. Then without stopping for the count which I was screaming at him to take, he gathered his long, steely legs under him and was up with a bound, blood gushing down his black chest. Gomez leaped in and Ace, with the fury of desperation, met him with a terrific right, square to the jaw. And Gomez crashed to the canvas on his shoulder blades!

The crowd rose screaming! In the space of ten seconds both men had been floored for the first time in the life of each!

"One! Two! Three! Four!" The referee's arm rose and fell.

GOMEZ WAS UP, unhurt, wild with fury. Roaring like a wild beast, he plunged in, brushed aside Ace's hammering arms and crashed his right hand with the full wieght of his mighty shoulder behind it, full into Ace's midriff. Ace went an ashy color--he swayed like a tall tree, and Gomez beat him to his knees with rights and lefts which sounded like the blows of caulking mallets.

"One! Two! Three! Four--"

Ace was writhing on the canvas, trying to get up. The roar of the fans was an ocean of noise which drowned all thought.

"--Five! Six! Seven--"

Ace was up! Gomez came charging across the stained canvas, gibbering his pagan fury. His blows beat upon the staggering challenger like a hail of sledges. A left--a right--another left which Ace had not the strength to duck.

He went down again.

"One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Six! Seven! Eight--"

Again Ace was up, weaving, staring blankly, helpless. A swinging left hurled him back into the ropes and, rebounding from them, he went to his knees--then the gong sounded!

As his handlers and I sprang into the ring Ace groped blindly for his corner and dropped limply upon the stool.

"Ace, he's too much for you," I said.

A weak grin spread over Ace's face and his indomitable spirit shone in his blood-shot eyes.

"Mistah John, please, suh, don't throw in de sponge. If I mus' take it, I takes it standin'. Dat boy caint last at dis pace all night, suh."

No--but neither could Ace Jessel, in spite of his remarkable vitality and his marvelous recuperative powers, which sent him into the next round with a show of renewed strength and freshness.

The sixth and seventh were comparatively tame. Perhaps Gomez really was fatigued from the terrific pace he had been setting. At any rate, Ace managed to make it more or less of a sparring match at long range and the crowd was treated to an exhibition illustrating how long a brainy boxer can stand off and keep away from a slugger bent solely on his destruction Even I marveled at the brand of boxing which Ace was showing, though I knew that Gomez was fighting cautiously for him. The champion had sampled the power of Ace's right hand in that frenzied fifth round and perhaps he was wary of a trick. For the first time in his life he had sprawled on the canvas. He was content to rest a couple of rounds, take his time and gather his energies for a final onslaught.

This began as the gong sounded for the eighth round. Gomez launched his usual sledge-hammer attack, drove Ace about the ring and floored him in a neutral corner. His style of fighting was such that when he was determined to annihilate a foe, skill, speed and science could do no more than postpone the eventual outcome. Ace took the count of nine and rose, back-pedaling.

BUT GOMEZ WAS after him; the champion missed twice with his left and then sank a right under the heart that turned Ace ashy. A left to the jaw made his knees buckle and he clinched desperately.

On the break-away Ace sent a straight left to the face and right hook to the chin, but the blows lacked force. Gomez shook them off and sank his left wrist deep in Ace's midsection. Ace again clinched but the champion shoved him away and drove him across the right with savage hooks to the body. At the gong they were slugging along the ropes.

Ace reeled to the wrong corner, and when his handlers led him to his own, he sank down on the stool, his legs trembling and his great dusky chest heaving from his exertions. I glanced across at the champion, who was glowering at his foe. He too was showing signs of the fray, but he was much fresher than Ace. The referee walked over, looked hesitantly at Ace, and then spoke to me.

Through the mists that veiled his muddled brain, Ace realized the significance of these words and struggled to rise, a kind of fear showing in his eyes.

"Mistah John, don' let him stop it, suh! Don' let him do it; I ain't hu't nuthin' like dat would hu't me!"

The referee shrugged his shoulders and walked back to the center of the ring.

There was little use giving advice to Ace. He was too battered to understand--in his numbed brain there was room only for one thought--to fight and fight, and keep on fighting--the old primal instinct that is stronger than all things except death.

At the sound of the gong he reeled out to meet his doom with an indomitable courage that brought the crowd to its feet yelling. He struck, a wild aimless left, and the champion plunged in, hitting with both hands until Ace sent down. At "nine" he was up, back-pedaling instinctively until Gomez reached him with a long straight right and sent him down again. Again he took "nine" before he reeled up and now the crowd was silent. Not one voice was raised in an urge for the kill. This was butchery--primitive slaughter--but the courage of Ace Jessel took their breath as it gripped my heart.

Ace fell blindly into a clinch, and another and another, till the Mankiller, furious, shook him off and sank his right to the body. Ace's ribs gave way like rotten wood, with a dry crack heard distinctly all over the stadium. A strangled cry went up from the crowd and Ace gasped thickly and fell to his knees.

"--Seven! Eight--" The great black form was still writhing on the canvas.

"--Nine!" And then a miracle happened; Ace was on his feet, swaying, jaw sagging, arms hanging limply.

Gomez glared at him, as if unable to understand how his foe could have risen again, then came plunging in to finish him. Ace was in dire straits. Blood blinded him. Both eyes were nearly closed, and when he breathed through his smashed nose, a red haze surrounded him. Deep cuts gashed cheek and cheek bones and his left side was a mass of torn flesh. He was going on fighting instinct alone now, and never again would any man doubt that Ace Jessel had a fighting heart.

Yet a fighting heart alone is not enough when the body is broken and battered, and mists of unconsciousness veil the brain. Before Gomez' terrific onslaught, Ace went down--broken--and the crowd knew that this time it was final.

When a man has taken the beating that Ace had taken, something more than body and heart must come into the game to carry him through. Something to inspire and stimulate him--to fire him to heights of superhuman effort!

Before leaving the training quarters, I had, unknown to Ace, removed the picture of Tom Molyneaux from its frame, rolled it up carefully and brought it to the stadium with me. I now took this, and as Ace's dazed eyes instinctively sought his corner, I held the portrait up, just outside the flare of the ring lights, so while illumined by them it appeared illusive and dim. It may be thought that I acted wrongly and selfishly, to thus seek to bring a broken man to his feet for more punishment--but the outsider cannot fathom the souls of the children of the fight game, to whom winning is greater than life, and losing, worse than death.

All eyes were glued on the prostrate from in the center of the ring, on the exhausted champion sagging against the ropes, on the referee's arm which rose and fell with the regularity of doom. I doubt if four men in the audience saw my action--but Ace Jessel did!

I caught the gleam that came into his blood-shot eyes. I saw him shake his head violently. I saw him begin sluggishly to gather his long legs under him, while the drone of the referee rose as it neared its climax.

And as I live today, the picture in my hands shook suddenly and violently!

A cold wind passed like death across me and I heard the man next to me shiver involuntarily as he drew his coat close about him. But it was no cold wind that gripped my soul as I looked, wide-eyed and staring, into the ring where the greatest drama of the boxing world was being enacted.

Ace, struggling, got his elbows under him. Bloody mists masked his vision; then, far away but coming nearer, he saw a form looming through the fog. A man--a short, massive black man, barrel-chested and might-limbed, clad in the long tights of another day--stood beside him in the ring! It was Tom Molyneaux, stepping down through the deal years to aid his worshiper--Tom Molyneaux, attired and ready as when he fought Tom Cribb so long ago!

AND JESSEL WAS up! The crowd went insane and screaming. A supernatural might fired his weary limbs and lit his dazed brain. Let Gomez do his worst now--how could he beat a man for whom the ghost of the greatest of all black warrriors was fighting?

For to Ace Jessel, falling on the astounded Mankiller like a blast from the Arctic, Tom Molyneaux's mighty arm was about his waist, Tom's eye guided his blows, Tom's bare fists fell with Ace's on the head and body of the champion.

The Mankiller was dazed by his opponent's sudden come-back--he was bewildered by the uncanny strength of the man who should have been fainting on the canvas. And before he could rally, he was beaten down by the long, straight smashes sent in with the speed and power of a pile-driver. The last blow, a straight right, would have felled an ox--and it felled Gomez for the long count.

As the astonished referee lifted Ace's hand, proclaiming him champion, the tall negro smiled and collapsed, mumbling the words, "Thanks, Mistah Tom."

Yes, to all concerned, Ace's come-back seemed inhuman and unnatural--though no one saw the phantom figure except Tom--and one other. I am not going to claim that I saw the ghost myself--because I didn't, though I did feel the uncanny movement of that picture. If it hadn't been for the strange thing that happened just after the fight, I would say that the whole affair might be naturally explained--that Ace's strength was miraculously renewed by a delusion resulting from his glimpse of the picture. For after all, who knows the strange depths of the human soul and to what apparently superhuman heights the body may be lifted by the mind?

BUT AFTER THE bout the referee, a steely-nerved, cold-eyed sportsman of the old school, said to me:

"Listen here! Am I crazy--or was there a fourth man in that ring when Ace Jessel dropped Gomez? For a minute I thought I saw a broad, squat, funny-looking negro standing there beside Ace! Don't grin, you bum! It wasn't that picture you were holding up--I saw that, too. It was a real man--and he looked like the one in the picture. He was standing there a moment--and then he was gone! God! That fight must have got on my nerves."

And these are the cold facts, told without any attempt to distort the truth or mislead the reader. I leave the problem up to you:

Was it Ace's numbed brain that created the hallucination of ghostly aid--or did the phantom of Tom Molyneaux actually stand beside him, as he believes to this day?

As far as I am concerned, the old superstition is justified. I believe firmly today that a portrait is a door through which astral beings may pass back and forth between this world and the next--whatever the next world may be--and that a great, unselfish love is strong enough to summon the spirits of the dead to the aid of the living.

THE END

Contents

GRAVEYARD RATS

By Robert E. Howard

Chapter 1

: The Head from the Grave

Saul Wilkinson awoke suddenly, and lay in the darkness with beads of cold sweat on his hands and face. He shuddered at the memory of the dream from which he had awakened.

But horrible dreams were nothing uncommon. Grisly nightmares had haunted his sleep since early childhood. It was another fear that clutched his heart with icy fingers--fear of the sound that had roused him. It had been a furtive step--hands fumbling in the dark.

And now a small scurrying sounded in the room--a rat running back and forth across the floor.

He groped under his pillow with trembling fingers. The house was still, but imagination peopled its darkness with shapes of horror. But it was not all imagination. A faint stir of air told him the door that gave on the broad hallway was open. He knew he had closed that door before he went to bed. And he knew it was not one of his brothers who had come so subtly to his room.

In that fear-tense, hate-haunted household, no man came by night to his brother's room without first making himself known.

This was especially the case since an old feud had claimed the eldest brother four days since--John Wilkinson, shot down in the streets of the little hill-country town by Joel Middleton, who had escaped into the post oak grown hills, swearing still greater vengeance against the Wilkinsons.

All this flashed through Saul's mind as he drew the revolver from under his pillow.

As he slid out of bed, the creak of the springs brought his heart into his throat, and he crouched there for a moment, holding his breath and straining his eyes into the darkness.

Richard was sleeping upstairs, and so was Harrison, the city detective Peter had brought out to hunt down Joel Middleton. Peter's room was on the ground floor, but in another wing. A yell for help might awaken all three, but it would also bring a hail of lead at him, if Joel Middleton were crouching over there in the blackness.

Saul knew this was his fight, and must be fought out alone, in the darkness he had always feared and hated. And all the time sounded that light, scampering patter of tiny feet, racing up and down, up and down ...

Crouching against the wall, cursing the pounding of his heart, Saul fought to steady his quivering nerves. He was backed against the wall which formed the partition between his room and the hall.

The windows were faint grey squares in the blackness, and he could dimly make out objects of furniture in all except one side of the room. Joel Middleton must be over there, crouching by the old fireplace, which was invisible in the darkness.

But why was he waiting? And why was that accursed rat racing up and down before the fireplace, as if in a frenzy of fear and greed? Just so Saul had seen rats race up and down the floor of the meat-house, frantic to get at flesh suspended out of reach.

Noiselessly, Saul moved along the wall toward the door. If a man was in the room, he would presently be lined between himself and a window. But as he glided along the wall like a night-shirted ghost, no ominous bulk grew out of the darkness. He reached the door and closed it soundlessly, wincing at his nearness to the unrelieved blackness of the hall outside.

But nothing happened. The only sounds were the wild beating of his heart, the loud ticking of the old clock on the mantelpiece--the maddening patter of the unseen rat. Saul clenched his teeth against the shrieking of his tortured nerves. Even in his growing terror he found time to wonder frantically why that rat ran up and down before the fireplace.

The tension became unbearable. The open door proved that Middleton, or someone--or something--had come into that room. Why would Middleton come save to kill? But why in God's name had he not struck already? What was he waiting for?

Saul's nerve snapped suddenly. The darkness was strangling him and those pattering rat-feet were red-hot hammers on his crumbling brain. He must have light, even though that light brought hot lead ripping through him.

In stumbling haste he groped to the mantelpiece, fumbling for the lamp. And he cried out--a choked, horrible croak that could not have carried beyond his room. For his hand, groping in the dark on the mantel, had touched the hair on a human scalp!

A furious squeal sounded in the darkness at his feet and a sharp pain pierced his ankle as the rat attacked him, as if he were an intruder seeking to rob it of some coveted object.

But Saul was hardly aware of the rodent as he kicked it away and reeled back, his brain a whirling turmoil. Matches and candles were on the table, and to it he lurched, his hands sweeping the dark and finding what he wanted.

He lighted a candle and turned, gun lifted in a shaking hand. There was no living man in the room except himself. But his distended eyes focused themselves on the mantelpiece--and the object on it.

He stood frozen, his brain at first refusing to register what his eyes revealed. Then he croaked inhumanly and the gun crashed on the hearth as it slipped through his numb fingers.

John Wilkinson was dead, with a bullet through his heart. It had been three days since Saul had seen his body nailed into the crude coffin and lowered into the grave in the old Wilkinson family graveyard. For three days the hard clay soil had baked in the hot sun above the coffined form of John Wilkinson.

Yet from the mantel John Wilkinson's face leered at him--white and cold and dead.

It was no nightmare, no dream of madness. There, on the mantelpiece rested John Wilkinson's severed head.

And before the fireplace, up and down, up and down, scampered a creature with red eyes, that squeaked and squealed--a great grey rat, maddened by its failure to reach the flesh its ghoulish hunger craved.

Saul Wilkinson began to laugh--horrible, soul-shaking shrieks that mingled with the squealing of the grey ghoul. Saul's body rocked to and fro, and the laughter turned to insane weeping, that gave way in turn to hideous screams that echoed through the old house and brought the sleepers out of their sleep.

They were the screams of a madman. The horror of what he had seen had blasted Saul Wilkinson's reason like a blown-out candle flame.

Chapter 2

: Madman's Hate

It was those screams which roused Steve Harrison, sleeping in an upstairs chamber. Before he was fully awake he was on his way down the unlighted stairs, pistol in one hand and flashlight in the other.

Down in the hallway he saw light streaming from under a closed door, and made for it. But another was before him. Just as Harrison reached the landing, he saw a figure rushing across the hall, and flashed his beam on it.

It was Peter Wilkinson, tall and gaunt, with a poker in his hand. He yelled something incoherent, threw open the door and rushed in.

Harrison heard him exclaim: "Saul! What's the matter? What are you looking at--" Then a terrible cry: "My God!"

The poker clanged on the floor, and then the screams of the maniac rose to a crescendo of fury.

It was at this instant that Harrison reached the door and took in the scene with one startled glance. He saw two men in nightshirts grappling in the candlelight, while from the mantel a cold, dead, white face looked blindly down on them, and a grey rat ran in mad circles about their feet.

Into that scene of horror and madness Harrison propelled his powerful, thick-set body. Peter Wilkinson was in sore straits. He had dropped his poker and now, with blood streaming from a wound in his head, he was vainly striving to tear Saul's lean fingers from his throat.

The glare in Saul's eyes told Harrison the man was mad. Crooking one massive arm about the maniac's neck, he tore him loose from his victim with an exertion of sheer strength that not even the abnormal energy of insanity could resist.

The madman's stringy muscles were like steel wires under the detective's hands, and Saul twisted about in his grasp, his teeth snapping, beastlike, for Harrison's bull-throat. The detective shoved the clawing, frothing fury away from him and smashed a fist to the madman's jaw. Saul crashed to the floor and lay still, eyes glazed and limbs quivering.

Peter reeled back against a table, purple-faced and gagging.

"Get cords, quick!" snapped Harrison, heaving the limp figure off the floor and letting it slump into a great arm-chair. "Tear that sheet in strips. We've got to tie him up before he comes to. Hell's fire!"

The rat had made a ravening attack on the senseless man's bare feet. Harrison kicked it away, but it squeaked furiously and came charging back with ghoulish persistence. Harrison crushed it under his foot, cutting short its maddened squeal.

Peter, gasping convulsively, thrust into the detective's hands the strips he had torn from the sheet, and Harrison bound the limp limbs with professional efficiency. In the midst of his task he looked up to see Richard, the youngest brother, standing in the doorway, his face like chalk.

"Richard!" choked Peter. "Look! My God! John's head!"

"I see!" Richard licked his lips. "But why are you tying up Saul?"

"He's crazy," snapped Harrison. "Get me some whiskey, will you?"

As Richard reached for a bottle on a curtained shelf, booted feet hit the porch outside, and a voice yelled: "Hey, there! Dick! What's wrong?"

"That's our neighbor, Jim Allison," muttered Peter.

He stepped to the door opposite the one that opened into the hall and turned the key in the ancient lock. That door opened upon a side porch. A tousle-headed man with his pants pulled on over his nightshirt came blundering in.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "I heard somebody hollerin', and run over quick as I could. What you doin' to Saul--good God Almighty!"

He had seen the head on the mantel, and his face went ashen.

"Go get the marshal, Jim!" croaked Peter. "This is Joel Middleton's work!"

Allison hurried out, stumbling as he peered back over his shoulder in morbid fascination.

Harrison had managed to spill some liquor between Saul's livid lips. He handed the bottle to Peter and stepped to the mantel. He touched the grisly object, shivering slightly as he did so. His eyes narrowed suddenly.

"You think Middleton dug up your brother's grave and cut off his head?" he asked.

"Who else?" Peter stared blankly at him.

"Saul's mad. Madmen do strange things. Maybe Saul did this."

"No! No!" exclaimed Peter, shuddering. "Saul hasn't left the house all day. John's grave was undisturbed this morning, when I stopped by the old graveyard on my way to the farm. Saul was sane when he went to bed. It was seeing John's head that drove him mad. Joel Middleton has been here, to take this horrible revenge!" He sprang up suddenly, shrilling, "My God, he may still be hiding in the house somewhere!"

"We'll search it," snapped Harrison. "Richard, you stay here with Saul. You might come with me, Peter."

In the hall outside the detective directed a beam of light on the heavy front door. The key was turned in the massive lock. He turned and strode down the hall, asking: "Which door is farthest from any sleeping chamber?"

"The back kitchen door!" Peter answered, and led the way. A few moments later they were standing before it. It stood partly open, framing a crack of starlit sky.

"He must have come and gone this way," muttered Harrison. "You're sure this door was locked?"

"I locked all outer doors myself," asserted Peter. "Look at those scratches on the outer side! And there's the key lying on the floor inside."

"Old-fashioned lock," grunted Harrison. "A man could work the key out with a wire from the outer side and force the lock easily. And this is the logical lock to force, because the noise of breaking it wouldn't likely be heard by anybody in the house."

He stepped out onto the deep back porch. The broad back yard was without trees or brushes, separated by a barbed-wire fence from a pasture lot, which ran to a wood-lot thickly grown with post oaks, part of the woods which hemmed in the village of Lost Knob on all sides.

Peter stared toward that woodland, a low, black rampart in the faint starlight, and he shivered.

"He's out there, somewhere!" he whispered. "I never suspected he'd dare strike at us in our own house. I brought you here to hunt him down. I never thought we'd need you to protect us!"

Without replying, Harrison stepped down into the yard. Peter cringed back from the starlight, and remained crouching at the edge of the porch.

Harrison crossed the narrow pasture and paused at the ancient rail fence which separated it from the woods. They were black as only post oak thickets can be.

No rustle of leaves, no scrape of branches betrayed a lurking presence. If Joel Middleton had been there, he must have already sought refuge in the rugged hills that surrounded Lost Knob.

Harrison turned back toward the house. He had arrived at Lost Knob late the preceding evening. It was now somewhat past midnight. But the grisly news was spreading, even in the dead of night.

The Wilkinson house stood at the western edge of the town, and the Allison house was the only one within a hundred yards of it. But Harrison saw lights springing up in distant windows.

Peter stood on the porch, head out-thrust on his long, buzzard-like neck.

"Find anything?" he called anxiously.

"Tracks wouldn't show on this hard-baked ground," grunted the detective. "Just what did you see when you ran into Saul's room?"

"Saul standing before the mantelboard, screaming with his mouth wide open," answered Peter. "When I saw--what he saw, I must have cried out and dropped the poker. Then Saul leaped on me like a wild beast."

"Was his door locked?"

"Closed, but not locked. The lock got broken accidentally a few days ago."

"One more question: has Middleton ever been in this house before?"

"Not to my knowledge," replied Peter grimly. "Our families have hated each other for twenty-five years. Joel's the last of his name."

Harrison re-entered the house. Allison had returned with the marshal, McVey, a tall, taciturn man who plainly resented the detective's presence. Men were gathering on the side porch and in the yard. They talked in low mutters, except for Jim Allison, who was vociferous in his indignation.

"This finishes Joel Middleton!" he proclaimed loudly. "Some folks sided with him when he killed John. I wonder what they think now? Diggin' up a dead man and cuttin' his head off! That's Injun work! I reckon folks won't wait for no jury to tell 'em what to do with Joel Middleton!"

"Better catch him before you start lynchin' him," grunted McVey. "Peter, I'm takin' Saul to the county seat."

Peter nodded mutely. Saul was recovering consciousness, but the mad glaze of his eyes was unaltered. Harrison spoke:

"Suppose we go to the Wilkinson graveyard and see what we can find? We might be able to track Middleton from there."

"They brought you in here to do the job they didn't think I was good enough to do," snarled McVey. "All right. Go ahead and do it--alone. I'm takin' Saul to the county seat."

With the aid of his deputies he lifted the bound maniac and strode out. Neither Peter nor Richard offered to accompany him. A tall, gangling man stepped from among his fellows and awkwardly addressed Harrison:

"What the marshal does is his own business, but all of us here are ready to help all we can, if you want to git a posse together and comb the country."

"Thanks, no." Harrison was unintentionally abrupt. "You can help me by all clearing out, right now. I'll work this thing out alone, in my own way, as the marshal suggested."

The men moved off at once, silent and resentful, and Jim Allison followed them, after a moment's hesitation. When all had gone, Harrison closed the door and turned to Peter.

"Will you take me to the graveyard?"

Peter shuddered. "Isn't it a terrible risk? Middleton has shown he'll stop at nothing."

"Why should he?" Richard laughed savagely. His mouth was bitter, his eyes alive with harsh mockery, and lines of suffering were carven deep in his face.

"We never stopped hounding him," said he. "John cheated him out of his last bit of land--that's why Middleton killed him. For which you were devoutly thankful!"

"You're talking wild!" exclaimed Peter.

Richard laughed bitterly. "You old hypocrite! We're all beasts of prey, we Wilkinsons--like this thing!" He kicked the dead rat viciously. "We all hated each other. You're glad Saul's crazy! You're glad John's dead. Only me left now, and I have a heart disease. Oh, stare if you like! I'm no fool. I've seen you poring over Aaron's lines in 'Titus Andronicus':

"Oft have I digg'd up dead men from their graves, and set them upright at their dear friends' doors!"

"You're mad yourself!" Peter sprang up, livid.

"Oh, am I?" Richard had lashed himself almost into a frenzy. "What proof have we that you didn't cut off John's head? You knew Saul was a neurotic, that a shock like that might drive him mad! And you visited the graveyard yesterday!"

Peter's contorted face was a mask of fury. Then, with an effort of iron control, he relaxed and said quietly: "You are over-wrought, Richard."

"Saul and John hated you," snarled Richard. "I know why. It was because you wouldn't agree to leasing our farm on Wild River to that oil company. But for your stubbornness we might all be wealthy."

"You know why I wouldn't lease," snapped Peter. "Drilling there would ruin the agricultural value of the land--certain profit, not a risky gamble like oil."

"So you say," sneered Richard. "But suppose that's just a smoke screen? Suppose you dream of being the sole, surviving heir, and becoming an oil millionaire all by yourself, with no brothers to share--"

Harrison broke in: "Are we going the chew the rag all night?"

"No!" Peter turned his back on his brother. "I'll take you to the graveyard. I'd rather face Joel Middleton in the night than listen to the ravings of this lunatic any longer."

"I'm not going," snarled Richard. "Out there in the black night there's too many chances for you to remove the remaining heir. I'll go and stay the rest of the night with Jim Allison."

He opened the door and vanished in the darkness.

Peter picked up the head and wrapped it in a cloth, shivering lightly as he did so.

"Did you notice how well preserved the face is?" he muttered. "One would think that after three days--Come on. I'll take it and put it back in the grave where it belongs."

"I'll kick this dead rat outdoors," Harrison began, turning--and then stopped short. "The damned thing's gone!"

Peter Wilkinson paled as his eyes swept the empty floor.

"It was there!" he whispered. "It was dead. You smashed it! It couldn't come to life and run away."

"We'll, what about it?" Harrison did not mean to waste time on this minor mystery.

Peter's eyes gleamed wearily in the candlelight.

"It was a graveyard rat!" he whispered. "I never saw one in an inhabited house, in town, before! The Indians used to tell strange tales about them! They said they were not beasts at all, but evil, cannibal demons, into which entered the spirits of wicked, dead men at whose corpses they gnawed!"

"Hell's fire!" Harrison snorted, blowing out the candle. But his flesh crawled. After all, a dead rat could not crawl away by itself.

Chapter 3
: The Feathered Shadow

Clouds had rolled across the stars. The air was hot and stifling. The narrow, rutty road that wound westward into the hills was atrocious. But Peter Wilkinson piloted his ancient Model T Ford skillfully, and the village was quickly lost to sight behind them. They passed no more houses. On each side the dense post oak thickets crowded close to the barbed-wire fences.

Peter broke the silence suddenly:

"How did that rat come into our house? They overrun the woods along the creeks, and swarm in every country graveyard in the hills. But I never saw one in the village before. It must have followed Joel Middleton when he brought the head--"

A lurch and a monotonous bumping brought a curse from Harrison. The car came to a stop with a grind of brakes.

"Flat," muttered Peter. "Won't take me long to change tires. You watch the woods. Joel Middleton might be hiding anywhere."

That seemed good advice. While Peter wrestled with rusty metal and stubborn rubber, Harrison stood between him and the nearest clump of trees, with his hand on his revolver. The night wind blew fitfully through the leaves, and once he thought he caught the gleam of tiny eyes among the stems.

"That's got it," announced Peter at last, turning to let down the jack. "We've wasted enough time."

"Listen!" Harrison started, tensed. Off to the west had sounded a sudden scream of pain or fear. Then there came the impact of racing feet on the hard ground, the crackling of brush, as if someone fled blindly through the bushes within a few hundred yards of the road. In an instant Harrison was over the fence and running toward the sounds.

"Help! Help!" it was the voice of dire terror. "Almighty God! Help!"

"This way!" yelled Harrison, bursting into an open flat. The unseen fugitive evidently altered his course in response, for the heavy footfalls grew louder, and then there rang out a terrible shriek, and a figure staggered from the bushes on the opposite side of the glade and fell headlong.

The dim starlight showed a vague writhing shape, with a darker figure on its back. Harrison caught the glint of steel, heard the sound of a blow. He threw up his gun and fired at a venture. At the crack of the shot, the darker figure rolled free, leaped up and vanished in the bushes. Harrison ran on, a queer chill crawling along his spine because of what he had seen in the flash of the shot.

He crouched at the edge of the bushes and peered into them. The shadowy figure had come and gone, leaving no trace except the man who lay groaning in the glade.

Harrison bent over him, snapping on his flashlight. He was an old man, a wild, unkempt figure with matted white hair and beard. That beard was stained with red now, and blood oozed from a deep stab in his back.

"Who did this?" demanded Harrison, seeing that it was useless to try to stanch the flow of blood. The old man was dying. "Joel Middleton?"

"It couldn't have been!" Peter had followed the detective. "That's old Joash Sullivan, a friend of Joel's. He's half crazy, but I've suspected that he's been keeping in touch with Joel and giving his tips--"

"Joel Middleton," muttered the old man. "I'd been to find him, to tell the news about John's head--"

"Where's Joel hiding?" demanded the detective.

Sullivan choked on a flow of blood, spat and shook his head.

"You'll never learn from me!" He directed his eyes on Peter with the eerie glare of the dying. "Are you taking your brother's head back to his grave, Peter Wilkinson? Be careful you don't find your own grave before this night's done! Evil on all your name! The devil owns your souls and the graveyard rats'll eat your flesh! The ghost of the dead walks the night!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Harrison. "Who stabbed you?"

"A dead man!" Sullivan was going fast. "As I come back from meetin' Joel Middleton I met him. Wolf Hunter, the Tonkawa chief your grandpap murdered so long ago, Peter Wilkinson! He chased me and knifed me. I saw him plain, in the starlight--naked in his loin-clout and feathers and paint, just as I saw him when I was a child, before your grandpap killed him!

"Wolf Hunter took your brother's head from the grave!" Sullivan's voice was a ghastly whisper. "He's come back from Hell to fulfill the curse he laid onto your grandpa when your grandpap shot him in the back, to get the land his tribe claimed. Beware! His ghost walks the night! The graveyard rats are his servants. The graveyard rats--"

Blood burst from his white-bearded lips and he sank back, dead.

Harrison rose somberly.

"Let him lie. We'll pick up his body as we go back to town. We're going on to the graveyard."

"Dare we?" Peter's face was white. "A human I do not fear, not even Joel Middleton, but a ghost--"

"Don't be a fool!" snorted Harrison. "Didn't you say the old man was half crazy?"

"But what if Joel Middleton is hiding somewhere near--"

"I'll take care of him!" Harrison had an invincible confidence in his own fighting ability. What he did not tell Peter, as they returned to the car, was that he had had a glimpse of the slayer in the flash of his shot. The memory of that glimpse still had the short hair prickling at the base of his skull.

That figure had been naked but for a loin-cloth and moccasins and a headdress of feathers.

"Who was Wolf Hunter?" he demanded as they drove on.

"A Tonkawa chief," muttered Peter. "He befriended my grandfather and was later murdered by him, just as Joash said. They say his bones lie in the old graveyard to this day."

Peter lapsed into silence, seemingly a prey of morbid broodings.

Some four miles from town the road wound past a dim clearing. That was the Wilkinson graveyard. A rusty barbed-wire fence surrounded a cluster of graves whose white headstones leaned at crazy angles. Weeds grew thick, straggling over the low mounds.

The post oaks crowded close on all sides, and the road wound through them, past the sagging gate. Across the tops of the trees, nearly half a mile to the west, there was visible a shapeless bulk which Harrison knew was the roof of a house.

"The old Wilkinson farmhouse," Peter answered in reply to his question. "I was born there, and so were my brothers. Nobody's lived in it since we moved to town, ten years ago."

Peter's nerves were taut. He glanced fearfully at the black woods around him, and his hands trembled as he lighted a lantern he took from the car. He winced as he picked up the round cloth-wrapped object that lay on the back seat; perhaps he was visualizing the cold, white, stony face that cloth concealed.

As he climbed over the low gate and led the way between the weed-grown mounds he muttered: "We're fools. If Joel Middleton's laying out there in the woods he could pick us both off easy as shooting rabbits."

Harrison did not reply, and a moment later Peter halted and shone the light on a mound which was bare of weeds. The surface was tumbled and disturbed, and Peter exclaimed: "Look! I expected to find an open grave. Why do you suppose he took the trouble of filling it again?"

"We'll see," grunted Harrison. "Are you game to open that grave?"

"I've seen my brother's head," answered Peter grimly. "I think I'm man enough to look on his headless body without fainting. There are tools in the tool-shed in the corner of the fence. I'll get them."

Returning presently with pick and shovel, he set the lighted lantern on the ground, and the cloth-wrapped head near it. Peter was pale, and sweat stood on his brow in thick drops. The lantern cast their shadows, grotesquely distorted, across the weed-grown graves. The air was oppressive. There was an occasional dull flicker of lightning along the dusky horizons.

"What's that?" Harrison paused, pick lifted. All about them sounded rustlings and scurryings among the weeds. Beyond the circle of lantern light clusters of tiny red beads glittered at him.

"Rats!" Peter hurled a stone and the beads vanished, though the rustlings grew louder. "They swarm in this graveyard. I believe they'd devour a living man, if they caught him helpless. Begone, you servants of Satan!"

Harrison took the shovel and began scooping out mounds of loose dirt.

"Ought not to be hard work," he grunted. "If he dug it out today or early tonight, it'll be loose all the way down--"

He stopped short, with his shovel jammed hard against the dirt, and a prickling in the short hairs at the nape of his neck. In the tense silence he heard the graveyard rats running through the grass.

"What's the matter?" A new pallor greyed Peter's face.

"I've hit solid ground," said Harrison slowly. "In three days, this clayey soil bakes hard as a brick. But if Middleton or anybody else had opened this grave and refilled it today, the soil would be loose all the way down. It's not. Below the first few inches it's packed and baked hard! The top has been scratched, but the grave has never been opened since it was first filled, three days ago!"

Peter staggered with an inhuman cry.

"Then it's true!" he screamed. "Wolf Hunter has come back! He reached up from Hell and took John's head without opening the grave! He sent his familiar devil into our house in the form of a rat! A ghost-rat that could not be killed! Hands off, curse you!"

For Harrison caught at him, growling: "Pull yourself together, Peter!"

But Peter struck his arm aside and tore free. He turned and ran--not toward the car parked outside the graveyard, but toward the opposite fence. He scrambled across the rusty wires with a ripping of cloth and vanished in the woods, heedless of Harrison's shouts.

"Hell!" Harrison pulled up, and swore fervently. Where but in the black-hill country could such things happen? Angrily he picked up the tools and tore into the close-packed clay, baked by a blazing sun into almost iron hardness.

Sweat rolled from him in streams, and he grunted and swore, but persevered with all the power of his massive muscles. He meant to prove or disprove a suspicion growing in his mind--a suspicion that the body of John Wilkinson had never been placed in that grave.

The lightning flashed oftener and closer, and a low mutter of thunder began in the west. An occasional gust of wind made the lantern flicker, and as the mound beside the grave grew higher, and the man digging there sank lower and lower in the earth, the rustling in the grass grew louder and the red beads began to glint in the weeds. Harrison heard the eerie gnashings of tiny teeth all about him, and swore at the memory of grisly legends, whispered by the Negroes of his boyhood region about the graveyard rats.

The grave was not deep. No Wilkinson would waste much labor on the dead. At last the rude coffin lay uncovered before him. With the point of the pick he pried up one corner of the lid, and held the lantern close. A startled oath escaped his lips. The coffin was not empty. It held a huddled, headless figure.

Harrison climbed out of the grave, his mind racing, fitting together pieces of the puzzle. The stray bits snapped into place, forming a pattern, dim and yet incomplete, but taking shape. He looked for the cloth-wrapped head, and got a frightful shock.

The head was gone!

For an instant Harrison felt cold sweat clammy on his hands. Then he heard a clamorous squeaking, the gnashing of tiny fangs.

He caught up the lantern and shone the light about. In its reflection he saw a white blotch on the grass near a straggling clump of bushes that had invaded the clearing. It was the cloth in which the head had been wrapped. Beyond that a black, squirming mound heaved and tumbled with nauseous life.

With an oath of horror he leaped forward, striking and kicking. The graveyard rats abandoned the head with rasping squeaks, scattering before him like darting black shadows. And Harrison shuddered. It was no face that stared up at him in the lantern light, but a white, grinning skull, to which clung only shreds of gnawed flesh.

While the detective burrowed into John Wilkinson's grave, the graveyard rats had torn the flesh from John Wilkinson's head.

Harrison stooped and picked up the hideous thing, now triply hideous. He wrapped it in the cloth, and as he straightened, something like fright took hold of him.

He was ringed in on all sides by a solid circle of gleaming red sparks that shone from the grass. Held back by their fear, the graveyard rats surrounded him, squealing their hate.

Demons, the Negroes called them, and in that moment Harrison was ready to agree.

They gave back before him as he turned toward the grave, and he did not see the dark figure that slunk from the bushes behind him. The thunder boomed out, drowning even the squeaking of the rats, but he heard the swift footfall behind him an instant before the blow was struck.

He whirled, drawing his gun, dropping the head, but just as he whirled, something like a louder clap of thunder exploded in his head, with a shower of sparks before his eyes.

As he reeled backward he fired blindly, and cried out as the flash showed him a horrific, half-naked, painted, feathered figure, crouching with a tomahawk uplifted--the open grave was behind Harrison as he fell.

Down into the grave he toppled, and his head struck the edge of the coffin with a sickening impact. His powerful body went limp; and like darting shadows, from every side raced the graveyard rats, hurling themselves into the grave in a frenzy of hunger and blood-lust.

Chapter 4
: Rats in Hell

It seemed to Harrison's stunned brain that he lay in blackness on the darkened floors of Hell, a blackness lit by darts of flame from the eternal fires. The triumphant shrieking of demons was in his ears as they stabbed him with red-hot skewers.

He saw them, now--dancing monstrosities with pointed noses, twitching ears, red eyes and gleaming teeth--a sharp pain knifed through his flesh.

And suddenly the mists cleared. He lay, not on the floor of Hell, but on a coffin in the bottom of a grave; the fires were lightning flashes from the black sky; and the demons were rats that swarmed over him, slashing with razor-sharp teeth.

Harrison yelled and heaved convulsively, and at his movement the rats gave back in alarm. But they did not leave the grave; they massed solidly along the walls, their eyes glittering redly.

Harrison knew he could have been senseless only a few seconds. Otherwise, these grey ghouls would have already stripped the living flesh from his bones--as they had ripped the dead flesh from the head of the man on whose coffin he lay.

Already his body was stinging in a score of places, and his clothing was damp with his own blood.

Cursing, he started to rise--and a chill of panic shot through him! Falling, his left arm had been jammed into the partly-open coffin, and the weight of his body on the lid clamped his hand fast. Harrison fought down a mad wave of terror.

He would not withdraw his hand unless he could lift his body from the coffin lid--and the imprisonment of his hand held him prostrate there.

Trapped!

In a murdered man's grave, his hand locked in the coffin of a headless corpse, with a thousand grey ghoul-rats ready to tear the flesh from his living frame!

As if sensing his helplessness, the rats swarmed upon him. Harrison fought for his life, like a man in a nightmare. He kicked, he yelled, he cursed, he smote them with the heavy six-shooter he still clutched in his hand.

Their fangs tore at him, ripping cloth and flesh, their acrid scent nauseated him; they almost covered him with their squirming, writhing bodies. He beat them back, smashed and crushed them with blows of his six-shooter barrel.

The living cannibals fell on their dead brothers. In desperation he twisted half-over and jammed the muzzle of his gun against the coffin lid.

At the flash of fire and the deafening report, the rats scurried in all directions.

Again and again, he pulled the trigger until the gun was empty. The heavy slugs crashed through the lid, splitting off a great sliver from the edge. Harrison drew his bruised hand from the aperture.

Gagging and shaking, he clambered out of the grave and rose groggily to his feet. Blood was clotted in his hair from the gash the ghostly hatchet had made in his scalp, and blood trickled from a score of tooth-wounds in his flesh. Lightning played constantly, but the lantern was still shining. But it was not on the ground.

It seemed to be suspended in mid-air--and then he was aware that it was held in the hand of a man--a tall man in a black slicker, whose eyes burned dangerously under his broad hat-brim. In his other hand a black pistol muzzle menaced the detective's midriff.

"You must be that damn' low-country law Pete Wilkinson brung up here to run me down!" growled this man.

"Then you're Joel Middleton!" grunted Harrison.

"Sure I am!" snarled the outlaw. "Where's Pete, the old devil?"

"He got scared and ran off."

"Crazy, like Saul, maybe," sneered Middleton. "Well, you tell him I been savin' a slug for his ugly mug a long time. And one for Dick, too."

"Why did you come here?" demanded Harrison.

"I heard shootin'. I got here just as you was climbin' out of the grave. What's the matter with you? Who was it that broke your head?"

"I don't know his name," answered Harrison, caressing his aching head.

"Well, it don't make no difference to me. But I want to tell you that I didn't cut John's head off. I killed him because he needed it." The outlaw swore and spat. "But I didn't do that other!"

"I know you didn't," Harrison answered.

"Eh?" The outlaw was obviously startled.

"Do you know which rooms the Wilkinsons sleep in, in their house in town?"

"Naw," snorted Middleton. "Never was in their house in my life."

"I thought not. Whoever put John's head on Saul's mantel knew. The back kitchen door was the only one where the lock could have been forced without waking somebody up. The lock on Saul's door was broken. You couldn't have known those things. It looked like an inside job from the start. The lock was forced to make it look like an outside job.

"Richard spilled some stuff that cinched my belief that it was Peter. I decided to bring him out to the graveyard and see if his nerve would stand up under an accusation across his brother's open coffin. But I hit hard-packed soil and knew the grave hadn't been opened. It gave me a turn and I blurted out what I'd found. But it's simple, after all.

"Peter wanted to get rid of his brothers. When you killed John, that suggested a way to dispose of Saul. John's body stood in its coffin in the Wilkinsons' parlor until it was placed in the grave the next day. No death watch was kept. It was easy for Peter to go into the parlor while his brothers slept, pry up the coffin lid and cut off John's head. He put it on ice somewhere to preserve it. When I touched it I found it was nearly frozen.

"No one knew what had happened, because the coffin was not opened again. John was an atheist, and there was the briefest sort of ceremony. The coffin was not opened for his friends to take a last look, as is the usual custom. Then tonight the head was placed in Saul's room. It drove him raving mad.

"I don't know why Peter waited until tonight, or why he called me into the case. He must be partly insane himself. I don't think he meant to kill me when we drove out here tonight. But when he discovered I knew the grave hadn't been opened tonight, he saw the game was up. I ought to have been smart enough to keep my mouth shut, but I was so sure that Peter had opened the grave to get the head, that when I found it hadn't been opened, I spoke involuntarily, without stopping to think of the other alternative. Peter pretended a panic and ran off. Later he sent back his partner to kill me."

"Who's he?" demanded Middleton.

"How should I know? Some fellow who looks like an Indian!"

"That old yarn about a Tonkawa ghost has went to your brain!" scoffed Middleton.

"I didn't say it was a ghost," said Harrison, nettled. "It was real enough to kill your friend Joash Sullivan!"

"What?" yelled Middleton. "Joash killed? Who done it?"

"The Tonkawa ghost, whoever he is. The body is lying about a mile back, beside the road, amongst the thickets, if you don't believe me."

Middleton ripped out a terrible oath.

"By God, I'll kill somebody for that! Stay where you are! I ain't goin' to shoot no unarmed man, but if you try to run me down I'll kill you sure as Hell. So keep off my trail. I'm goin', and don't you try to follow me!"

The next instant Middleton had dashed the lantern to the ground where it went out with a clatter of breaking glass.

Harrison blinked in the sudden darkness that followed, and the next lightning flash showed him standing alone in the ancient graveyard.

The outlaw was gone.

Chapter 5

: The Rats Eat

Cursing, Harrison groped on the ground, lit by the lightning flashes. He found the broken lantern, and he found something else.

Rain drops splashed against his face as he started toward the gate. One instant he stumbled in velvet blackness, the next the tombstones shone white in the dazzling glare. Harrison's head ached frightfully. Only chance and a tough skull had saved his life. The would-be killer must have thought the blow was fatal and fled, taking John Wilkinson's head for what grisly purpose there was no knowing. But the head was gone.

Harrison winced at the thought of the rain filling the open grave, but he had neither the strength nor the inclination to shovel the dirt back in it. To remain in that dark graveyard might well be death. The slayer might return.

Harrison looked back as he climbed the fence. The rain had disturbed the rats; the weeds were alive with scampering, flame-eyed shadows. With a shudder, Harrison made his way to the flivver. He climbed in, found his flashlight and reloaded his revolver.

The rain grew in volume. Soon the rutty road to Lost Knob would be a welter of mud. In his condition he did not feel able to the task of driving back through the storm over that abominable road. But it could not be long until dawn. The old farmhouse would afford him a refuge until daylight.

The rain came down in sheets, soaking him, dimming the already uncertain lights as he drove along the road, splashing noisily through the mud-puddles. Wind ripped through the post oaks. Once he grunted and batted his eyes. He could have sworn that a flash of lightning had fleetingly revealed a painted, naked, feathered figure gliding among the trees!

The road wound up a thickly wooded eminence, rising close to the bank of a muddy creek. On the summit the old house squatted. Weeds and low bushes straggled from the surrounding woods up to the sagging porch. He parked the car as close to the house as he could get it, and climbed out, struggling with the wind and rain.

He expected to have to blow the lock off the door with his gun, but it opened under his fingers. He stumbled into a musty-smelling room, weirdly lit by the flickering of the lightning through the cracks of the shutters.

His flashlight revealed a rude bunk built against a side wall, a heavy hand-hewn table, a heap of rags in a corner. From this pile of rags black furtive shadows darted in all directions.

Rats! Rats again!

Could he never escape them?

He closed the door and lit the lantern, placing it on the table. The broken chimney caused the flame to dance and flicker, but not enough wind found its way into the room to blow it out. Three doors, leading into the interior of the house, were closed. The floor and walls were pitted with holes gnawed by the rats.

Tiny red eyes glared at him from the apertures.

Harrison sat down on the bunk, flashlight and pistol on his lap. He expected to fight for his life before day broke. Peter Wilkinson was out there in the storm somewhere, with a heart full of murder, and either allied to him or working separately--in either case an enemy to the detective--was that mysterious painted figure.

And that figure was Death, whether living masquerader or Indian ghost. In any event, the shutters would protect him from a shot from the dark, and to get at him his enemies would have to come into the lighted room where he would have an even chance--which was all the big detective had ever asked.

To get his mind off the ghoulish red eyes glaring at him from the floor, Harrison brought out the object he had found lying near the broken lantern, where the slayer must have dropped it.

It was a smooth oval of flint, made fast to a handle with rawhide thongs--the Indian tomahawk of an elder generation. And Harrison's eyes narrowed suddenly; there was blood on the flint, and some of it was his own. But on the other point of the oval there was more blood, dark and crusted, with strands of hair lighter than his, clinging to the clotted point.

Joash Sullivan's blood? No. The old man had been knifed. But someone else had died that night. The darkness had hidden another grim deed....

Black shadows were stealing across the floor. The rats were coming back--ghoulish shapes, creeping from their holes, converging on the heap of rags in the far corner--a tattered carpet, Harrison now saw, rolled in a long compact heap. Why should the rats leap upon that rag? Why should they race up and down along it, squealing and biting at the fabric?

There was something hideously suggestive about its contour--a shape that grew more definite and ghastly as he looked.

The rats scattered, squeaking, as Harrison sprang across the room. He tore away the carpet--and looked down on the corpse of Peter Wilkinson.

The back of the head had been crushed. The white face was twisted in a leer of awful terror.

For an instant Harrison's brain reeled with the ghastly possibilities his discovery summoned up. Then he took a firm grasp on himself, fought off the whispering potency of the dark, howling night, the thrashing wet black woods and the abysmal aura of the ancient hills, and recognized the only sane solution of the riddle.

Somberly he looked down on the dead man. Peter Wilkinson's fright had been genuine, after all. In his blind panic he had reverted to the habits of his boyhood and fled toward his old home--and met death instead of security.

Harrison started convulsively as a weird sound smote his ears above the roar of the storm--the wailing horror of an Indian war-whoop. The killer was upon him!

Harrison sprang to a shuttered window, peered through a crack, waiting for a flash of lightning. When it came he fired through the window at a feathered head he saw peering around a tree close to the car.

In the darkness that followed the flash he crouched, waiting--there came another white glare--he grunted explosively but did not fire. The head was still there, and he got a better look at it. The lightning shone weirdly white upon it.

It was John Wilkinson's fleshless skull, clad in a feathered headdress and bound in place--and it was the bait of a trap.

Harrison wheeled and sprang toward the lantern on the table. That grisly ruse had been to draw his attention to the front of the house while the killer slunk upon him through the rear of the building! The rats squealed and scattered. Even as Harrison whirled an inner door began to open. He smashed a heavy slug through the panels, heard a groan and the sound of a falling body, and then, just as he reached a hand to extinguish the lantern, the world crashed over his head.

A blinding burst of lightning, a deafening clap of thunder, and the ancient house staggered from gables to foundations! Blue fire crackled from the ceiling and ran down the walls and over the floor. One livid tongue just flicked the detective's shin in passing.

It was like the impact of a sledgehammer. There was in instant of blindness and numb agony, and Harrison found himself sprawling, half-stunned on the floor. The lantern lay extinguished beside the overturned table, but the room was filled with a lurid light.

He realized that a bolt of lightning had struck the house, and that the upper story was ablaze. He hauled himself to his feet, looking for his gun. It lay halfway across the room, and as he started toward it, the bullet-split door swung open. Harrison stopped dead in his tracks.

Through the door limped a man naked but for a loin-cloth and moccasins on his feet. A revolver in his hand menaced the detective. Blood oozing from a wound in his thigh mingled with the paint with which he had smeared himself.

"So it was you who wanted to be the oil millionaire, Richard!" said Harrison.

The other laughed savagely. "Aye, and I will be! And no cursed brothers to share with--brothers I always hated, damn them! Don't move! You nearly got me when you shot through the door. I'm taking no chances with you! Before I send you to Hell, I'll tell you everything.

"As soon as you and Peter started for the graveyard, I realized my mistake in merely scratching the top of the grave--knew you'd hit hard clay and know the grave hadn't been opened. I knew then I'd have to kill you, as well as Peter. I took the rat you mashed when neither of you were looking, so its disappearance would play on Peter's superstitions.

"I rode to the graveyard through the woods, on a fast horse. The Indian disguise was one I thought up long ago. What with that rotten road, and the flat that delayed you, I got to the graveyard before you and Peter did. On the way, though, I dismounted and stopped to kill that old fool Joash Sullivan. I was afraid he might see and recognize me.

"I was watching when you dug into the grave. When Peter got panicky and ran through the woods I chased him, killed him, and brought his body here to the old house. Then I went back after you. I intended bringing your body here, or rather your bones, after the rats finished you, as I thought they would. Then I heard Joel Middleton coming and had to run for it--I don't care to meet that gun-fighting devil anywhere!

"I was going to burn this house with both your bodies in it. People would think, when they found the bones in the ashes, that Middleton killed you both and burnt the house! And now you play right into my hands by coming here! Lightning has struck the house and it's burning! Oh, the gods fight for me tonight!"

A light of unholy madness played in Richard's eyes, but the pistol muzzle was steady, as Harrison stood clenching his great fists helplessly.

"You'll lie here with that fool Peter!" raved Richard. "With a bullet through your head, until your bones are burnt to such a crisp that nobody can tell how you died! Joel Middleton will be shot down by some posse without a chance to talk. Saul will rave out his days in a madhouse! And I, who will be safely sleeping in my house in town before sun-up, will live out my allotted years in wealth and honor, never suspected--never--"

He was sighting along the black barrel, eyes blazing, teeth bared like the fangs of a wolf between painted lips--his finger was curling on the trigger.

Harrison crouched tensely, desperately, poising the hurl himself with bare hands at the killer and try to pit his naked strength against hot lead spitting from that black muzzle--then--

The door crashed inward behind him and the lurid glare framed a tall figure in a dripping slicker.

An incoherent yell rang to the roof and the gun in the outlaw's hand roared. Again, and again, and yet again it crashed, filling the room with smoke and thunder, and the painted figure jerked to the impact of the tearing lead.

Through the smoke Harrison saw Richard Wilkinson toppling--but he too was firing as he fell. Flames burst through the ceiling, and by their brighter glare Harrison saw a painted figure writhing on the floor, a taller figure wavering in the doorway. Richard was screaming in agony.

Middleton threw his empty gun at Harrison's feet.

"Heard the shootin' and come," he croaked. "Reckon that settles the feud for good!" He toppled, and Harrison caught him in his arms, a lifeless weight.

Richard's screams rose to an unbearable pitch. The rats were swarming from their holes. Blood streaming across the floor had dripped into their holes, maddening them. Now they burst forth in a ravening horde that heeded not cries, or movement, or the devouring flames, but only their own fiendish hunger.

In a grey-black wave they swept over the dead man and the dying man. Peter's white face vanished under that wave. Richard's screaming grew thick and muffled. He writhed, half covered by grey, tearing figures who sucked at his gushing blood, tore at his flesh.

Harrison retreated through the door, carrying the dead outlaw. Joel Middleton, outlaw and killer, yet deserved a better fate than was befalling his slayer.

To save that ghoul, Harrison would not have lifted a finger, had it been in his power.

It was not. The graveyard rats had claimed their own. Out in the yard, Harrison let his burden fall limply. Above the roar of the flames still rose those awful, smothered cries.

Through the blazing doorway he had a glimpse of a horror, a gory figure rearing upright, swaying, enveloped by a hundred clinging, tearing shapes. He glimpsed a face that was not a face at all, but a blind, bloody skull-mask. Then the awful scene was blotted out as the flaming roof fell with a thundering, ear-rending crash.

Sparks showered against the sky, the flames rose as the walls fell in, and Harrison staggered away, dragging the dead man, as a storm-wrapped dawn came haggardly over the oak-clad ridges.

THE END

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FANGS OF GOLD
by Robert E. Howard

"This is the only trail into the swamp, mister." Steve Harrison's guide pointed a long finger down the narrow path which wound in and out among the live-oaks and cypresses. Harrison shrugged his massive shoulders. The surroundings were not inviting, with the long shadows of the late afternoon sun reaching dusky fingers into the dim recesses among the moss-hung trees.

"You ought to wait till mornin'," opined the guide, a tall lanky man in cowhide boots and sagging overall. "It's gittin' late, and we don't want to git catched in the swamp after night."

"I can't wait, Rogers," answered the detective. "The man I'm after might get clean away by morning."

"He'll have to come out by this path," answered Rogers as they swung along. "Ain't no other way in or out. If he tries to push through to high ground on the other side, he'll shore fall into a bottomless bog, or git et by a gator. There's lots of them. I reckon he ain't much used to swamps?"

"I don't suppose he ever saw one before. He's city-bred."

"Then he won't das't leave the beaten path," confidently predicted Rogers.

"On the other hand, he might, not realizing the danger," grunted Harrison.

"What'd you say he done?" pursued Rogers, directing a jet of tobacco juice at a beetle crawling through the dark loam.

"Knocked an old Chinaman in the head with a meat-cleaver and stole his life-time savings--ten thousand dollars, in bills of a thousand each. The old man left a little granddaughter who'll be penniless if this money isn't recovered. That's one reason I want to get this rat before he loses himself in a bog. I want to recover that money, for the kid."

"And you figure the Chinaman seen goin' down this path a few days ago was him?"

"Couldn't be anybody else," snapped Harrison. "We've hounded him half way across the continent, cut him off from the borders and the ports. We were closing in on him when he slipped through, somehow. This was about the only place left for him to hide. I've chased him too far to delay now. If he drowns in the swamp, we'll probably never find him, and the money will be lost, too. The man he murdered was a fine, honest old Chinaman. This fellow, Woon Shang, is bad all the way through."

"He'll run into some bad folks down here," ruminated Rogers. "Nothin' but niggers live in these swamplands. They ain't regular darkies like them that live outside. These came here fifty or sixty years back--refugees from Haiti, or somewhere. You know we ain't far from the coast. They're yeller-skinned, and don't hardly ever come out of the swamp. They keep to theirselves, and they don't like strangers.What's that?"

They were just rounding a bend in the path, and something lay on the ground ahead of them--something black, and dabbled with red, that groaned and moved feebly.

"It's a nigger!" exclaimed Rogers. "He's been knifed."

It took no expert to deduce that. They bent over him and Rogers voiced profane recognition. "Why, I know this feller! He ain't no swamp rat. He's Joe Corley, that razored up another nigger at a dance last month and lit out. Bet he's been hidin' in the swamp ever since. Joe! Joe Corley!"

The wounded man groaned and rolled up his glassy eyes; his skin was ashy with the nearness of approaching death.

"Who stabbed you, Joe?" demanded Rogers.

"De Swamp Cat!" The gasp was scarcely audible. Rogers swore and looked fearfully about him, as if expecting something to spring on them from the trees.

"I wuz tryin' to git outside," muttered the Negro.

"What for?" demanded Rogers. "Didn't you know you'd git jailed if they catched you?"

"Ruther go to de jail-house dan git mixed up--in de devilment--dey's cookin' up--in de swamp." The voice sank lower as speech grew more difficult.

"What you mean, Joe?" uneasily demanded Rogers.

"Voodoo niggers," muttered Corley disjointedly. "Took dat Chinaman 'stead uh me--didn't want me to git away, though--then John Bartholomew--uuuugh!"

A trickle of blood started from the corner of his thick lips, he stiffened in brief convulsion and then lay still.

"He's dead!" whispered Rogers, staring down the swamp path with dilated eyes.

"He spoke of a Chinaman," said Harrison. "That clinches it that we're on the right trail. Have to leave him here for the time being. Nothing we can do for him now. Let's get going."

"You aim to go on, after this?" exclaimed Rogers.

"Why not?"

"Mr. Harrison," said Rogers solemnly, "you offered me a good wage to guide you into this here swamp. But I'm tellin' you fair there ain't enough money to make me go in there now, with night comin' on."

"But why?" protested Harrison. "Just because this man got into a fight with one of his own kind--"

"It's more 'n just that," declared Rogers decisively. "This nigger was tryin' to git out of the swamp when they got him. He knowed he'd git jailed on the outside, but he was goin' anyway; that means somethin' had scared the livin' daylights out of him. You heard him say it was the Swamp Cat that got him?"

"Well?"

"Well, the Swamp Cat is a crazy nigger that lives in the swamp. It's been so long since any white folks claimed they seen him, I'd begun to believe he was just a myth the 'outside' niggers told to scare people away from the swamp. But this shows he ain't. He killed Joe Corley. He'll kill us if he catches us in the dark. Why, by golly, he may be watchin' us right now!" This thought so disturbed Rogers that he drew a big six-shooter with an enormous length of barrel, and peered about, masticating his quid with a rapidity that showed his mental perturbation.

"Who's the other follow he named, John Bartholomew?" inquired Harrison.

"Don't know. Never heard of him. Come on, let's shove out of here. We'll git some boys and come back after Joe's body."

"I'm going on," growled Harrison, rising and dusting his hands.

Rogers stared. "Man, you're plumb crazy! You'll git lost--"

"Not if I keep to the path."

"Well, then, the Swamp Cat'll git you, or them gators will--"

"I'll take my chance," answered Harrison brusquely. "Woon Shang's somewhere in this swamp. If he manages to get out before I get my hands on him, he may get clean away. I'm going after him."

"But if you'll wait we'll raise a posse and go after him first thing in the mornin'," urged Rogers.

Harrison did not attempt to explain to the man his almost obsessional preference for working alone. With no further comment he turned and strode off down the narrow path. Rogers yelled after him: "You're crazy as Hell! If you git as far as Celia Pompoloi's hut, you better stay there tonight! She's the big boss of them niggers. It's the first cabin you come to. I'm goin' back to town and git a posse, and tomorrow mornin' we'll--" The words became unintelligible among the dense growth as Harrison rounded a turn that shut off the sight of the other man.

As the detective strode along he saw that blood was smeared on the rotting leaves, and there were marks as if something heavy had been dragged over the trail. Joe Corley had obviously crawled for some distance after being attacked. Harrison visualized him dragging himself along on his belly like a crippled snake. The man must have had intense vitality to have gotten so far with a mortal wound in his back. And his fear must have been desperate to so drive him.

Harrison could no longer see the sun, but he knew it was hanging low. The shadows were gathering, and he was plunging deeper and deeper into the swamp. He began to glimpse patches of scummy ooze among the trees, and the path grew more tortuous as it wound to avoid these slimy puddles. Harrison plunged on without pausing. The dense growth might lend concealment to a desperate fugitive, but it was not in the woods, but among the scattered cabins of the swamp dwellers that he expected to find the man he hunted. The city-bred Chinaman, fearful of solitude and unable to fend for himself, would seek the company of men, even of black men.

The detective wheeled suddenly. About him, in the dusk, the swamp was waking. Insects lifted strident voices, wings of bats or owls beat the air, and bullfrogs boomed from the lily pads. But he had heard a sound that was not of these things. It was a stealthy movement among the trees that marched in solid ranks beside the trail. Harrison drew his .45 and waited. Nothing happened. But in primitive solitudes a man's instincts are whetted. The detective felt that he was being watched by unseen eyes; he could almost sense the intensity of their glare. Was it the Chinaman, after all?

A bush beside the trail moved, without a wind to stir it. Harrison sprang through the curtain of creeper-hung cypresses, gun ready, snarling a command. His feet sank in slimy ooze, he stumbled in rotting vegetation and felt the dangling strands of moss slap against his face. There was nothing behind the bush, but he could have sworn that he saw a shadowy form move and vanish among the trees a short distance away. As he hesitated, he glanced down and saw a distinct mark in the loam. He bent closer; it was the print of a great, bare, splay foot. Moisture was oozing into the depression. A manhadbeen standing behind that bush.

With a shrug Harrison stepped back into the trail. That was not the footprint of Woon Shang, and the detective was not looking for anybody else. It was natural that one of the swamp dwellers would spy on a stranger. The detective sent a hail into the gathering darkness, to assure the unseen watcher of his friendly intentions. There was no reply. Harrison turned and strode on down the trail, not feeling entirely at ease, as he heard, from time to time, a faint snapping of twigs and other sounds that seemed to indicate someone moving along a course paralleling the path. It was not soothing to know that he was being followed by some unseen and possibly hostile being.

It was so dark now that he kept the path more by feel than by sight. About him sounded weird cries of strange birds or animals, and from time to time a deep grunting reverberation that puzzled him until he recognized it as the bellow of a bull alligator. He wondered if the scaly brutes ever crawled up on the trail, and how the fellow that was shadowing him out there

in the darkness managed to avoid them. With the thought another twig snapped, much closer to the trail than before. Harrison swore softly, trying to peer into the Stygian gloom under the moss-festooned branches. The fellow was closing in on him with the growing darkness.

There was a sinister implication about the thing that made Harrison's flesh creep a bit. This reptile-haunted swamp-trail was no place for a fight with an insane Negro--for it seemed probable that the unknown stalker was the killer of Joe Corley. Harrison was meditating on the matter when a light glimmered through the trees ahead of him. Quickening his steps he came abruptly out of the darkness into a grey twilight.

He had reached an expanse of solid ground, where the thinning trees let in the last grey light of the outer dusk. They made a black wall with waving fringes all about a small clearing, and through their boles, on one side, Harrison caught a glimmer of inky water. In the clearing stood a cabin of rough-hewn logs, and through a tiny window shone the light of an oil lamp.

As Harrison emerged from among the growth he glanced back, but saw no movement among the ferns, heard no sound of pursuit. The path, dimly marked on the higher ground, ran past the cabin and vanished in the further gloom. This cabin must be the abode of that Celia Pompoloi Rogers had mentioned. Harrison strode to the sagging stoop and rapped on the handmade door.

Inside there was movement, and the door swung open. Harrison was not prepared for the figure that confronted him. He had expected to see a bare-footed slattern; instead he saw a tall, rangily powerful man, neatly dressed, whose regular features and light skin portrayed his mixed blood.

"Good evening, sir." The accent hinted of education above the average.

"Name's Harrison," said the detective abruptly, displaying his badge. "I'm after a crook that ran in here--a Chinese murderer, named Woon Shang. Know anything about him?"

"Yes, sir," the man replied promptly. "That man went past my cabin three days ago."

"Where is he now?" demanded Harrison.

The other spread his hands in a curiously Latin gesture.

"I can not say. I have little intercourse with the other people who live in the swamp, but it is my belief that he is hiding among them somewhere. I have not seen him pass my cabin going back up the path."

"Can you guide me to these other cabins?"

"Gladly, sir; by daylight."

"I'd like to go tonight," growled Harrison.

"That's impossible, sir," the other protested. "It would be most dangerous. You ran a great risk in coming this far alone. The other cabins are further back in the swamp. We do not leave our huts at night; there are many things in the swamp which are dangerous to human beings."

"The Swamp Cat, for instance?" grunted Harrison.

The man cast him a quick glance of interrogation.

"He killed a colored man named Joe Corley a few hours ago," said the detective. "I found Corley on the trail. And if I'm not mistaken, that same lunatic has been following me for the past half hour."

The mulatto evinced considerable disquiet and glanced across the clearing into the shadows.

"Come in," he urged. "If the Swamp Cat is prowling tonight, no man is safe out of door. Come in and spend the night with me, and at dawn I will guide you to all the cabins in the swamp."

Harrison saw no better plan. After all, it was absurd to go blundering about in the night, in an unknown marsh. He realized that he had made a mistake in coming in by himself, in the dusk; but working alone had become a habit with him, and he was tinged with a strong leaven of recklessness. Following a tip he had arrived at the little town on the edge of the swamplands in the mid-afternoon, and plunged on into the woods without hesitation. Now he doubted the wisdom of the move.

"Is this Celia Pompoloi's cabin?" he asked.

"It was," the mulatto replied. "She has been dead for three weeks. I live here alone. My name is John Bartholomew."

Harrison's head snapped up and he eyed the other with new interest. John Bartholomew; Joe Corley had muttered that name just before he died.

"Did you know Joe Corley?" he demanded.

"Slightly; he came into the swamp to hide from the law. He was a rather low grade sort of human, though naturally I am sorry to hear of his death."

"What's a man of your intelligence and education doing in this jungle?" the detective asked bluntly.

Bartholomew smiled rather wryly. "We can not always choose our environments, Mr. Harrison. The waste places of the world provide retreat for others than criminals. Some come to the swamps like your Chinaman, fleeing from the law. Others come to forget bitter disappointments forced upon them by circumstances."

Harrison glanced about the cabin while Bartholomew was putting a stout bar in place across the door. It had but two rooms, one behind the other, connected by a strongly built door. The slab floor was clean, the room scantily furnished; a table, benches, a bunk built against the wall, all hand-made. There was a fireplace, over which hung primitive cooking utensils, and a cloth covered cupboard.

"Would you like some fried bacon and corn pone?" asked Bartholomew. "Or perhaps a cup of coffee? I do not have much to offer you, but--"

"No, thanks, I ate a big meal just before I started into the swamp. Just tell me something about these people."

"As I said, I have little intercourse with them," answered Bartholomew. "They are clannish and suspicious, and keep much to themselves. They are not like other colored people. Their fathers came here from Haiti, following one of the bloody revolutions which have cursed that unfortunate island in the past. They have curious customs. Have you heard of the worship of Voodoo?"

Harrison nodded.

"These people are Voodooists. I know that they have mysterious conclaves back in the swamps. I have heard drums booming in the night, and seen the glow of fires through the trees. I have sometimes felt a little uneasy for my safety at such times. Such people are capable of bloody extremes, when their primitive natures are maddened by the bestial rites of the Voodoo."

"Why don't the whites come in here and stop it?" demanded Harrison.

"They know nothing about it. No one ever comes here unless he is a fugitive from the law. The swamp people carry on their worship without interference.

"Celia Pompoloi, who once occupied this very hut, was a woman of considerable intelligence and some education; she was the one swamp dweller who ever went 'outside,' as they call the outer world, and attended school. Yet, to my actual knowledge, she was the priestess of the cult and presided over their rituals. It is my belief that she met her fate at last during one of those saturnalias. Her body was found in the marshes, so badly mangled by the alligators that it was recognizable only by her garments."

"What about the Swamp Cat?" asked Harrison.

"A maniac, living like a wild beast in the marshes, only sporadically violent; but at those times a thing of horror."

"Would be kill the Chinaman if he had a chance?"

"He would kill anyone when his fit is on him. You said the Chinaman was a murderer?"

"Murderer and thief," grunted Harrison. "Stole ten grand from the man he killed."

Bartholomew looked up as with renewed interest, started to speak, then evidently changed his mind.

Harrison rose, yawning. "Think I'll hit the hay," he announced.

Bartholomew took up the lamp and led his guest into the back room, which was of the same size as the other, but whose furnishings consisted only of a bunk and a bench.

"I have but the one lamp, sir," said Bartholomew. "I shall leave it with you."

"Don't bother," grunted Harrison, having a secret distrust of oil lamps, resultant from experiencing an explosion of one in his boyhood. "I'm like a cat in the dark. I don't need it."

With many apologies for the rough accommodations and wishes for a good night's sleep, Bartholomew bowed himself out, and the door closed. Harrison, through force of habit, studied the room. A little starlight came in through the one small window, which he noticed was furnished with heavy wooden bars. There was no door other than the one by which he had entered. He lay down on the bunk fully dressed, without even removing his shoes, and pondered rather glumly. He was beset by fears that Woon Shang might escape him, after all. Suppose the Chinaman slipped out by the way he had come in? True, local officers were watching at the edge of the swampland, but Woon Shang might avoid them in the night. And what if therewasanother way out, known only to the swamp people? And if Bartholomew was as little acquainted with his neighbors as he said, what assurance was there that the mulatto would be able to guide him to the Chinaman's hiding place? These and other doubts assailed him while he lay and listened to the soft sounds of his host's retiring, and saw the thin line of light under the door vanish as the lamp was blown out. At last Harrison consigned his doubts to the devil, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER II

Murder Tracks

It was a noise at the windows, a stealthy twisting and wrenching at the bars, that awakened him. He woke quickly, with all his facilities alert, as was his habit. Something bulked in the window, something dark and round, with gleaming spots in it. He realized with a start that it was a human head he saw, with the faint starlight shining on rolling eyes and bared teeth. Without shifting his body, the detective stealthily reached for his gun; lying as he was in the darkness of the bunk, the man watching him could scarcely have seen the movement. But the head vanished, as if warned by some instinct.

Harrison sat up on his bunk, scowling, resisting the natural impulse to rush to the window and look out. That might be exactly what the man outside was wanting. There was something deadly about this business; the fellow had evidently been trying to get in. Was it the same creature that had followed him through the swamp? A sudden thought struck him. What was more likely than that the Chinaman had set a man to watch for a possible pursuer? Harrison cursed himself for not having thought of it before.

He struck a match, cupped it in his hand, and looked at his watch. It was scarcely ten o'clock. The night was still young. He scowled abstractedly at the rough wall behind the bunk, minutely illuminated in the flare of the match, and suddenly his breath hissed between his teeth. The match burned down to his fingers and went out. He struck another and leaned to the wall. Thrust in a chink between the logs was a knife, and its wicked curved blade was grimly smeared and clotted. The implication sent a shiver down Harrison's spine. The blood might be that of an animal--but who would butcher a calf or a hog in that room? Why had not the blade been cleansed? It was as if it had been hastily concealed, after striking a murderous blow.

He took it down and looked at it closely. The blood was dried and blackened as if at least many hours had elapsed since it had been let. The weapon was no ordinary butcher knife--Harrison stiffened. It was a Chinese dagger.The match went out and Harrison did what the average man would have done. He leaned over the edge of the bunk, the only thing in the room that would conceal an object of any size, and lifted the cloth that hung to the floor. He did not actually expect to find the corpse of Woon Shang beneath it. He merely acted through instinct. Nor did he find a corpse. His hand, groping in the dark, encountered only the uneven floor and rough logs; then his fingers felt something else--something at once compact and yielding, wedged between the logs as the knife had been.

He drew it forth; it felt like a flat package of crisp paper, bound with oiled silk. Cupping a match in his hand, he tore it open. Ten worn bills met his gaze; on each bill was the numerals of $1,000. He crushed the match out and sat in the dark, mental pictures tumbling rapidly across his consciousness.

So John Bartholomew had lied. Doubtless he had taken in the Chinaman as he had taken in Harrison. The detective visualized a dim form bending in the darkness above a sleeping figure in that same bunk--a murderous stroke with the victim's own knife.

He growled inarticulately, with the chagrin of the cheated manhunter, certain that Woon Shang's body was rotting in some slimy marsh. At least he had the money. Careless of Bartholomew to hide it there. But was it? It was only by an accidental chain of circumstances that he had found it--

He stiffened again. Under the door he saw a thin pencil of light. Had Bartholomew not yet gone to bed? But he remembered the blowing out of the lamp. Harrison rose and glided noiselessly to the thick door. When he reached it he heard a low mumble of voices in the outer room. The speakers moved nearer, stood directly before the door. He strained his ears and recognized the crisp accents of John Bartholomew. "Don't bungle the job," the mulatto was muttering. "Get him before he has a chance to use his gun. He doesn't suspect anything. I just remember that I left the Chinaman's knife in the crack over the bunk. But the detective will never see it, in the dark. He had to come butting in here, this particular night. We can't let him see what he'd see if he lived through this night."

"We do de job quick and clean, mastah," murmured another voice, with a guttural accent different from any Harrison had ever heard, and impossible to reproduce.

"Alright; we haven't anything to fear from Joe Corley. The Swamp Cat carried out my instructions."

"Dat Swamp Cat prowlin' 'round outside right now," muttered another man. "Ah don't like him. Why can't he do dis job?"

"He obeys my orders; but he can't be trusted too far. But we can't stand here talking like this. The detective will wake up and get suspicious. Throw open that door and rush him. Knife him in his bunk--"

Harrison always believed that the best defense was a strong offensive. There was but one way out of this jam. He took it without hesitation. He hurled a massive shoulder against the door, knocking it open, and sprang into the outer room, gun leveled, and barked: "Hands up, damn you!"

There were five men in that room; Bartholomew, holding the lamp and shading it with his left hand, and four others, four lean, rangy giants in nondescript garments, with yellow, sinister features. Each man of the four had a knife in his hand.

They recoiled with yells of dismay as Harrison crashed upon them. Automatically their hands went up and their knives clattered on the floor. For an instant the white man was complete master of the situation, Bartholomew turning ashy as he stared, the lamp shaking in his hands.

"Back up against that wall!" snapped Harrison.

They obeyed dumbly, rendered incapable of action by the shock of surprise. Harrison knew that it was John Bartholomew, more than these hulking butchers, that he had to fear.

"Set that lamp on the table," he snapped. "Line up there with them--ha!"

Bartholomew had stooped to lower the lamp to the table--then quick as a cat he threw it crashing to the floor, ducking behind the table with the same motion. Harrison's gun crashed almost simultaneously, but even in the bedlam darkness that followed, the detective knew he had missed. Whirling, he leaped through the outer door. Inside the dark cabin he would have no chance against the knives for which the Negroes were already groping on the floor, mouthing like rabid dogs. As Harrison raced across the clearing he heard Bartholomew's furious voice yelling commands. The white man did not take the obvious route, the beaten trail. He rounded the cabin and darted toward the trees on the other side. He had no intention of fleeing until he was run down from behind. He was seeking a place where he could turn at bay and shoot it out with a little advantage on his side. The moon was just coming up above the trees, emphasizing, rather than illuminating the shadows.

He heard the Negroes clamoring out of the cabin and casting about, momentarily at a loss. He reached the shadows before they rounded the hut, and glancing back through the bushes, saw them running about the clearing like hunting dogs seek a spoor, howling in primitive blood-lust and disappointment. The growing moonlight glittered on the long knives in their hands.

He drew back further among the trees, finding the ground more solid underfoot than he had expected. Then he came suddenly upon the marshy edge of a stretch of black water. Something grunted and thrashed amidst it, and two green lamps burned suddenly like jewels on the inky water. He recoiled, well knowing what those twin lights were. And as he did so, he bumped full into something that locked fierce arms like an ape about him.

Harrison ducked and heaved, bowing his powerful back like a great cat, and his assailant tumbled over his head and thumped on the ground, still clutching the detective's coat with the grip of a vise. Harrison lunged backward, ripping the garment down the back, wrenching his arms from the sleeves, in his frenzy to free himself.

The man leaped to his feet on the edge of the pool, snarling like a wild beast. Harrison saw a gaunt half naked black man with wild strands of hair caked with mud hanging over a contorted mask of a face, the thick loose lips drooling foam. This, indeed, he knew, was the dread Swamp Cat.

Still grasping Harrison's torn coat brainlessly in his left hand, his right swept up with a sheen of sharp steel, and even as he sensed the madman's intention, the detective ducked and fired from the hip. The thrown knife hummed by his ear, and with the crash of the shot the Swamp Cat swayed and pitched backward into the black pool. There was a threshing rush, the waters stormed foamily, there was a glimpse of a blunted, reptilian snout, and the trailing body vanished with it.

Harrison stepped back, sickened, and heard behind him the shouting progress of men through the bushes. His hunters had heard the shot. He drew back into the shadows among a cluster of gum trees, and waited, gun in hand. An instant later they rushed out upon the bank of the pool, John Bartholomew and his dusky knife-fighters.

They ranged the bank, gaping, and then Bartholomew laughed and pointed to a blood-stained piece of cloth that floated soggily on the foam-flecked waters.

"The fool's coat! He must have run right into the pool, and the 'gator's got him! I can see them tearing at something, over there among the reeds. Hear those bones crack?" Bartholomew's laugh was fiendish to hear.

"Well," said the mulatto, "we don't have to worry about him. If they send anybody in after him, we'll just tell them the truth: that he fell into the water and got grabbed by the gators, just like Celia Pompoloi."

"She wuz a awful sight when us foun' huh body," muttered one of the swamp Negroes.

"We'll never find that much of him," prophesied Bartholomew.

"Did he say what de Chinaman done?" asked another of the men.

"Just what the Chinaman said; that he'd murdered a man."

"Wish he'd uh robbed uh bank," murmured the swamp dweller plaintively. "Wish he'd uh brung uh lot uh money in wid him."

"Well, he didn't," snapped Bartholomew. "You saw me search him. Now get back to the others and help them watch him. These Chinese are slippery customers, and we can't take any chances with him. More white men may come looking for him tomorrow, but if they do, they're welcome to all of him they can find!" He laughed with sinister meaning, and then added abruptly: "Hurry and get out of here. I want to be alone. There are spirits to be communed with before the hour arrives, and dread rites that I must perform alone. Go!"

The others bent their heads in a curious gesture of subservience, and trooped away, in the direction of the clearing. He followed leisurely.

Harrison glared after them, turning what he had heard over in his mind. Some of it was gibberish, but certain things were clear. For one thing, the Chinaman was obviously alive, and imprisoned somewhere. Bartholomew had lied about his own relations with the swamp people; one of them he certainly was not; but he was just as certainly a leader among them. Yet he had lied to them about the Chinaman's money. Harrison remembered the mulatto's expression when he had mentioned it to him. The detective believed that Bartholomew had never seen the money; that Woon Shang, suspicious, had hidden it himself before he was attacked.

Harrison rose and stole after the retreating Negroes. As long as they believed him dead, he could conduct his investigations without being harried by pursuit. His shirt was of dark material and did not show in the darkness, and the big detective was trained in stealth by adventures in the haunted dives of Oriental quarters where unseen eyes always watched and ears were forever alert.

When he came to the edge of the trees, he saw the four giants trooping down the trail that led deeper into the swamp. They walked in single file, their heads bent forward, stooping from the waist like apes. Bartholomew was just going into the cabin. Harrison started to follow the disappearing forms, then hesitated. Bartholomew was in his power. He could steal up on the cabin, throw his gun on the mulatto and make him tell where Woon Shang was imprisoned--maybe. Harrison knew the invincible stubbornness of the breed. Even as he ruminated, Bartholomew came out of the cabin and stood peering about with a strange furtiveness. He held a heavy whip in his hand. Presently he glided across the clearing toward the quarter where the detective crouched. He passed within a few yards of Harrison's covert, and the moonlight illumined his features. Harrison was astounded at the change in his face, at the sinister vitality and evil strength reflected there.

Harrison altered his plans and stole after him, wishing to know on what errand the man went with such secrecy. It was not difficult. Bartholomew looked neither back nor sidewise, but wound a tortuous way among inky pools and clusters of rotting vegetation that looked poisonous, even in the moonlight. Presently the detective crouched low; ahead of the mulatto there was a tiny hut, almost hidden among the trees which trailed Spanish moss over it like a grey veil. Bartholomew looked carefully about him, then drew forth a key and manipulated a large padlock on the door. Harrison was convinced that he had been led to the prison of Woon Shang.

Bartholomew disappeared inside, closing the door. A light gleamed through the chinks of the logs. Then came a mumble of voices, too indistinct for Harrison to tell anything about them; that was followed by the sharp, unmistakable crack of a whip on bare flesh, and a shrill cry of pain. Enlightenment came to Harrison. Bartholomew had come secretly to his prisoner, to torture the Chinaman--and for what reason but to make him divulge the hiding place of the money, of which Harrison had spoken? Obviously Bartholomew had no intentions of sharing that money with his mates.

Harrison began to work his way stealthily toward the cabin, fully intending to burst in and put a stop to that lashing. He would cheerfully have shot down Woon Shang himself, had the occasion arisen, but he had a white man's abhorrence of torture. But before he reached the hut, the sounds ceased, the light went out and Bartholomew emerged, wiping the perspiration of exertion from his brow. He locked the door, thrust the key in his pocket, and turned away through the trees, trailing his whip in his hand. Harrison, crouching in the shadows, let him go. It was Woon Shang he was after. Bartholomew could be dealt with later.

When the mulatto had disappeared, Harrison rose and strode to the door of the hut. The absence of guards was rather puzzling, after the conversation he had overheard, but be wasted no time on conjecture. The door was secured by a chain made fast to a big hasp driven deep into a log. He thrust his gun barrel through this hasp, and using it as a lever, pried out the hasp with no great difficulty.

Pulling open the door he peered in; it was too dark to see, but be heard somebody's breath coming in jerky hysterical sobs. He struck a match, looked--then glared. The prisoner was there, crouching on the dirt floor. But it was not Woon Shang. It was a woman.

She was a mulatto, young, and handsome in her way. She was clad only in a ragged and scanty chemise, and her hands were bound behind her. From her wrists a long strand of rawhide ran to a heavy staple in the wall. She stared wildly at Harrison, her dark eyes reflecting both hope and terror. There were tear stains on her checks.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded the detective.

"Celia Pompoloi!" Her voice was rich and musical despite its hysteria. "Oh, white man, for God's sake let me go! I can't stand it any more. I'll die; I know I will!"

"I thought youweredead," he grunted.

"John Bartholomew did it!" she exclaimed. "He persuaded a yellow girl from 'outside' into the swamp, and then he killed her and dressed her in my clothes, and threw her into the marsh where the alligators would chew the body till nobody could tell it wasn't me. The people found it and thought it was Celia Pompoloi. He's kept me here for three weeks and tortured me every night."

"Why?" Harrison found and lighted a candle stump stuck on the wall. Then he stooped and cut the rawhide thongs that bound her hands. She climbed to her feet, chafing her bruised and swollen wrists. In her scanty garb the brutality of the floggings she had received was quite apparent.

"He's a devil!" Her dark eyes flashed murderously; whatever her wrongs, she obviously was no meek sufferer. "He came here posing as a priest of the Great Serpent. He said he was from Haiti, the lying dog. He's from Santo Domingo, and no more priest than you are.Iam the proper priestess of the Serpent, and the people obeyed me. That's why he put me out of the way. I'll kill him!"

"But why did he lick you?" asked Harrison.

"Because I wouldn't tell him what be wanted to know," she muttered sullenly, bending her head and twisting one bare foot behind the other ankle, school-girl fashion. She did not seem to think of refusing to answer his questions. His white skin put him beyond and outside swamp-land politics.

"He came here to steal the jewel, the heart of the Great Serpent, which we brought with us from Haiti, long ago. He is no priest. He is an impostor. He proposed that I give the Heart to him and run away from my people with him. When I refused, he tied me in this old hut where none can hear my screams; the swamp people shun it, thinking it's haunted. He said he'd keep beating me until I told him where the Heart was hidden, but I wouldn't tell him--not though he stripped all the flesh from my bones. I alone know that secret, because I am a priestess of the Serpent, and the guardian of its heart."

This was Voodoo stuff with a vengeance; her matter-of-fact manner evinced an unshaken belief in her weird cult.

"Do you know anything about the Chinaman, Woon Shang?" he demanded.

"John Bartholomew told me of him in his boastings. He came running from the law and Bartholomew promised to hide him. Then he summoned the swamp men, and they seized the Chinaman, though he wounded one of them badly with his knife. They made a prisoner of him--"

"Why?"

Celia was in that vengeful mood in which a woman recklessly tells everything, and repeats things she would not otherwise mention.

"Bartholomew came saying he was a priest of old time. That's how he caught the fancy of the people. He promised them anold sacrifice, of which there has not been one for thirty years. We have offered the white cock and the red cock to the Great Serpent. But Bartholomew promised them thegoat-without-horns. He did that to get the Heart into his hands, for only then is it taken from its secret hiding place. He thought to get it into his hands and run away before the sacrifice was made. But when I refused to aid him, it upset his plans. Now he can not get the Heart, but he must go through with the sacrifice anyway. The people are becoming impatient. If he fails them, they will kill him.

"He first chose the 'outside' black man, Joe Corley, who was hiding in the swamp, for the sacrifice; but when the Chinaman came, Bartholomew decided he would make a better offering. Bartholomew told me tonight that the Chinaman had money, and he was going to make him tell where he hid it, so he would have the money, and the Heart, too, when I finally gave in and told him--"

"Wait a minute," interposed Harrison. "Let me get this straight. What is it that Bartholomew intends doing with Woon Shang?"

"He will offer him up to the Great Serpent," she answered, making a conventional gesture of conciliation and adoration as she spoke the dread name.

"Ahumansacrifice?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll be damned!" he muttered. "If I hadn't been raised in the South myself, I'd never believe it. When is this sacrifice to take place?"

"Tonight!"

"Eh, what's that?" He remembered Bartholomew's cryptic instructions to his henchmen. "The devil! Where does it happen, and what time?"

"Just before dawn; far back in the swamp."

"I've got to find Woon Shang and stop it!" he exclaimed. "Where is he imprisoned?"

"At the place of the sacrifice; many men guard him. You'd never find your way there. You'd drown and get eaten by the gators. Besides, if you did get there, the people would tear you to pieces."

"You lead me there and I'll take care of the people," he snarled. "You want revenge on Bartholomew. All right; guide me there and I'll see that you get plenty. I've always worked alone," he ruminated angrily, "but the swamp country isn't River Street."

"I'll do it!" Her eyes blazed and her white teeth gleamed in a mask of passion. "I'll guide you to the place of the Altar.' We'll kill him, the yellow dog!"

"How long will it take us to get there?"

"I could go there in an hour, alone. Guiding you, it will take longer. Much longer, the way we must go. You can't travel the road I would take, alone."

"I can follow you anywhere you walk," he grunted, slightly nettled. He glanced at his watch, then extinguished the candle. "Let's get going. Take the shortest route and don't worry about me. I'll keep up."

She caught his wrist in a fierce grasp and almost jerked him out of the door, quivering with the eagerness of a hunting hound.

"Wait a minute!" A thought struck him. "If I go back to the cabin and capture Bartholomew--"

"He will not be there; he is well on his way to the Place of the Altar; better that we beat him there."

CHAPTER III

Voodoo Lair

As long as he lived Harrison remembered that race through the swamp, as he followed Celia Pompoloi along pathless ways that seemed impossible. Mire caught at his feet, and sometimes black scummy water lapped about his ankles, but Celia's swift sure feet always found solid ground where none seemed possible, or guided him over bogs that quaked menacingly beneath their weight. She sprang lightly from hummock to hummock, or slid between snaky pools of black slime where unseen monsters grunted and wallowed. Harrison floundered after her, sweating, half nauseated with the miasmic reek of the oozy slime that plastered him; but all the bulldog was roused in him, and he was ready to wade through swamps for a week if the man he hunted was at the other end of the loathsome journey. Dank misty clouds had veiled the sky, through which the moon shone fitfully, and Harrison stumbled like a blind man, depending entirely on his guide, whose dusky half-naked body was all but invisible to him at times in the darkness.

Ahead of them he began to hear a rhythmic throbbing, a barbaric pulsing that grew as they advanced. A red glow flickered through the black trees.

"The flames of the sacrifice!" gasped Celia, quickening her pace. "Hasten!"

Somewhere in his big, weary body Harrison found enough reserve energy to keep up with her. She seemed to run lightly over bogs that engulfed him to the knees. She possessed the swamp dweller's instinct for safe footing. Ahead of them Harrison saw the shine of something that was not mud, and Celia halted at the verge of a stretch of noisome water.

"The Place of the Altar is surrounded by water on all sides but one," she hissed. "We are in the very heart of the swamp, deeper than anyone ever goes except on such occasions as these. There are no cabins near. Follow me! I have a bridge none knows of except myself."

At a point where the sluggish stream narrowed to some fifty feet, a fallen tree spanned it. Celia ran out upon it, balancing herself upright. She swayed across, a slim ghostly figure in the cloudy light. Harrison straddled the log and hitched himself ignominiously along.

He was too weary to trusthisequilibrium. His feet dangled a foot or so above the black surface, and Celia, waiting impatiently on the further bank as she peered anxiously at the distant glow, cast him a look over her shoulder and cried a sudden urgent warning.

Harrison jerked up his legs just as something bulky and grisly heaved up out of the water with a great splash and an appalling clash of mighty fangs. Harrison fairly flung himself over the last few feet and landed on the further bank in a more demoralized condition than he would have admitted. A criminal in a dark room with a knife was less nerve-shaking than these ghoulish slayers of the dark waters.

The ground was firmer; they were, as Celia said, on a sort of island in the heart of the marshes. The girl threaded her supple way among the cypresses, panting with the intensity of her emotions. Perspiration soaked her; the hand that held Harrison's wrist was wet and slippery.

A few minutes later, when the glow in the trees had grown to an illuminating glare, she halted and slipped to the damp mold, drawing her companion with her. They looked out upon a scene incredible in its primitive starkness.

There was a clearing, free of underbrush, circled by a black wall of cypress. From its outer edge a sort of natural causeway wandered away into the gloom, and over that low ridge ran a trail, beaten by many feet. The trail ended in the clearing, the ultimate end of the path that Harrison had followed into the swamp. On the other side of the clearing there was a glimpse of dusky water, reflecting the firelight.

In a wide horseshoe formation, their backs to the causeway, sat some fifty men, women and children, resembling Celia Pompoloi in complexion. Harrison had not supposed that so many people inhabited the swamp. Their gaze was fixed on an object in the center of the opening of the human horseshoe. This was a great block of dark wood that had an unfamiliar appearance, as of an altar, brought from afar. There was an intolerable suggestion about that block, and the misshapen, leering figure that rose behind it--a fantastically carven idol, to whose bestial features the flickering firelight lent life and mobility. Harrison intuitively knew that this monstrosity was never carved in America. The yellow people had brought it with them from Haiti, and surely their black ancestors had brought it originally from Africa. There was an aura of the Congo about it, the reek of black squalling jungles, and squirming faceless shapes of a night more primeval than this. Harrison was not superstitious, but he felt gooseflesh rise on his limbs. At the back of his consciousness dim racial memories stirred, conjuring up unstable and monstrous images from the dim mists of the primitive, when men worshipped such gods as these.

Before the idol, near the block, sat an old crone, striking a bowl tom-tom with quick staccato strokes of her open hands; it growled and rumbled and muttered, and the squatting Negroes swayed and chanted softly in unison. Their voices were low, but they hummed with a note of hysteria. The fire struck gleams from their rolling eyeballs and shining teeth.

Harrison looked in vain for John Bartholomew and Woon Shang. He reached out a hand to get his companion's attention. She did not heed him. Her supple figure was tense and quivering as a taut wire under his hand. A sudden change in the chanting, a wild wolfish baying, brought him about again.

Out of the shadows of the trees behind the idol strode John Bartholomew. He was clad only in a loin cloth, and it was as if he had doffed his civilized culture with his clothing. His facial expression, his whole bearing, were changed; he was like an image of barbarism incarnate. Harrison stared at the knotted biceps, the ridged body muscles which the firelight displayed. But something else gripped his whole attention. With John Bartholomew came another, unwillingly, at the sight of whom the crowd gave tongue to another bestial yell.

About Bartholomew's mighty left hand was twisted the pigtail of Woon Shang, whom he dragged after him like a fowl to the chopping block. The Chinaman was stark naked, his yellow body gleaming like old ivory in the fire. His hands were bound behind his back, and he was like a child in the grasp of his executioner. Woon Shang was not a large man; beside the great mulatto he seemed slimmer than ever. His hysterical panting came plainly to Harrison in the silence that fell tensely as the shouting ceased and the Negroes watched with eyes that gleamed redly. His straining feet tore at the sod as he struggled against the inexorable advance of his captor. In Bartholomew's right hand shone a great razor-edged crescent of steel.

The watchers sucked in their breath loudly; in a single stride they had returned to the jungle whence they had crawled; they were mad for the bloody saturnalia their ancestors had known.

In Bartholomew's face Harrison read stark horror and mad determination. He sensed that the mulatto was not enjoying this ghastly primordial drama into which he had been trapped. He also realized that the man must go through with it, and that he would go through with it. It was more than the jewel heart of the serpent-god for which Bartholomew strove now; it was the continued dominance of these wolfish devil-worshippers on which his life depended.

Harrison rose to one knee, drew and cocked his revolver and sighted along the blue barrel. The distance was not great, but the light was illusive. But he felt he must trust to the chance of sending a slug crashing through John Bartholomew's broad breast. If he stepped out into the open and tried to arrest the man, the Negroes, in their present fanatical frenzy, would tear him to pieces. If their priest was shot down, panic might seize them. His finger was crooking about the trigger when something was thrown into the fire. Abruptly the flames died down, throwing everything into deep shallow. As suddenly they flared up again, burning with a weird green radiance. The dusky faces looked like those of drowned corpses in the glow.

In the moment of darkness Bartholomew had reached the block. His victim's head was thrust down upon it, and the mulatto stood like a bronze image, his muscular right arm lifted, poising above his head the broad steel crescent. And then, before could strike the blow that would send Woon Shang's head rolling to the misshapen feet of the grinning idol, before Harrison could jerk the trigger, something froze them all in their places.

Into the weird glow moved a figure, so lithely that it seemed to float in the uncertain light rather than move on earthly feet. A groan burst from the Negroes, and they came to their feet like automatons. In the green glow that lent her features the aspect of death, with perspiration dripping from her draggled garment, Celia Pompoloi looked hideously like the corpse of a drowned woman newly risen from a watery grave.

"Celia!"

It was a scream from a score of gaping months. Bedlam followed.

"Celia Pompoloi! Oh Gawd, she done come back from de watah! Done come back from Hell!"

"Yes you dogs!" It was a most unghostly scream from Celia. "It's Celia Pompoloi, come back from Hell to send John Bartholomew there!"

And like a fury she rushed across the green-lit space, a knife she had found somewhere glittering in her hand. Bartholomew, momentarily paralyzed by the appearance of his prisoner, came to life. Releasing Woon Shang he stepped aside and swung the heavy beheading knife with all his power. Harrison saw the great muscles leap up under his glossy skin as he struck. But Celia's spring was that of a swamp panther. It carried her inside the circular sweep of the weighted blade, and her knife flashed as it sank to the hilt under John Bartholomew's heart. With a strangled cry he reeled and fell, dragging her down with him as she strove to wrench her blade free.

Abandoning it she rose, panting, her hair standing on end, her eyes starting from her head, her red lips writhing back in a curl of devilish rage. The people shrieked and gave back from her, still evidently in the grip of the delusion that they looked on one risen from the dead.

"Dogs!" she screamed, an incarnation of fury. "Fools! Swine! Have you lost your reason, to forget all my teachings, and let this dead dog make of you the beasts your fathers were? Oh--!" Glaring about for a weapon she caught up a blazing fire-brand and rushed at them, striking furiously. Men yelped as the flames bit them, and the sparks showered. Howling, cursing, and screaming they broke and fled, a frenzied mob, streaming out across the causeway, with their maddened priestess at their heels, screaming maledictions and smiting with the splintering fagot. They vanished in the darkness and their clamor came back faintly.

Harrison rose, shaking his head in wonder, and went stiffly up to the dying fire. Bartholomew was dead, staring glassily up at the moon which was breaking through the scattering clouds. Woon Shang crouched babbling incoherent Chinese as Harrison hauled him to his feet.

"Woon Shang," said the detective wearily, "I arrest you for the murder of Li-keh-tsung. I warn you that anything you say will be used against you."

That formula seemed to invest the episode with some sanity, in contrast to the fantastic horror of the recent events. The Chinaman made no struggle. He seemed dazed, muttering: "This will break the heart of my honorable father; he had rather see me dead than dishonored."

"You ought to have thought of that before," said Harrison heavily. Through force of habit he cut Woon Shang's cords and reached for his handcuffs before he realized that they had been lost with his coat.

"Oh, well," he sighed. "I don't reckon you'll need them. Let's get going."

Laying a heavy hand on his captive's naked shoulder, Harrison half guided, half pushed him toward the causeway. The detective was dizzy with fatigue, but combined with it was a muddled determination to get his prisoner out of the swamp and into a jail before he stopped. He felt he had no more to fear from the swamp people, but he wanted to get out of that atmosphere of decay and slime in which he seemed to have been wandering for ages. Woon Shang took note of his condition with furtive side-long glances, as the stark fear died out of the Chinaman's beady black eyes to be replaced by one of craft.

"I have ten thousand dollars," he began babbling. "I hid it before the Negroes made me prisoner. I will give you all of it if you will let me go...."

"Oh, shut up!" groaned Harrison wearily, giving him an exasperated shove. Woon Shang stumbled and went to his knees, his bare shoulder slipping from Harrison's grasp. The detective was stooping, fumbling for him when the Chinaman rose with a chunk of wood in his hand, and smote him savagely on the head. Harrison staggered back, almost falling, and Woon Shang, in a last desperate bid for freedom, dashed, not for the neck of land between which himself and Harrison stood, but straight toward the black water that glimmered beyond the fringe of cypresses. Harrison fired mechanically and without aim, but the fugitive kept straight on and hit the dusky water with a long dive.

Woon Shang's bobbing head was scarcely visible in the shadows of the overhanging ferns. Then a wild shriek cut the night; the water threshed and foamed, there was the glimpse of a writhing, horribly contorted yellow body and of a longer, darker shape, and then the blood-streaked waters closed over Woon Shang forever.

Harrison exhaled gustily and sank down on a rotting log.

"Well," he said wearily, aloud, "that windsthatup. It's better this way. Woon's family had rather he died this way than in the chair, and they're decent folks, in spite of him. If this business had come to trial, I'd have had to tell about Celia shoving a knife into that devil Bartholomew, and I'd hate to see her on trial for killing that rat. This way it can be smoothed over. He had it coming to him. And I've got the money that's coming to old Li-keh-tsung's granddaughter. And it's me for the feather beds and fried steaks of civilization."

THE END

Contents

NAMES IN THE BLACK BOOK

By Robert E. Howard

"Three unsolved murders in a week are not so unusual--for River Street," grunted Steve Harrison, shifting his muscular bulk restlessly in his chair.

His companion lighted a cigarette and Harrison observed that her slim hand was none too steady. She was exotically beautiful, a dark, supple figure, with the rich colors of purple Eastern nights and crimson dawns in her dusky hair and red lips. But in her dark eyes Harrison glimpsed the shadow of fear. Only once before had he seen fear in those marvelous eyes, and the memory made him vaguely uneasy.

"It's your business to solve murders," she said.

"Give me a little time. You can't rush things, when you're dealing with the people of the Oriental quarter."

"You have less time than you think," she answered cryptically. "If you do not listen to me, you'll never solve these killings."

"I'm listening."

"But you won't believe. You'll say I'm hysterical--seeing ghosts and shying at shadows."

"Look here, Joan," he exclaimed impatiently. "Come to the point. You called me to your apartment and I came because you said you were in deadly danger. But now you're talking riddles about three men who were killed last week. Spill it plain, won't you?"

"Do you remember Erlik Khan?" she asked abruptly.

Involuntarily his hand sought his face, where a thin scar ran from temple to jaw-rim.

"I'm not likely to forget him," he said. "A Mongol who called himself Lord of the Dead. His idea was to combine all the Oriental criminal societies in America in one big organization, with himself at the head. He might have done it, too, if his own men hadn't turned on him."

"Erlik Khan has returned," she said.

"What!" His head jerked up and he glared at her incredulously. "What are you talking about? I saw him die, and so did you!"

"I saw his hood fall apart as Ali ibn Suleyman struck with his keen-edged scimitar," she answered. "I saw him roll to the floor and lie still. And then the house went up in flames, and the roof fell in, and only charred bones were ever found among the ashes. Nevertheless, Erlik Khan has returned."

Harrison did not reply, but sat waiting for further disclosures, sure they would come in an indirect way. Joan La Tour was half Oriental, and partook of many of the characteristics of her subtle kin.

"How did those three men die?" she asked, though he was aware that she knew as well as he.

"Li-crin, the Chinese merchant, fell from his own roof," he grunted. The people on the street heard him scream and then saw him come hurtling down. Might have been an accident--but middle-aged Chinese merchants don't go climbing around on roofs at midnight.

"Ibrahim ibn Achmet, the Syrian curio dealer, was bitten by a cobra. That might have been an accident too, only I know somebody dropped the snake on him through his skylight.

"Jacob Kossova, the Levantine exporter, was simply knifed in a back alley. Dirty jobs, all of them, and no apparent motive on the surface. But motives are hidden deep, in River Street. When I find the guilty parties I'll uncover the motives."

"And these murders suggest nothing to you?" exclaimed the girl, tense with suppressed excitement. "You do not see the link that connects them? You do not grasp the point they all have in common? Listen--all these men were formerly associated in one way or another with Erlik Khan!"

"Well?" he demanded. "That doesn't mean that the Khan's spook killed them! We found plenty of bones in the ashes of the house, but there were members of his gang in other parts of the city. His gigantic organization went to pieces, after his death, for lack of a leader, but the survivors were never uncovered. Some of them might be paying off old grudges."

"Then why did they wait so long to strike? It's been a year since we saw Erlik Khan die. I tell you, the Lord of the Dead himself, alive or dead, has returned and is striking down these men for one reason or another. Perhaps they refuse to do his bidding once more. Five were marked for death. Three have fallen."

"How do you know that?" said he.

"Look!" From beneath the cushions of the divan on which she sat she drew something, and rising, came and bent beside him while she unfolded it.

It was a square piece of parchment-like substance, black and glossy. On it were written five names, one below the other, in a bold flowing hand--and in crimson, like spilled blood. Through the first three names a crimson bar had been drawn. They were the names of Li-chin, Ibrahim ibn Achmet, and Jacob Kossova. Harrison grunted explosively. The last two names, as yet unmarred, were those of Joan La Tour and Stephen Harrison.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"It was shoved under my door last night, while I slept. If all the doors and windows had not been locked, the police would have found it pinned to my corpse this morning."

"But still I don't see what connection--"

"It is a page from the Black Book of Erlik Khan!" she cried. "The book of the dead! I have seen it, when I was a subject of his in the old days. There he kept accounts of his enemies, alive and dead. I saw that book, open, the very day of the night Ali ibn Suleyman killed him--a big book with jade-hinged ebony covers and glossy black parchment pages. Those names were not in it then; they have been written in since Erlik Khan died--and that is Erlik Khan's handwriting!"

If Harrison was impressed he failed to show it.

"Does he keep his books in English?"

"No, in a Mongolian script. This is for our benefit. And I know we are hopelessly doomed. Erlik Khan never warned his victims unless he was sure of them."

"Might be a forgery," grunted the detective.

"No! No man could imitate Erlik Khan's hand. He wrote those names himself. He has come back from the dead! Hell could not hold a devil as black as he!" Joan was losing some of her poise in her fear and excitement. She ground out the half-consumed cigarette and broke the cover of a fresh carton. She drew forth a slim white cylinder and tossed the package on the table. Harrison took it up and absently extracted one for himself.

"Our names are in the Black Book! It is a sentence of death from which there is no appeal!" She struck a match and was lifting it, when Harrison struck the cigarette from her with a startled oath. She fell back on the divan, bewildered at the violence of his action, and he caught up the package and began gingerly to remove the contents.

"Where'd you get these things?"

"Why, down at the corner drug store, I guess," she stammered. "That's where I usually--"

"Not these you didn't," he grunted. "These fags have been specially treated. I don't know what it is, but I've seen one puff of the stuff knock a man stone dead. Some kind of a hellish Oriental drug mixed with the tobacco. You were out of your apartment while you were phoning me--"

"I was afraid my wire was tapped," she answered. "I went to a public booth down the street."

"And it's my guess somebody entered your apartment while you were gone and switched cigarettes on you. I only got a faint whiff of the stuff when I started to put that fag in my mouth, but it's unmistakable. Smell it yourself. Don't be afraid. It's deadly only when ignited."

She obeyed, and turned pale.

"I told you! We were the direct cause of Erlik Khan's overthrow! If you hadn't smelt that drug, we'd both be dead now, as he intended!"

"Well," he grunted, "it's a cinch somebody's after you, anyway. I still say it can't be Erlik Khan, because nobody could live after the lick on the head I saw Ali ibn Suleyman hand him, and I don't believe in ghosts. But you've got to be protected until I run down whoever is being so free with his poisoned cigarettes."

"What about yourself? Your name's in his book, too."

"Never mind me," Harrison growled pugnaciously. "I reckon I can take care of myself." He looked capable enough, with his cold blue eyes, and the muscles bulging in his coat. He had shoulders like a bull.

"This wing's practically isolated from the rest of the building," he said, "and you've got the third floor to yourself?"

"Not only the third floor of the wing," she answered. "There's no one else on the third floor anywhere in the building at present."

"That makes it fine!" he exclaimed irritably. "Somebody could sneak in and cut your throat without disturbing anyone. That's what they'll try, too, when they realize the cigarettes didn't finish you. You'd better move to a hotel."

"That wouldn't make any difference," she answered, trembling. Her nerves obviously were in a bad way. "Erlik Khan would find me, anywhere. In a hotel, with people coming and going all the time, and the rotten locks they have on the doors, with transoms and fire escapes and everything, it would just be that much easier for him."

"Well, then, I'll plant a bunch of cops around here."

"That wouldn't do any good, either. Erlik Khan has killed again and again in spite of the police. They do not understand his ways."

"That's right," he muttered uncomfortably aware of a conviction that to summon men from headquarters would surely be signing those men's death warrants, without accomplishing anything else. It was absurd to suppose that the dead Mongol fiend was behind these murderous attacks, yet--Harrison's flesh crawled along his spine at the memory of things that had taken place in River Street--things he had never reported, because he did not wish to be thought either a liar or a madman. The dead do not return--but what seems absurd on Thirty-ninth Boulevard takes on a different aspect among the haunted labyrinths of the Oriental quarter.

"Stay with me!" Joan's eyes were dilated, and she caught Harrison's arm with hands that shook violently. "We can defend these rooms! While one sleeps the other can watch! Do not call the police; their blunders would doom us. You have worked in the quarter for years, and are worth more than the whole police force. The mysterious instincts that are a part of my Eastern heritage are alert to danger. I feel peril for us both, near, creeping closer, gliding around us like serpents in the darkness!"

"But I can't stay here," he scowled worriedly. "We can't barricade ourselves and wait for them to starve us out. I've got to hit back--find out who's behind all this. The best defense is a good offense. But I can't leave you here unguarded, either. Damn!" He clenched his big fists and shook his head like a baffled bull in his perplexity.

"There is one man in the city besides yourself I could trust," she said suddenly. "One worth more than all the police. With him guarding me I could sleep safely."

"Who is he?"

"Khoda Khan."

"That fellow? Why, I thought he'd skipped months ago."

"No; he's been hiding in Levant Street."

"But he's a confounded killer himself!"

"No, he isn't; not according to his standards, which means as much to him as yours do to you. He's an Afghan who was raised in a code of blood-feud and vengeance. He's as honorable according to his creed of life as you or I. And he's my friend. He'd die for me."

"I reckon that means you've been hiding him from the law," said Harrison with a searching glance which she did not seek to evade. He made no further comment. River Street is not South Park Avenue. Harrison's own methods were not always orthodox, but they generally got results.

"Can you reach him?" he asked abruptly. She nodded.

"Alright. Call him and tell him to beat it up here. Tell him he won't be molested by the police, and after the brawl's over, he can go back into hiding. But after that it's open season if I catch him. Use your phone. Wire may be tapped, but we'll have to take the chance. I'll go downstairs and use the booth in the office. Lock the door, and don't open it to anybody until I get back."

When the bolts clicked behind him, Harrison turned down the corridor toward the stairs. The apartment house boasted no elevator. He watched all sides warily as he went. A peculiarity of architecture had, indeed, practically isolated that wing. The wall opposite Joan's doors was blank. The only way to reach the other suites on that floor was to descend the stair and ascend another on the other side of the building.

As he reached the stair he swore softly; his heel had crunched a small vial on the first step. With some vague suspicion of a planted poison trap he stooped and gingerly investigated the splintered bits and the spilled contents. There was a small pool of colorless liquid which gave off a pungent, musky odor, but there seemed nothing lethal about it.

"Some damned Oriental perfume Joan dropped, I reckon," he decided. He descended the twisting stair without further delay and was presently in the booth in the office which opened on the street; a sleepy clerk dozed behind the desk.

Harrison got the chief of police on the wire and began abruptly.

"Say, Hoolihan, you remember that Afghan, Khoda Khan, who knifed a Chinaman about three months ago? Yes, that's the one. Well, listen: I'm using him on a job for a while, so tell your men to lay off, if they see him. Pass the word along pronto. Yes, I know it's very irregular; so's the job I hold down. In this case it's the choice of using a fugitive from the law, or seeing a law-abiding citizen murdered. Never mind what it's all about. This is my job, and I've got to handle it my own way. All right; thanks."

He hung up the receiver, thought vigorously for a few minutes, and then dialed another number that was definitely not related to the police station. In place of the chief's booming voice there sounded at the other end of the wire a squeaky whine framed in the argot of the underworld.

"Listen, Johnny," said Harrison with his customary abruptness, "you told me you thought you had a lead on the Kossova murder. What about it?"

"It wasn't no lie, boss!" The voice at the other end trembled with excitement. "I got a tip, and it's big!--big! I can't spill it over the phone, and I don't dare stir out. But if you'll meet me at Shan Yang's hop joint, I'll give you the dope. It'll knock you loose from your props, believe me it will!"

"I'll be there in an hour," promised the detective. He left the booth and glanced briefly out into the street. It was a misty night, as so many River Street nights are. Traffic was only a dim echo from some distant, busier section. Drifting fog dimmed the street lamps, shrouding the forms of occasional passers-by. The stage was set for murder; it only awaited the appearance of the actors in the dark drama.

Harrison mounted the stairs again. They wound up out of the office and up into the third story wing without opening upon the second floor at all. The architecture, like much of it in or near the Oriental section, was rather unusual. People of the quarter were notoriously fond of privacy, and even apartment houses were built with this passion in mind. His feet made no sound on the thickly carpeted stairs, though a slight crunching at the top step reminded him of the broken vial again momentarily. He had stepped on the splinters.

He knocked at the locked door, answered Joan's tense challenge and was admitted. He found the girl more self-possessed.

"I talked with Khoda Khan. He's on his way here now. I warned him that the wire might be tapped--that our enemies might know as soon as I called him, and try to stop him on his way here."

"Good," grunted the detective. "While I'm waiting for him I'll have a look at your suite."

There were four rooms, drawing room in front, with a large bedroom behind it, and behind that two smaller rooms, the maid's bedroom and the bathroom. The maid was not there, because Joan had sent her away at the first intimation of danger threatening. The corridor ran parallel with the suite, and the drawing room, large bedroom and bathroom opened upon it. That made three doors to consider. The drawing room had one big east window, overlooking the street, and one on the south. The big bedroom had one south window, and the maid's room one south and one west window. The bathroom had one window, a small one in the west wall, overlooking a small court bounded by a tangle of alleys and board-fenced backyards.

"Three outside doors and six windows to be watched, and this the top story," muttered the detective. "I still think I ought to get some cops here." But he spoke without conviction. He was investigating the bathroom when Joan called him cautiously from the drawing room, telling him that she thought she had heard a faint scratching outside the door. Gun in hand he

opened the bathroom door and peered out into the corridor. It was empty. No shape of horror stood before the drawing room door. He closed the door, called reassuringly to the girl, and completed his inspection, grunting approval. Joan La Tour was a daughter of the Oriental quarter. Long ago she had provided against secret enemies as far as special locks and bolts could provide. The windows were guarded with heavy iron-braced shutters, and there was no trapdoor, dumb waiter nor skylight anywhere in the suite.

"Looks like you're ready for a siege," he commented.

"I am. I have canned goods laid away to last for weeks. With Khoda Khan I can hold the fort indefinitely. If things get too hot for you, you'd better come back here yourself--if you can. It's safer than the police station--unless they burn the house down."

A soft rap on the door brought them both around.

"Who is it?" called Joan warily.

"I, Khoda Khan, sahiba," came the answer in a low-pitched, but strong and resonant voice. Joan sighed deeply and unlocked the door. A tall figure bowed with a stately gesture and entered.

Khoda Khan was taller than Harrison, and though he lacked something of the American's sheer bulk, his shoulders were equally broad, and his garments could not conceal the hard lines of his limbs, the tigerish suppleness of his motions. His garb was a curious combination of costume, which is common in River Street. He wore a turban which well set off his hawk nose and black beard, and a long silk coat hung nearly to his knees. His trousers were conventional, but a silk sash girdled his lean waist, and his foot-gear was Turkish slippers.

In any costume it would have been equally evident that there was something wild and untamable about the man. His eyes blazed as no civilized man's ever did, and his sinews were like coiled springs under his coat. Harrison felt much as he would have felt if a panther had padded into the room, for the moment placid but ready at an instant's notice to go flying into flaming-eyed, red-taloned action.

"I thought you'd left the country," he said.

The Afghan smiled, a glimmer of white amidst the dark tangle of his beard.

"Nay, sahib. That son of a dog I knifed did not die."

"You're lucky he didn't," commented Harrison. "If you kill him you'll hang, sure."

"Inshallah," agreed Khoda Khan cheerfully. "But it was a matter of izzat--honor. The dog fed me swine's flesh. But no matter. The memsahib called me and I came."

"Alright. As long as she needs your protection the police won't arrest you. But when the matter's finished, things stand as they were. I'll give you time to hide again, if you wish, and then I'll try to catch you as I have in the past. Or if you want to surrender and stand trial, I'll promise you as much leniency as possible."

"You speak fairly," answered Khoda Khan. "I will protect the memsahib, and when our enemies are dead, you and I will begin our feud anew."

"Do you know anything about these murders?"

"Nay, sahib. The memsahib called me, saying Mongol dogs threatened her. I came swiftly, over the roofs, lest they seek to ambush me. None molested me. But here is something I found outside the door."

He opened his hand and exhibited a bit of silk, evidently torn from his sash. On it lay a crushed object that Harrison did not recognize. But Joan recoiled with a low cry.

"God! A black scorpion of Assam!"

"Aye--whose sting is death. I saw it running up and down before the door, seeking entrance. Another man might have stepped upon it without seeing it, but I was on my guard, for I smelled the Flower of Death as I came up the stairs. I saw the thing at the door and crushed it before it could sting me."

"What do you mean by the Flower of Death?" demanded Harrison.

"It grows in the jungles where these vermin abide. Its scent attracts them as wine draws a drunkard. A trail of the juice had somehow been laid to this door. Had the door been opened before I slew it, it would have darted in and struck whoever happened to be in its way."

Harrison swore under his breath, remembering the faint scratching noise Joan had heard outside the door.

"I get it now! They put a bottle of that juice on the stairs where it was sure to be stepped on. I did step on it, and broke it, and got the liquid on my shoe. Then I tracked down the stairs, leaving the scent wherever I stepped. Came back upstairs, stepped in the stuff again and tracked it on through the door. Then somebody downstairs turned that scorpion loose--the devil!! That means they've been in this house since I was downstairs!--may be hiding somewhere here now! But somebody had to come into the office to put the scorpion on the trail--I'll ask the clerk--"

"He sleeps like the dead," said Khoda Khan. "He did not waken when I entered and mounted the stairs. What matters if the house is full of Mongols? These doors are strong, and I am alert!" From beneath his coat he drew the terrible Khyber knife--a yard long, with an edge like a razor. "I have slain men with this," he announced, grinning like a bearded mountain devil. "Pathans, Indians, a Russian or so. These Mongols are dogs on whom the good steel will be shamed."

"Well," grunted Harrison. "I've got an appointment that's overdue now. I feel queer walking out and leaving you two to fight these devils alone. But there'll be no safety for us until I've smashed this gang at its root, and that's what I'm out to do."

"They'll kill you as you leave the building," said Joan with conviction.

"Well, I've got to risk it. If you're attacked call the police anyway, and call me, at Shan Yang's joint. I'll come back here some time before dawn. But I'm hoping the tip I expect to get will enable me to hit straight at whoever's after us."

He went down the hallway with an eerie feeling of being watched and scanned the stairs as if he expected to see it swarming with black scorpions, and he shied wide of the broken glass on the step. He had an uncomfortable sensation of duty ignored, in spite of himself, though he knew that his two companions did not want the police, and that in dealing with the East it is better to heed the advice of the East.

The clerk still sagged behind his desk. Harrison shook him without avail. The man was not asleep; he was drugged. But his heartbeat was regular, and the detective believed he was in no danger. Anyway, Harrison had no more time to waste. If he kept Johnny Kleck waiting too long, the fellow might become panicky and bolt, to hide in some rat-run for weeks.

He went into the street, where the lamps gleamed luridly through the drifting river mist, half expecting a knife to be thrown at him, or to find a cobra coiled on the seat of his automobile. But he found nothing his suspicion anticipated, even though he lifted the hood and the rumble-seat to see if a bomb had been planted. Satisfying himself at last, he climbed in and the girl watching him through the slits of a third-story shutter sighed relievedly to see him roar away unmolested.

Khoda Khan had gone through the rooms, giving approval in his beard of the locks, and having extinguished the lights in the other chambers he returned to the drawing room, where he turned out all lights there except one small desk lamp. It shed a pool of light in the center of the room, leaving the rest in shadowy vagueness.

"Darkness baffles rogues as well as honest men," he said sagely, "and I see like a cat in the dark."

He sat cross-legged near the door that let into the bedroom, which he left partly open. He merged with the shadows so that all of him Joan could make out with any distinctness was his turban and the glimmer of his eyes as he turned his head.

"We will remain in this room, sahiba," he said. "Having failed with poison and reptile, it is certain that men will next be sent. Lie down on that divan and sleep, if you can. I will keep watch."

Joan obeyed, but she did not sleep. Her nerves seemed to thrum with tautness. The silence of the house oppressed her, and the few noises of the street made her start.

Khoda Khan sat motionless as a statue, imbued with the savage patience and immobility of the hills that bred him. Grown to manhood on the raw barbaric edge of the world, where survival depended on personal ability, his senses were whetted keener than is possible for civilized men. Even Harrison's trained faculties were blunt in comparison. Khoda Khan could still smell the faint aroma of the Flower of Death, mingled with the acrid odor of the crushed scorpion. He heard and identified every sound in or outside the house--knew which were natural, and which were not.

He heard the sounds on the roof long before his warning hiss brought Joan upright on the divan. The Afghan's eyes glowed like phosphorus in the shadows and his teeth glimmered dimly in a savage grin. Joan looked at him inquiringly. Her civilized ears heard nothing. But he heard and with his ears followed the sounds accurately and located the place where they halted. Joan heard something then, a faint scratching somewhere in the building, but she did not identify it--as Khoda Khan did--as the forcing of the shutters on the bathroom window.

With a quick reassuring gesture to her, Khoda Khan rose and melted like a slinking leopard into the darkness of the bedroom. She took up a blunt-nosed automatic, with no great conviction of reliance upon it, and groped on the table for a bottle of wine, feeling an intense need of stimulants. She was shaking in every limb and cold sweat was gathering on her flesh. She remembered the cigarettes, but the unbroken seal on the bottle reassured her. Even the wisest have their thoughtless moments. It was not until she had begun to drink that the peculiar flavor made her realize that the man who had shifted the cigarettes might just as easily have taken a bottle of wine and left another in its place, a facsimile that included an unbroken seal. She fell back on the divan, gagging.

Khoda Khan wasted no time, because he heard other sounds, out in the hall. His ears told him, as he crouched by the bathroom door, that the shutters had been forced--done almost in silence, a job that a white man would have made sound like an explosion in an iron foundry--and now the window was being jimmied. Then he heard something stealthy and bulky drop into the room. Then it was that he threw open the door and charged in like a typhoon, his long knife held low.

Enough light filtered into the room from outside to limn a powerful, crouching figure, with dim snarling yellow features. The intruder yelped explosively, started a motion--and then the long Khyber knife, driven by an arm nerved to the fury of the Himalayas, ripped him open from groin to breastbone.

Khoda Khan did not pause. He knew there was only one man in the room, but through the open window he saw a thick rope dangling from above. He sprang forward, grasped it with both hands and heaved backward like a bull. The men on the roof holding it released it to keep from being jerked headlong over the edge, and he tumbled backward, sprawling over the corpse, the loose rope in his hands. He yelped exultantly, then sprang up and glided to the door that opened into the corridor. Unless they had another rope, which was unlikely, the men on the roof were temporarily out of the fight.

He flung open the door and ducked deeply. A hatchet cut a great chip out the jamb, and he stabbed upward once, then sprang over a writhing body into the corridor, jerking a big pistol from its hidden scabbard.

The bright light of the corridor did not blind him. He saw a second hatchet-man crouching by the bedroom door, and a man in the silk robes of a mandarin working at the lock of the drawing room door. He was between them and the stairs. As they wheeled toward him he shot the hatchet-man in the belly. An automatic spat in the hand of the mandarin, and Khoda Khan felt the wind of the bullet. The next instant his own gun roared again and the Manchu staggered, the pistol flying from a hand that was suddenly a dripping red pulp. Then he whipped a long knife from his robes with his left hand and came along the corridor like a hurricane, his eyes glaring and his silk garments whipping about him.

Khoda Khan shot him through the head and the mandarin fell so near his feet that the long knife stuck into the floor and quivered a matter of inches from the Afghan's slipper.

But Khoda Khan paused only long enough to pass his knife through the hatchet-man he had shot in the belly--for his fighting ethics were those of the savage Hills--and then he turned and ran back into the bathroom. He fired a shot through the window, though the men on the roof were making further demonstration, and then ran through the bedroom, snapping on lights as he went.

"I have slain the dogs, sahiba!" he exclaimed. "By Allah, they have tasted lead and steel! Others are on the roof but they are helpless for the moment. But men will come to investigate the shots, that being the custom of the sahibs, so it is expedient that we decide on our further actions, and the proper lies to tell--Allah!"

Joan La Tour stood bolt upright, clutching the back of the divan. Her face was the color of marble, and the expression was rigid too, like a mask of horror carved in stone. Her dilated eyes blazed like weird black fire.

"Allah shield us against Shaitan the Damned!" ejaculated Khoda Khan, making a sign with his fingers that antedated Islam by some thousands of years. "What has happened to you, sahiba?"

He moved toward her, to be met by a scream that sent him cowering back, cold sweat starting out on his flesh.

"Keep back!" she cried in a voice he did not recognize. "You are a demon! You are all demons! I see you! I hear your cloven feet padding in the night! I see your eyes blazing from the shadows! Keep your taloned hands from me! Aie!" Foam flecked her lips as she screamed blasphemies in English and Arabic that made Khoda Khan's hair stand stiffly on end.

"Sahiba!" he begged, trembling like a leaf. "I am no demon! I am Khoda Khan! I--" His outstretched hand touched her, and with an awful shriek she turned and darted for the door, tearing at the bolts. He sprang to stop her, but in her frenzy she was even quicker than he. She whipped the door open, eluded his grasping hand and flew down the corridor, deaf to his anguished yells.

When Harrison left Joan's house, he drove straight to Shan Yang's dive, which, in the heart of River Street, masqueraded as a low-grade drinking joint. It was late. Only a few derelicts huddled about the bar, and he noticed that the barman was a Chinaman that he had never seen before. He stared impassively at Harrison, but jerked a thumb toward the back door, masked by dingy curtains, when the detective asked abruptly: "Johnny Kleck here?"

Harrison passed through the door, traversed a short dimly-lighted hallway and rapped authoritatively on the door at the other end. In the silence he heard rats scampering. A steel disk in the center of the door shifted and a slanted black eye glittered in the opening.

"Open the door, Shan Yang," ordered Harrison impatiently, and the eye was withdrawn, accompanied by the rattling of bolts and chains.

He pushed open the door and entered the room whose illumination was scarcely better than that of the corridor. It was a large, dingy, drab affair, lined with bunks. Fires sputtered in braziers, and Shan Yang was making his way to his accustomed seat behind a low counter near the wall. Harrison spent but a single casual glance on the familiar figure, the well-known dingy silk jacket worked in gilt dragons. Then he strode across the room to a door in the wall opposite the counter to which Shan Yang was making his way. This was an opium joint and Harrison knew it--knew those figures in the bunks were Chinamen sleeping the sleep of the smoke. Why he had not raided it, as he had raided and destroyed other opium-dens, only Harrison could have said. But law-enforcement on River Street is not the orthodox routine it is on Baskerville Avenue, for instance. Harrison's reasons were those of expediency and necessity. Sometimes certain conventions have to be sacrificed for the sake of more important gains--especially when the law-enforcement of a whole district (and in the Oriental quarter) rests on one's shoulders.

A characteristic smell pervaded the dense atmosphere, in spite of the reek of dope and unwashed bodies--the dank odor of the river, which hangs over the River Street dives or wells up from their floors like the black intangible spirit of the quarter itself. Shan Yang's dive, like many others, was built on the very bank of the river. The back room projected out over the water on rotting piles, at which the black river lapped hungrily.

Harrison opened the door, entered and pushed it to behind him, his lips framing a greeting that was never uttered. He stood dumbly, glaring.

He was in a small dingy room, bare except for a crude table and some chairs. An oil lamp on the table cast a smoky light. And in that light he saw Johnny Kleck. The man stood bolt upright against the far wall, his arms spread like a crucifix, rigid, his eyes glassy and staring, his mean, ratty features twisted in a frozen grin. He did not speak, and Harrison's gaze, traveling down him, halted with a shock. Johnny's feet did not touch the floor by several inches--

Harrison's big blue pistol jumped into his hand. Johnny Kleck was dead, that grin was a contortion of horror and agony. He was crucified to the wall by skewer-like dagger blades through his wrists and ankles, his ears spiked to the wall to keep his head upright. But that was not what had killed him. The bosom of Johnny's shirt was charred, and there was a round, blackened hole.

Feeling suddenly sick the detective wheeled, opened the door and stepped back into the larger room. The light seemed dimmer, the smoke thicker than ever. No mumblings came from the bunks; the fires in the braziers burned blue, with weird sputterings. Shan Yang crouched behind the counter. His shoulders moved as if he were tallying beads on an abacus.

"Shan Yang!" the detective's voice grated harshly in the murky silence. "Who's been in that room tonight besides Johnny Kleck?"

The man behind the counter straightened and looked full at him, and Harrison felt his skin crawl. Above the gilt-worked jacket an unfamiliar face returned his gaze. That was no Shan Yang; it was a man he had never seen--it was a Mongol. He started and stared about him as the men in the bunks rose with supple ease. They were not Chinese; they were Mongols to a man, and their slanted black eyes were not clouded by drugs.

With a curse Harrison sprang toward the outer door and with a rush they were on him. His gun crashed and a man staggered in mid-stride. Then the lights went out, the braziers were overturned, and in the stygian blackness hard bodies caromed against the detective. Long-nailed fingers clawed at his throat, thick arms locked about his waist and legs. Somewhere a sibilant voice was hissing orders.

Harrison's mauling left worked like a piston, crushing flesh and bone; his right wielded the gun barrel like a club. He forged toward the unseen door blindly, dragging his assailants by sheer strength. He seemed to be wading through a solid mass, as if the darkness had turned to bone and muscle about him. A knife licked through his coat, stinging his skin, and then he gasped as a silk cord looped about his neck, shutting off his wind, sinking deeper and deeper into the straining flesh. Blindly he jammed the muzzle against the nearest body and pulled the trigger. At the muffled concussion something fell away from him and the strangling agony lessened. Gasping for breath he groped and tore the cord away--then he was borne down under a rush of heavy bodies and something smashed savagely against his head. The darkness exploded in a shower of sparks that were instantly quenched in stygian blackness.

* * * *

The smell of the river was in Steve Harrison's nostrils as he regained his addled senses, river-scent mingled with the odor of stale blood. The blood, he realized, when he had enough sense to realize anything, was clotted on his own scalp. His head swam and he tried to raise a hand to it, thereby discovering that he was bound hand and foot with cords that cut into the flesh. A candle was dazzling his eyes, and for awhile he could see nothing else. Then things began to assume their proper proportions, and objects grew out of nothing and became identifiable.

He was lying on a bare floor of new, unpainted wood, in a large square chamber, the walls of which were of stone, without paint or plaster. The ceiling was likewise of stone, with heavy, bare beams, and there was an open trap door almost directly above him, through which, in spite of the candle, he got a glimpse of stars. Fresh air flowed through that trap, bearing with it the river-smell stronger than ever. The chamber was bare of furniture, the candle stuck in a niche in the wall. Harrison swore, wondering if he was delirious. This was like an experience in a dream, with everything unreal and distorted.

He tried to struggle to a sitting position, but that made his head swim, so that he lay back and swore fervently. He yelled wrathfully, and a face peered down at him through the trap--a square, yellow face with beady slanted eyes. He cursed the face and it mocked him and was withdrawn. The noise of the door softly opening checked Harrison's profanity and he wriggled around to glare at the intruder.

And he glared in silence, feeling an icy prickling up and down his spine. Once before he had lain bound and helpless, staring up at a tall black-robed figure whose yellow eyes glimmered from the shadow of a dusky hood. But that man was dead; Harrison had seen him cut down by the scimitar of a maddened Druse.

"Erlik Khan!" The words were forced out of him. He licked lips suddenly dry.

"Aie!" It was the same ghostly, hollow voice that had chilled him in the old days. "Erlik Khan, the Lord of the Dead."

"Are you a man or a ghost?" demanded Harrison.

"I live."

"But I saw Ali ibn Suleyman kill you!" exclaimed the detective. "He slashed you across the head with a heavy sword that was sharp as a razor. He was a stronger man than I am. He struck with the full power of his arm. Your hood fell in two pieces--"

"And I fell like a dead man in my own blood," finished Erlik Khan. "But the steel cap I wore--as I wear now--under my hood, saved my life as it has more than once. The terrible stroke cracked it across the top and cut my scalp, fracturing my skull and causing concussion of the brain. But I lived, and some of my faithful followers, who escaped the sword of the Druse, carried me down through the subterranean tunnels which led from my house, and so I escaped the burning building. But I lay like a dead man for weeks, and it was not until a very wise man was brought from Mongolia that I recovered my senses, and sanity.

"But now I am ready to take up my work where I left off, though I must rebuild much. Many of my former followers had forgotten my authority. Some required to be taught anew who was master."

"And you've been teaching them," grunted Harrison, recovering his pugnacious composure.

"True. Some examples had to be made. One man fell from a roof, a snake bit another, yet another ran into knives in a dark alley. Then there was another matter. Joan La Tour betrayed me in the old days. She knows too many secrets. She had to die. So that she might taste agony in anticipation, I sent her a page from my book of the dead."

"Your devils killed Kleck," accused Harrison.

"Of course. All wires leading from the girl's apartment house are tapped. I myself heard your conversation with Kleck. That is why you were not attacked when you left the building. I saw that you were playing into my hands. I sent my men to take possession of Shan Yang's dive. He had no more use for his jacket, presently, so one donned it to deceive you. Kleck had somehow learned of my return; these stool pigeons are clever. But he had time to regret. A man dies hard with a white-hot point of iron bored through his breast."

Harrison said nothing and presently the Mongol continued.

"I wrote your name in my book because I recognized you as my most dangerous opponent. It was because of you that Ali ibn Suleyman turned against me.

"I am rebuilding my empire again, but more solidly. First I shall consolidate River Street, and create a political machine to rule the city. The men in office now do not suspect my existence. If all were to die, it would not be hard to find others to fill their places--men who are not indifferent to the clink of gold."

"You're mad," growled Harrison. "Control a whole city government from a dive in River Street?"

"It has been done," answered the Mongol tranquilly. "I will strike like a cobra from the dark. Only the men who obey my agent will live. He will be a white man, a figurehead whom men will think the real power, while I remain unseen. You might have been he, if you had a little more intelligence."

He took a bulky object from under his arm, a thick book with glossy black covers--ebony with green jade hinges. He riffled the night-hued pages and Harrison saw they were covered with crimson characters.

"My book of the dead," said Erlik Khan. "Many names have been crossed out. Many more have been added since I recovered my sanity. Some of them would interest you; they include names of the mayor, the chief of police, district attorney, a number of aldermen."

"That lick must have addled your brains permanently," snarled Harrison. "Do you think you can substitute a whole city government and get away with it?"

"I can and will. These men will die in various ways, and men of my own choice will succeed them in office. Within a year I will hold this city in the palm of my hand, and there will be none to interfere with me."

Lying staring up at the bizarre figure, whose features were, as always, shadowed beyond recognition by the hood, Harrison's flesh crawled with the conviction that the Mongol was indeed mad. His crimson dreams, always ghastly, were too grotesque and incredible for the visions of a wholly sane man. Yet he was dangerous as a maddened cobra. His monstrous plot

must ultimately fail, yet he held the lives of many men in his hand. And Harrison, on whom the city relied for protection from whatever menace the Oriental quarter might spawn, lay bound and helpless before him. The detective cursed in fury.

"Always the man of violence," mocked Erlik Khan, with the suggestion of scorn in his voice. "Barbarian! Who lays his trust in guns and blades, who would check the stride of imperial power with blows of the naked fists! Brainless arm striking blind blows! Well, you have struck your last. Smell the river damp that creeps in through the ceiling? Soon it shall enfold you utterly and your dreams and aspirations will be one with the mist of the river."

"Where are we?" demanded Harrison.

"On an island below the city, where the marshes begin. Once there were warehouses here, and a factory, but they were abandoned as the city grew in the other direction, and have been crumbling into ruin for twenty years. I purchased the entire island through one of my agents, and am rebuilding to suit my own purposes an old stone mansion which stood here before the factory was built. None notices, because my own henchmen are the workmen, and no one ever comes to this marshy island. The house is invisible from the river, hidden as it is among the tangle of old rotting warehouses. You came here in a motorboat which was anchored beneath the rotting wharves behind Shan Yang's dive. Another boat will presently fetch my men who were sent to dispose of Joan La Tour."

"They may not find that so easy," commented the detective.

"Never fear. I know she summoned that hairy wolf, Khoda Khan, to her aid, and it's true that my men failed to slay him before he reached her. But I suppose it was a false sense of trust in the Afghan that caused you to make your appointment with Kleck. I rather expected you to remain with the foolish girl and try to protect her in your way."

Somewhere below them a gong sounded. Erlik Khan did not start, but there was a surprise in the lift of his head. He closed the black book.

"I have wasted enough time on you," he said. "Once before I bade you farewell in one of my dungeons. Then the fanaticism of a crazy Druse saved you. This time there will be no upset of my plans. The only men in this house are Mongols, who know no law but my will. I go, but you will not be lonely. Soon one will come to you."

And with a low, chilling laugh the phantom-like figure moved through the door and disappeared. Outside a lock clicked, and then there was stillness.

The silence was broken suddenly by a muffled scream. It came from somewhere below and was repeated half a dozen times. Harrison shuddered. No one who has ever visited an insane asylum could fail to recognize that sound. It was the shrieking of a mad woman. After these cries the silence seemed even more stifling and menacing.

Harrison swore to quiet his feelings, and again the velvet-capped head of the Mongol leered down at him through the trap.

"Grin, you yellow-bellied ape!" roared Harrison, tugging at his cords until the veins stood out on his temples. "If I could break these damned ropes I'd knock that grin around where your pigtail ought to be, you--" He went into minute details of the Mongol's ancestry, dwelling at length on the more scandalous phases of it, and in the midst of his noisy tirade he saw the leer change suddenly to a startled snarl. The head vanished from the trap and there came a sound like the blow of a butcher's cleaver.

Then another face was poked into the trap--a wild, bearded face, with blazing, bloodshot eyes, and surmounted by a disheveled turban.

"Sahib!" hissed the apparition.

"Khoda Khan!" ejaculated the detective, galvanized. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"Softly!" muttered the Afghan. "Let not the accursed ones hear!"

He tossed the loose end of a rope ladder down through the trap and came down in a rush, his bare feet making no sound as he hit the floor. He held his long knife in his teeth, and blood dripped from the point.

Squatting beside the detective he cut him free with reckless slashes that threatened to slice flesh as well as hemp. The Afghan was quivering with half-controlled passion. His teeth gleamed like a wolf's fangs amidst the tangle of his beard.

Harrison sat up, chafing his swollen wrists.

"Where's Joan? Quick, man, where is she?"

"Here! In this accursed den!"

"But--"

"That was she screaming a few minutes ago," broke in the Afghan, and Harrison's flesh crawled with a vague monstrous premonition.

"But that was a mad woman!" he almost whispered.

"The sahiba is mad," said Khoda Khan somberly. "Hearken, sahib, and then judge if the fault is altogether mine.

"After you left, the accursed ones let down a man from the roof on a rope. Him I knifed, and I slew three more who sought to force the doors. But when I returned to the sahiba, she knew me not. She fled from me into the street, and other devils must have been lurking nearby, because as she ran shrieking along the sidewalk, a big automobile loomed out of the fog and a Mongol stretched forth an arm and dragged her into the car, from under my very fingers. I saw his accursed yellow face by the light of a street lamp.

"Knowing she were better dead by a bullet than in their hands, I emptied my pistol after the car, but it fled like Shaitan the Damned from the face of Allah, and if I hit anyone in it, I know not. Then as I rent my garments and cursed the day of my birth--for I could not pursue it on foot--Allah willed that another automobile should appear. It was driven by a young man in evening clothes, returning from a revel, no doubt, and being cursed with curiosity he slowed down near the curb to observe my grief.

"So, praising Allah, I sprang in beside him and placing my knife point against his ribs bade him go with speed and he obeyed in great fear. The car of the damned ones was out of sight, but presently I glimpsed it again, and exhorted the youth to greater speed, so the machine seemed to fly like the steed of the Prophet. So, presently I saw the car halt at the river bank. I made the youth halt likewise, and he sprang out and fled in the other direction in terror.

"I ran through the darkness, hot for the blood of the accursed ones, but before I could reach the bank I saw four Mongols leave the car, carrying the memsahib who was bound and gagged, and they entered a motorboat and headed out into the river toward an island which lay on the breast of the water like a dark cloud.

"I cast up and down on the shore like a madman, and was about to leap in and swim, though the distance was great, when I came upon a boat chained to a pile, but one driven by oars. I gave praise to Allah and cut the chain with my knife--see the nick in the edge?--and rowed after the accursed ones with great speed.

"They were far ahead of me, but Allah willed it that their engine should sputter and cease when they had almost reached the island. So I took heart, hearing them cursing in their heathen tongue, and hoped to draw alongside and slay them all before they were aware of me. They saw me not in the darkness, nor heard my oars because of their own noises, but before I could reach them the accursed engine began again. So they reached a wharf on the marshy shore ahead of me, but they lingered to make the boat fast, so I was not too far behind them as they bore the memsahib through the shadows of the crumbling shacks which stood all about.

"Then I was hot to overtake and slay them, but before I could come up with them they had reached the door of a great stone house--this one, sahib--set in a tangle of rotting buildings. A steel fence surrounded it, with razor-edged spearheads set along the top but by Allah, that could not hinder a lifter of the Khyber! I went over it without so much as tearing my garments. Inside was a second wall of stone, but it stood in ruins.

"I crouched in the shadows near the house and saw that the windows were heavily barred and the doors strong. Moreover, the lower part of the house is full of armed men. So I climbed a corner of the wall, and it was not easy, but presently I reached the roof which at that part is flat, with a parapet. I expected a watcher, and so there was, but he was too busy taunting his captive to see or hear me until my knife sent him to Hell. Here is his dagger; he bore no gun."

Harrison mechanically took the wicked, lean-bladed poniard.

"But what caused Joan to go mad?"

"Sahib, there was a broken wine bottle on the floor, and a goblet. I had no time to investigate it, but I know that wine must have been poisoned with the juice of the fruit called the black pomegranate. She can not have drunk much, or she would have died frothing and champing like a mad dog. But only a little will rob one of sanity. It grows in the jungles of Indo-China, and white men say it is a lie. But it is no lie; thrice I have seen men die after having drunk its juice, and more than once I have seen men, and women too, turn mad because of it. I have traveled in that hellish country where it grows."

"God!" Harrison's foundations were shaken by nausea. Then his big hands clenched into chunks of iron and baleful fire glimmered in his savage blue eyes. The weakness of horror and revulsion was followed by cold fury dangerous as the blood-hunger of a timber wolf.

"She may be already dead," he muttered thickly. "But dead or alive we'll send Erlik Khan to Hell. Try that door."

It was of heavy teak, braced with bronze straps.

"It is locked," muttered the Afghan. "We will burst it."

He was about to launch his shoulder against it when he stopped short, the long Khyber knife jumping into his fist like a beam of light.

"Someone approaches!" he whispered, and a second later Harrison's more civilized--and therefore duller--ears caught a cat-like tread.

Instantly he acted. He shoved the Afghan behind the door and sat down quickly in the center of the room, wrapped a piece of rope about his ankles and then lay full length, his arms behind and under him. He was lying on the other pieces of severed cord, concealing them, and to the casual glance he resembled a man lying bound hand and foot. The Afghan understood and grinned hugely.

Harrison worked with the celerity of trained mind and muscles that eliminates fumbling delay and bungling. He accomplished his purpose in a matter of seconds and without undue noise. A key grated in the lock as he settled himself, and then the door swung open. A giant Mongol stood limned in the opening. His head was shaven, his square features passionless as the face of a copper idol. In one hand he carried a curiously shaped ebony block, in the other a mace such as was borne by the horsemen of Ghengis Khan--a straight-hafted iron bludgeon with a round head covered with steel points, and a knob on the other end to keep the hand from slipping.

He did not see Khoda Khan because when he threw back the door, the Afghan was hidden behind it. Khoda Khan did not stab him as he entered because the Afghan could not see into the outer corridor, and had no way of knowing how many men were following the first. But the Mongol was alone, and he did not bother to shut the door. He went straight to the man lying on the floor, scowling slightly to see the rope ladder hanging down through the trap, as if it was not usual to leave it that way, but he did not show any suspicion or call to the man on the roof.

He did not examine Harrison's cords. The detective presented the appearance the Mongol had expected, and this fact blunted his faculties as anything taken for granted is likely to do. As he bent down, over his shoulder Harrison saw Khoda Khan glide from behind the door as silently as a panther.

Leaning his mace against his leg, spiked head on the floor, the Mongol grasped Harrison's shirt bosom with one hand, lifted his head and shoulders clear of the floor, while he shoved the block under his head. Like twin striking snakes the detective's hands whipped from behind him and locked on the Mongol's bull throat.

There was no cry; instantly the Mongol's slant eyes distended and his lips parted in a grin of strangulation. With a terrific heave he reared upright, dragging Harrison with him, but not breaking his hold, and the weight of the big American pulled them both down again. Both yellow hands tore frantically at Harrison's iron wrists; then the giant stiffened convulsively and brief agony reddened his black eyes. Khoda Khan had driven his knife between the Mongol's shoulders so that the point cut through the silk over the man's breastbone.

Harrison caught up the mace, grunting with savage satisfaction. It was a weapon more suited to his temperament than the dagger Khoda Khan had given him. No need to ask its use; if he had been bound and alone when the executioner entered, his brains would now have been clotting its spiked ball and the hollowed ebon block which so nicely accommodated a human head. Erlik Khan's executions varied along the whole gamut from the exquisitely subtle to the crudely bestial.

"The door's open," said Harrison. "Let's go!"

There were no keys on the body. Harrison doubted if the key in the door would fit any other in the building, but he locked the door and pocketed the key, hoping that would prevent the body from being soon discovered.

They emerged into a dim-lit corridor which presented the same unfinished appearance as the room they had just left. At the other end stairs wound down into shadowy gloom, and they descended warily, Harrison feeling along the wall to guide his steps. Khoda Khan seemed to see like a cat in the dark; he went down silently and surely. But it was Harrison who discovered the door. His hand, moving along the convex surface, felt the smooth stone give way to wood--a short narrow panel, through which a man could just squeeze. When the wall was covered with tapestry--as he knew it would be when Erlik Khan completed his house--it would be sufficiently hidden for a secret entrance.

Khoda Khan, behind him, was growing impatient at the delay, when somewhere below them both heard a noise simultaneously. It might have been a man ascending the winding stairs and it might not, but Harrison acted instinctively. He pushed and the door opened inward on noiseless oiled springs. A groping foot discovered narrow steps inside. With a whispered word to the Afghan he stepped through and Khoda Khan followed. He pulled the door shut again and they stood in total blackness with a curving wall on either hand. Harrison struck a match and a narrow stairs was revealed, winding down.

"This place must be built like a castle," Harrison muttered, wondering at the thickness of the walls. The match went out and they groped down in darkness too thick for even the Afghan to pierce. And suddenly both halted in their tracks. Harrison estimated that they had reached the level of the second floor, and through the inner wall came the mutter of voices. Harrison groped for another door, or a peep-hole for spying, but he found nothing of the sort. But straining his ear close to the stone, he began to understand what was being said beyond the wall, and a long-drawn hiss between clenched teeth told him that Khoda Khan likewise understood.

The first voice was Erlik Khan's; there was no mistaking that hollow reverberance. It was answered by a piteous, incoherent whimpering that brought sweat suddenly out on Harrison's flesh.

"No," the Mongol was saying. "I have come back, not from Hell as your barbarian superstitions suggest, but from a refuge unknown to your stupid police. I was saved from death by the steel cap I always wear beneath my coif. You are at a loss as to how you got here?"

"I don't understand!" It was the voice of Joan La Tour, half-hysterical, but undeniably sane. "I remember opening a bottle of wine, and as soon as I drank I knew it was drugged. Then everything faded out--I don't remember anything except great black walls, and awful shapes skulking in the darkness. I ran through gigantic shadowy halls for a thousand years--"

"They were hallucinations of madness, of the juice of the black pomegranate," answered Erlik Khan. Khoda Khan was muttering blasphemously in his beard until Harrison admonished him to silence with a fierce dig of his elbow. "If you had drunk more you would have died like a rabid dog. As it was, you went insane. But I knew the antidote--possessed the drug that restored your sanity."

"Why?" the girl whimpered bewilderedly.

"Because I did not wish you to die like a candle blown out in the dark, my beautiful white orchid. I wish you to be fully sane so as to taste to the last dregs the shame and agony of death, subtle and prolonged. For the exquisite, an exquisite death. For the coarse-fibered, the death of an ox, such as I have decreed for your friend Harrison."

"That will be more easily decreed than executed," she retorted with a flash of spirit.

"It is already accomplished," the Mongol asserted imperturbably. "The executioner has gone to him, and by this time Mr. Harrison's head resembles a crushed egg."

"Oh, God!" At the sick grief and pain in that moan Harrison winced and fought a frantic desire to shout out denial and reassurance.

Then she remembered something else to torture her.

"Khoda Khan! What have you done with Khoda Khan?"

The Afghan's fingers clamped like iron on Harrison's arm at the sound of his name.

"When my men brought you away they did not take time to deal with him," replied the Mongol. "They had not expected to take you alive, and when fate cast you into their hands, they came away in haste. He matters little. True, he killed four of my best men, but that was merely the deed of a wolf. He has no mentality. He and the detective are much alike--mere masses of brawn, brainless, helpless against intellect like mine. Presently I shall attend to him. His corpse shall be thrown on a dung-heap with a dead pig."

"Allah!" Harrison felt Khoda Khan trembling with fury. "Liar! I will feed his yellow guts to the rats!"

Only Harrison's grip on his arm kept the maddened Moslem from attacking the stone wall in an effort to burst through to his enemy. The detective was running his hand over the surface, seeking a door, but only blank stone rewarded him. Erlik Khan had not had time to provide his unfinished house with as many secrets as his rat-runs usually possessed.

They heard the Mongol clap his hands authoritatively, and they sensed the entrance of men into the room. Staccato commands followed in Mongolian, there was a sharp cry of pain or fear, and then silence followed the soft closing of a door. Though they could not see, both men knew instinctively that the chamber on the other side of the wall was empty. Harrison almost strangled with a panic of helpless rage. He was penned in these infernal walls and Joan La Tour was being borne away to some abominable doom.

"Wallah!" the Afghan was raving. "They have taken her away to slay her! Her life and our izzat is at stake! By the Prophet's beard and my feet! I will burn this accursed house! I will slake the fire with Mongol blood! In Allah's name, sahib, let us do something!"

"Come on!" snarled Harrison. "There must be another door somewhere!"

Recklessly they plunged down the winding stair, and about the time they had reached the first floor level, Harrison's groping hand felt a door. Even as he found the catch, it moved under his fingers. Their noise must have been heard through the wall, for the panel opened, and a shaven head was poked in, framed in the square of light. The Mongol blinked in the darkness, and Harrison brought the mace down on his head, experiencing a vengeful satisfaction as he felt the skull give way beneath the iron spikes. The man fell face down in the narrow opening and Harrison sprang over his body into the outer room before he took time to learn if there were others. But the chamber was untenanted. It was thickly carpeted, the walls hung with black velvet tapestries. The doors were of bronze-bound teak, with gilt-worked arches. Khoda Khan presented an incongruous contrast, bare-footed, with draggled turban and red-smeared knife.

But Harrison did not pause to philosophize. Ignorant as he was of the house, one way was as good as another. He chose a door at random and flung it open, revealing a wide corridor carpeted and tapestried like the chamber. At the other end, through wide satin curtains that hung from roof to floor, a file of men was just disappearing--tall, black-silk clad Mongols, heads bent somberly, like a train of dusky ghosts. They did not look back.

"Follow them!" snapped Harrison. "They must be headed for the execution--"

Khoda Khan was already sweeping down the corridor like a vengeful whirlwind. The thick carpet deadened their footfalls, so even Harrison's big shoes made no noise. There was a distinct feeling of unreality, running silently down that fantastic hall--it was like a dream in which natural laws are suspended. Even in that moment Harrison had time to reflect that this whole night had been like a nightmare, possible only in the Oriental quarter, its violence and bloodshed like an evil dream. Erlik Khan had loosed the forces of chaos and insanity; murder had gone mad, and its frenzy was imparted to all actions and men caught in its maelstrom.

Khoda Khan would have burst headlong through the curtains--he was already drawing breath for a yell, and lifting his knife--if Harrison had not seized him. The Afghan's sinews were like cords under the detective's hands, and Harrison doubted his own ability to restrain him forcibly, but a vestige of sanity remained to the hillman.

Pushing him back, Harrison gazed between the curtains. There was a great double-valved door there, but it was partly open, and he looked into the room beyond. Khoda Khan's beard was jammed hard against his neck as the Afghan glared over his shoulder.

It was a large chamber, hung like the others with black velvet on which golden dragons writhed. There were thick rugs, and lanterns hanging from the ivory-inlaid ceiling cast a red glow that made for illusion. Black-robed men ranged along the wall might have been shadows but for their glittering eyes.

On a throne-like chair of ebony sat a grim figure, motionless as an image except when its loose robes stirred in the faintly moving air. Harrison felt the short hairs prickle at the back of his neck, just as a dog's hackles rise at the sight of an enemy. Khoda Khan muttered some incoherent blasphemy.

The Mongol's throne was set against a side wall. No one stood near him as he sat in solitary magnificence, like an idol brooding on human doom. In the center of the room stood what looked uncomfortably like a sacrificial altar--a curiously carved block of stone that might have come out of the heart of the Gobi. On that stone lay Joan La Tour, white as a marble statue, her arms outstretched like a crucifix, her hands and feet extending over the edges of the block. Her dilated eyes stared upward as one lost to hope, aware of doom and eager only for death to put an end to agony. The physical torture had not yet begun, but a gaunt half-naked brute squatted on his haunches at the end of the altar, heating the point of a bronze rod in a dish full of glowing coals.

"Damn!" It was half curse, half sob of fury bursting from Harrison's lips. Then he was hurled aside and Khoda Khan burst into the room like a flying dervish, bristling beard, blazing eyes, knife and all. Erlik Khan came erect with a startled guttural as the Afghan came tearing down the room like a headlong hurricane of destruction. The torturer sprang up just in time to meet the yard-long knife lashing down, and it split his skull down through the teeth.

"Aie!" It was a howl from a score of Mongol throats.

"Allaho akabar!" yelled Khoda Khan, whirling the red knife about his head. He threw himself on the altar, slashing at Joan's bonds with a frenzy that threatened to dismember the girl.

Then from all sides the black-robed figures swarmed in, not noticing in their confusion that the Afghan had been followed by another grim figure who came with less abandon but with equal ferocity.

They were aware of Harrison only when he dealt a prodigious sweep of his mace, right and left, bowling men over like ten-pins, and reached the altar through the gap made in the bewildered throng. Khoda Khan had freed the girl and he wheeled, spitting like a cat, his bared teeth gleaming and each hair of his beard stiffly on end.

"Allah!" he yelled--spat in the faces of the oncoming Mongols--crouched as if to spring into the midst of them--then whirled and rushed headlong at the ebony throne.

The speed and unexpectedness of the move were stunning. With a choked cry Erlik Khan fired and missed at point-blank range--and then the breath burst from Khoda Khan in an ear-splitting yell as his knife plunged into the Mongol's breast and the point sprang a hand's breadth out of his black-clad back.

The impetus of his rush unchecked, Khoda Khan hurtled into the falling figure, crashing it back onto the ebony throne which splintered under the impact of the two heavy bodies. Bounding up, wrenching his dripping knife free, Khoda Khan whirled it high and howled like a wolf.

"Ya Allah! Wearer of steel caps! Carry the taste of my knife in your guts to Hell with you!"

There was a long hissing intake of breath as the Mongols stared wide-eyed at the black-robed, red-smeared figure crumpled grotesquely among the ruins of the broken throne; and in the instant that they stood like frozen men, Harrison caught up Joan and ran for the nearest door, bellowing: "Khoda Khan! This way! Quick!"

With a howl and a whickering of blades the Mongols were at his heels. Fear of steel in his back winged Harrison's big feet, and Khoda Khan ran slantingly across the room to meet him at the door.

"Haste, sahib! Down the corridor! I will cover you retreat!"

"No! Take Joan and run!" Harrison literally threw her into the Afghan's arms and wheeled back in the doorway, lifting the mace. He was as berserk in his own way as was Khoda Khan, frantic with the madness that sometimes inspired men in the midst of combat.

The Mongols came on as if they, too, were blood-mad. They jammed the door with square snarling faces and squat silk-clad bodies before he could slam it shut. Knives licked at him, and gripping the mace with both hands he wielded it like a flail, working awful havoc among the shapes that strove in the doorway, wedged by the pressure from behind. The lights, the upturned snarling faces that dissolved in crimson ruin beneath his flailing, all swam in a red mist. He was not aware of his individual identity. He was only a man with a club, transported back fifty thousand years, a hairy-breasted, red-eyed primitive, wholly possessed in the crimson instinct for slaughter.

He felt like howling his incoherent exultation with each swing of his bludgeon that crushed skulls and spattered blood into his face. He did not feel the knives that found him, hardly realizing it when the men facing him gave back, daunted at the havoc he was wreaking. He did not close the door then; it was blocked and choked by a ghastly mass of crushed and red-dripping flesh.

He found himself running down the corridor, his breath coming in great gulping gasps, following some dim instinct of preservation or realization of duty that made itself heard amidst the red dizzy urge to grip his foes and strike, strike, strike, until he was himself engulfed in the crimson waves of death. In such moments the passion to die--die fighting--is almost equal to the will to live.

In a daze, staggering, bumping into walls and caroming off them, he reached the further end of the corridor where Khoda Khan was struggling with a lock. Joan was standing now, though she reeled on her feet, and seemed on the point of collapse. The mob was coming down the long corridor full cry behind them. Drunkenly Harrison thrust Khoda Khan aside and whirling the blood-fouled mace around his head, struck a stupendous blow that shattered the lock, burst the bolts out of their sockets and caved in the heavy panels as if they had been cardboard. The next instant they were through and Khoda Khan slammed the ruins of the door which sagged on its hinges, but somehow held together. There were heavy metal brackets on each jamb, and Khoda Khan found and dropped an iron bar in place just as the mob surged against it.

Through the shattered panels they howled and thrust their knives, but Harrison knew until they hewed away enough wood to enable them to reach in and dislodge it, the bar across the door would hold the splintered barrier in place. Recovering some of his wits, and feeling rather sick, he herded his companions ahead of him with desperate haste. He noticed, briefly, that he was stabbed in the calf, thigh, arm and shoulder. Blood soaked his ribboned shirt and ran down his limbs in streams. The Mongols were hacking at the door, snarling like jackals over carrion.

The apertures were widening, and through then he saw other Mongols running down the corridor with rifles; just as he wondered why they did not shoot through the door, then saw the reason. They were in a chamber which had been converted into a magazine. Cartridge cases were piled high along the wall, and there was at least one box of dynamite. But he looked in vain for rifles or pistols. Evidently they were stored in another part of the building.

Khoda Khan was jerking bolts on an opposite door, but he paused to glare about and yelping "Allah!" he pounced on an open case, snatched something out--wheeled, yelled a curse and threw back his arm, but Harrison grabbed his wrist.

"Don't throw that, you idiot! You'll blow us all to Hell! They're afraid to shoot into this room, but they'll have that door down in a second or so, and finish us with their knives. Help Joan!"

It was a hand grenade Khoda Khan had found--the only one in an otherwise empty case, as a glance assured Harrison. The detective threw the door open, slammed it shut behind them as they plunged out into the starlight, Joan reeling, half carried by the Afghan. They seemed to have emerged at the back of the house. They ran across an open space, hunted creatures looking for a refuge. There was a crumbling stone wall, about breast-high to a man, and they ran through a wide gap in it, only to halt, a groan bursting from Harrison's lips. Thirty steps behind the ruined wall rose the steel fence of which Khoda Khan had spoken, a barrier ten feet high, topped with keen points. The door crashed open behind them and a gun spat venomously. They were in a trap. If they tried to climb the fence the Mongols had but to pick them off like monkeys shot off a ladder.

"Down behind the wall!" snarled Harrison, forcing Joan behind an uncrumbled section of the stone barrier. "We'll make 'em pay for it, before they take us!"

The door was crowded with snarling faces, now leering in triumph. There were rifles in the hands of a dozen. They knew their victims had no firearms, and could not escape, and they themselves could use rifles without fear. Bullets began to splatter on the stone, then with a long-drawn yell Khoda Khan bounded to the top of the wall, ripping out the pin of the hand grenade with his teeth.

"La illaha illulah; Muhammad rassoul ullah!" he yelled, and hurled the bomb--not at the group which howled and ducked, but over their heads, into the magazine!

The next instant a rending crash tore the guts out of the night and a blinding blaze of fire ripped the darkness apart. In that glare Harrison had a glimpse of Khoda Khan, etched against the flame, hurtling backward, arms out-thrown--then there was utter blackness in which roared the thunder of the fall of the house of Erlik Khan as the shattered walls buckled, the beams splintered, the roof fell in and story after story came crashing down on the crumpled foundations.

How long Harrison lay like dead he never knew, blinded, deafened and paralyzed; covered by falling debris. His first realization was that there was something soft under him, something that writhed and whimpered. He had a vague feeling he ought not to hurt this soft something, so he began to shove the broken stones and mortar off him. His arm seemed dead, but eventually he excavated himself and staggered up, looking like a scarecrow in his rags. He groped among the rubble, grasped the girl and pulled her up.

"Joan!" His own voice seemed to come to him from a great distance; he had to shout to make her hear him. Their eardrums had been almost split by the concussion.

"Are you hurt?" He ran his one good hand over her to make sure.

"I don't think so," she faltered dazedly. "What--what happened?"

"Khoda Khan's bomb exploded the dynamite. The house fell in on the Mongols. We were sheltered by that wall; that's all that saved us."

The wall was a shattered heap of broken stone, half covered by rubble--a waste of shattered masonry with broken beams thrust up through the litter, and shards of walls reeling drunkenly. Harrison fingered his broken arm and tried to think, his head swimming.

"Where is Khoda Khan?" cried Joan, seeming finally to shake off her daze.

"I'll look for him." Harrison dreaded what he expected to find. "He was blown off the wall like a straw in a wind."

Stumbling over broken stones and bits of timber, he found the Afghan huddled grotesquely against the steel fence. His fumbling fingers told him of broken bones--but the man was still breathing. Joan came stumbling toward him, to fall beside Khoda Khan and flutter her quick fingers over him, sobbing hysterically.

"He's not like civilized man!" she exclaimed, tears running down her stained, scratched face. "Afghans are harder than cats to kill. If we could get him medical attention he'll live. Listen!" She caught Harrison's arm with galvanized fingers; but he had heard it too--the sputter of a motor that was probably a police launch, coming to investigate the explosion.

Joan was tearing her scanty garments to pieces to staunch the blood that seeped from the Afghan's wounds, when miraculously Khoda Khan's pulped lips moved. Harrison, bending close, caught fragments of words: "The curse of Allah--Chinese dog--swine's flesh--my izzat."

"You needn't worry about your izzat," grunted Harrison, glancing at the ruins which hid the mangled figures that had been Mongolian terrorists. "After this night's work you'll not go to jail--not for all the Chinamen in River Street."

THE END

Contents

SKULL-FACE

by Robert E. Howard

The Face in the Mist

"We are no other than a moving row
Of Magic Shadow-shapes that come and go."
- Omar Khayyam

The horror first took concrete form amid that most unconcrete of all things--a hashish dream. I was off on a timeless, spaceless journey through the strange lands that belong to this state of being, a million miles away from earth and all things earthly; yet I became cognizant that something was reaching across the unknown voids--something that tore ruthlessly at the separating curtains of my illusions and intruded itself into my visions.

I did not exactly return to ordinary waking life, yet I was conscious of a seeing and a recognizing that was unpleasant and seemed out of keeping with the dream I was at that time enjoying. To one who has never known the delights of hashish, my explanation must seem chaotic and impossible. Still, I was aware of a rending of mists and then the Face intruded itself into my sight. I though at first it was merely a skull; then I saw that it was a hideous yellow instead of white, and was endowed with some horrid form of life. Eyes glimmered deep in the sockets and the jaws moved as if in speech. The body, except for the high, thin shoulders, was vague and indistinct, but the hands, which floated in the mists before and below the skull, were horribly vivid and filled me with crawling fears. They were like the hands of a mummy, long, lean and yellow, with knobby joints and cruel curving talons.

Then, to complete the vague horror which was swiftly taking possession of me, a voice spoke--imagine a man so long dead that his vocal organ had grown rusty and unaccustomed to speech. This was the thought which struck me and made my flesh crawl as I listened.

"A strong brute and one who might be useful somehow. See that he is given all the hashish he requires."

Then the face began to recede, even as I sensed that I was the subject of conversation, and the mists billowed and began to close again. Yet for a single instant a scene stood out with startling clarity. I gasped--or sought to. For over the high, strange shoulder of the apparition another face stood out clearly for an instant, as if the owner peered at me. Red lips, half-parted, long dark eyelashes, shading vivid eyes, a shimmery cloud of hair. Over the shoulder of Horror, breathtaking beauty for an instant looked at me.

The Hashish Slave

"Up from Earth's center through the Seventh Gate
I rose, and on the Throne of Saturn sate."
- Omar Khayyam

My dream of the skull-face was borne over that usually uncrossable gap that lies between hashish enchantment and humdrum reality. I sat cross-legged on a mat in Yun Shatu's Temple of Dreams and gathered the fading forces of my decaying brain to the task of remembering events and faces.

This last dream was so entirely different from any I had ever had before, that my waning interest was roused to the point of inquiring as to its origin. When I first began to experiment with hashish, I sought to find a physical or psychic basis for the wild flights of illusion pertaining thereto, but of late I had been content to enjoy without seeking cause and effect.

Whence this unaccountable sensation of familiarity in regard to that vision? I took my throbbing head between my hands and laboriously sought a clue. A living dead man and a girl of rare beauty who had looked over his shoulder. Then I remembered.

Back in the fog of days and nights which veils a hashish addict's memory, my money had given out. It seemed years or possibly centuries, but my stagnant reason told me that it had probably been only a few days. At any rate, I had presented myself at Yun Shatu's sordid dive as usual and had been thrown out by the great Negro Hassim when it was learned I had no more money.

My universe crashing to pieces about me, and my nerves humming like taut piano wires for the vital need that was mine, I crouched in the gutter and gibbered bestially, till Hassim swaggered out and stilled my yammerings with a blow that felled me, half-stunned.

Then as I presently rose, staggeringly and with no thought save of the river which flowed with cool murmur so near me--as I rose, a light hand was laid like the touch of a rose on my arm. I turned with a frightened start, and stood spellbound before the vision of loveliness which met my gaze. Dark eyes limpid with pity surveyed me and the little hand on my ragged sleeve drew me toward the door of the Dream Temple. I shrank back, but a low voice, soft and musical, urged me, and filled with a trust that was strange, I shambled along with my beautiful guide.

At the door Hassim met us, cruel hands lifted and a dark scowl on his ape-like brow, but as I cowered there, expecting a blow, he halted before the girl's upraised hand and her word of command which had taken on an imperious note.

I did not understand what she said, but I saw dimly, as in a fog, that she gave the black man money, and she led me to a couch where she had me recline and arranged the cushions as if I were king of Egypt instead of a ragged, dirty renegade who lived only for hashish. Her slim hand was cool on my brow for a moment, and then she was gone and Yussef Ali came bearing the stuff for which my very soul shrieked--and soon I was wandering again through those strange and exotic countries that only a hashish slave knows.

Now as I sat on the mat and pondered the dream of the skull-face I wondered more. Since the unknown girl had led me back into the dive, I had come and gone as before, when I had plenty of money to pay Yun Shatu. Someone certainly was paying him for me, and while my subconscious mind had told me it was the girl, my rusty brain had failed to grasp the fact entirely, or to wonder why. What need of wondering? So someone paid and the vivid-hued dreams continued, what cared I? But now I wondered. For the girl who had protected me from Hassim and had brought the hashish for me was the same girl I had seen in the skull-face dream.

Through the soddenness of my degradation the lure of her struck like a knife piercing my heart and strangely revived the memories of the days when I was a man like other men--not yet a sullen, cringing slave of dreams. Far and dim they were, shimmery islands in the mist of years--and what a dark sea lay between!

I looked at my ragged sleeve and the dirty, claw-like hand protruding from it; I gazed through the hanging smoke which fogged the sordid room, at the low bunks along the wall whereon lay the blankly staring dreamers--slaves, like me, of hashish or of opium. I gazed at the slippered Chinamen gliding softly to and fro bearing pipes or roasting balls of concentrated purgatory over tiny flickering fires. I gazed at Hassim standing, arms folded, beside the door like a great statue of black basalt.

And I shuddered and hid my face in my hands because with the faint dawning of returning manhood, I knew that this last and most cruel dream was futile--I had crossed an ocean over which I could never return, had cut myself off from the world of normal men or women. Naught remained now but to drown this dream as I had drowned all my others--swiftly and with hope that I should soon attain that Ultimate Ocean which lies beyond all dreams.

So these fleeting moments of lucidity, of longing, that tear aside the veils of all dope slaves--unexplainable, without hope of attainment.

So I went back to my empty dreams, to my phantasmagoria of illusions; but sometimes, like a sword cleaving a mist, through the high lands and the low lands and seas of my visions floated, like half-forgotten music, the sheen of dark eyes and shimmery hair.

You ask how I, Stephen Costigan, American and a man of some attainments and culture, came to lie in a filthy dive of London's Limehouse? The answer is simple--no jaded debauchee, I, seeking new sensations in the mysteries of the Orient. I answer--Argonne! Heavens, what deeps and heights of horror lurk in that one word alone! Shell-shocked--shell-torn. Endless days and nights without end and roaring red hell over No Man's Land where I lay shot and bayoneted to shreds of gory flesh. My body recovered, how I know not; my mind never did.

And the leaping fires and shifting shadows in my tortured brain drove me down and down, along the stairs of degradation, uncaring until at last I found surcease in Yun Shatu's Temple of Dreams, where I slew my red dreams in other dreams--the dreams of hashish whereby a man may descend to the lower pits of the reddest hells or soar into those unnamable heights where the stars are diamond pinpoints beneath his feet.

Not the visions of the sot, the beast, were mine. I attained the unattainable, stood face to face with the unknown and in cosmic calmness knew the unguessable. And was content after a fashion, until the sight of burnished hair and scarlet lips swept away my dream-built universe and left me shuddering among its ruins.

* * *

The Master of Doom

"And He that toss'd you down into the Field,
He knows about it all--He knows! He knows!"
- Omar Khayyam

A hand shook me roughly as I emerged languidly from my latest debauch.

"The Master wishes you! Up, swine!"

Hassim it was who shook me and who spoke.

"To Hell with the Master!" I answered, for I hated Hassim--and feared him.

"Up with you or you get no more hashish," was the brutal response, and I rose in trembling haste.

I followed the huge black man and he led the way to the rear of the building, stepping in and out among the wretched dreamers on the floor.

"Muster all hands on deck!" droned a sailor in a bunk. "All hands!"

Hassim flung open the door at the rear and motioned me to enter. I had never before passed through that door and had supposed it led into Yun Shatu's private quarters. But it was furnished only with a cot, a bronze idol of some sort before which incense burned, and a heavy table.

Hassim gave me a sinister glance and seized the table as if to spin it about. It turned as if it stood on a revolving platform and a section of the floor turned with it, revealing a hidden doorway in the floor. Steps led downward in the darkness.

Hassim lighted a candle and with a brusque gesture invited me to descend. I did so, with the sluggish obedience of the dope addict, and he followed, closing the door above us by means of an iron lever fastened to the underside of the floor. In the semi-darkness we went down the rickety steps, some nine or ten I should say, and then came upon a narrow corridor.

Here Hassim again took the lead, holding the candle high in front of him. I could scarcely see the sides of this cave-like passageway but knew that it was not wide. The flickering light showed it to be bare of any sort of furnishings save for a number of strange-looking chests which lined the walls--receptacles containing opium and other dope, I thought.

A continuous scurrying and the occasional glint of small red eyes haunted the shadows, betraying the presence of vast numbers of the great rats which infest the Thames waterfront of that section.

Then more steps loomed out of the dark in front of us as the corridor came to an abrupt end. Hassim led the way up and at the top knocked four times against what seemed the underside of a floor. A hidden door opened and a flood of soft, illusive light streamed through.

Hassim hustled me up roughly and I stood blinking in such a setting as I had never seen in my wildest flights of vision. I stood in a jungle of palm trees through which wriggled a million vivid-hued dragons! Then, as my startled eyes became accustomed to the light, I saw that I had not been suddenly transferred to some other planet, as I had at first thought. The palm trees were there, and the dragons, but the trees were artificial and stood in great pots and the dragons writhed across heavy tapestries which hid the walls.

The room itself was a monstrous affair--inhumanly large, it seemed to me. A thick smoke, yellowish and tropical in suggestion, seemed to hang over all, veiling the ceiling and baffling upward glances. This smoke, I saw, emanated from an altar in front of the wall to my left. I started. Through the saffron-billowing fog two eyes, hideously large and vivid, glittered at me. The vague outlines of some bestial idol took indistinct shape. I flung an uneasy glance about, marking the oriental divans and couches and the bizarre furnishings, and then my eyes halted and rested on a lacquer screen just in front of me.

I could not pierce it and no sound came from beyond it, yet I felt eyes searing into my consciousness through it, eyes that burned through my very soul. A strange aura of evil flowed from that strange screen with its weird carvings and unholy decorations.

Hassim salaamed profoundly before it and then, without speaking, stepped back and folded his arms, statue-like.

A voice suddenly broke the heavy and oppressive silence.

"You who are a swine, would you like to be a man again?"

I started. The tone was inhuman, cold--more, there was a suggestion of long disuse of the vocal organs--the voice I had heard in my dream!

"Yes," I replied, trance-like, "I would like to be a man again."

Silence ensued for a space; then the voice came again with a sinister whispering undertone at the back of its sound like bats flying through a cavern.

"I shall make you a man again because I am a friend to all broken men. Not for a price shall I do it, nor for gratitude. And I give you a sign to seal my promise and my vow. Thrust your hand through the screen."

At these strange and almost unintelligible words I stood perplexed, and then, as the unseen voice repeated the last command, I stepped forward and thrust my hand through a slit which opened silently in the screen. I felt my wrist seized in an iron grip and something seven times colder than ice touched the inside of my hand. Then my wrist was released, and drawing forth my hand I saw a strange symbol traced in blue close to the base of my thumb--a thing like a scorpion.

The voice spoke again in a sibilant language I did not understand, and Hassim stepped forward deferentially. He reached about the screen and then turned to me, holding a goblet of some amber-colored liquid which he proffered me with an ironical bow. I took it hesitatingly.

"Drink and fear not," said the unseen voice. "It is only an Egyptian wine with life-giving qualities."

So I raised the goblet and emptied it; the taste was not unpleasant, and even as I handed the beaker to Hassim again, I seemed to feel new life and vigor whip along my jaded veins.

"Remain at Yun Shatu's house," said the voice. "You will be given food and a bed until you are strong enough to work for yourself. You will use no hashish nor will you require any. Go!"

As in a daze, I followed Hassim back through the hidden door, down the steps, along the dark corridor and up through the other door that let us into the Temple of Dreams.

As we stepped from the rear chamber into the main room of the dreamers, I turned to the Negro wonderingly.

"Master? Master of what? Of Life?"

Hassim laughed, fiercely and sardonically.

"Master of Doom!"

* * *

The Spider and the Fly

"There was the Door to which I found no Key;
There was the Veil through which I might not see."
- Omar Khayyam

I sat on Yun Shatu's cushions and pondered with a clearness of mind new and strange to me. As for that, all my sensations were new and strange. I felt as if I had wakened from a monstrously long sleep, and though my thoughts were sluggish, I felt as though the cobwebs which had dogged them for so long had been partly brushed away.

I drew my hand across my brow, noting how it trembled. I was weak and shaky and felt the stirrings of hunger--not for dope but for food. What had been in the draft I had quenched in the chamber of mystery? And why had the "Master" chosen me, out of all the other wretches of Yun Shatu's, for regeneration?

And who was this Master? Somehow the word sounded vaguely familiar--I sought laboriously to remember. Yes--I had heard it, lying half-waking in the bunks or on the floor--whispered sibilantly by Yun Shatu or by Hassim or by Yussef Ali, the Moor, muttered in their low-voiced conversations and mingled always with words I could not understand. Was not Yun Shatu, then, master of the Temple of Dreams? I had thought and the other addicts thought that the withered Chinaman held undisputed sway over this drab kingdom and that Hassim and Yussef Ali were his servants. And the four China boys who roasted opium with Yun Shatu and Yar Khan the Afghan and Santiago the Haitian and Ganra Singh, the renegade Sikh--all in the pay of Yun Shatu, we supposed--bound to the opium lord by bonds of gold or fear.

For Yun Shatu was a power in London's Chinatown and I had heard that his tentacles reached across the seas into high places of mighty and mysterious tongs. Was that Yun Shatu behind the lacquer screen? No; I knew the Chinaman's voice and besides I had seen him puttering about in the front of the Temple just as I went through the back door.

Another thought came to me. Often, lying half-torpid, in the late hours of night or in the early grayness of dawn, I had seen men and women steal into the Temple, whose dress and bearing were strangely out of place and incongruous. Tall, erect men, often in evening dress, with their hats drawn low about their brows, and fine ladies, veiled, in silks and furs. Never two of them came together, but always they came separately and, hiding their features, hurried to the rear door, where they entered and presently came forth again, hours later sometimes. Knowing that the lust for dope finds resting-place in high positions sometimes, I had never wondered overmuch, supposing that these were wealthy men and women of society who had fallen victims to the craving, and that somewhere in the back of the building there was a private chamber for such. Yet now I wondered--sometimes these persons had remained only a few moments--was it always opium for which they came, or did they, too, traverse that strange corridor and converse with the One behind the screen?

My mind dallied with the idea of a great specialist to whom came all classes of people to find surcease from the dope habit. Yet it was strange that such a one should select a dope-joint from which to work--strange, too, that the owner of that house should apparently look on him with so much reverence.

I gave it up as my head began to hurt with the unwonted effort of thinking, and shouted for food. Yussef Ali brought it to me on a tray, with a promptness which was surprizing. More, he salaamed as he departed, leaving me to ruminate on the strange shift of my status in the Temple of Dreams.

I ate, wondering what the One of the screen wanted with me. Not for an instant did I suppose that his actions had been prompted by the reasons he pretended; the life of the underworld had taught me that none of its denizens leaned toward philanthropy. And underworld the chamber of mystery had been, in spite of its elaborate and bizarre nature. And where could it be located? How far had I walked along the corridor? I shrugged my shoulders, wondering if it were not all a hashish-induced dream; then my eye fell upon my hand--and the scorpion traced thereon.

"Muster all hands!" droned the sailor in the bunk. "All hands!"

To tell in detail of the next few days would be boresome to any who have not tasted the dire slavery of dope. I waited for the craving to strike me again--waited with sure sardonic hopelessness. All day, all night--another day--then the miracle was forced upon my doubting brain. Contrary to all theories and supposed facts of science and common sense the craving had left me as suddenly and completely as a bad dream! At first I could not credit my senses but believed myself to be still in the grip of a dope nightmare. But it was true. From the time I quaffed the goblet in the room of mystery, I felt not the slightest desire for the stuff which had been life itself to me. This, I felt vaguely, was somehow unholy and certainly opposed to all rules of nature. If the dread being behind the screen had discovered the secret of breaking hashish's terrible power, what other monstrous secrets had he discovered and what unthinkable dominance was his? The suggestion of evil crawled serpent-like through my mind.

I remained at Yun Shatu's house, lounging in a bunk or on cushions spread upon the floor, eating and drinking at will, but now that I was becoming a normal man again, the atmosphere became most revolting to me and the sight of the wretches writhing in their dreams reminded me unpleasantly of what I myself had been, and it repelled, nauseated me.

So one day, when no one was watching me, I rose and went out on the street and walked along the waterfront. The air, burdened though it was with smoke and foul scents, filled my lungs with strange freshness and aroused new vigor in what had once been a powerful frame. I took new interest in the sounds of men living and working, and the sight of a vessel being unloaded at one of the wharfs actually thrilled me. The force of longshoremen was short, and presently I found myself heaving and lifting and carrying, and though the sweat coursed down my brow and my limbs trembled at the effort, I exulted in the thought that at last I was able to labor for myself again, no matter how low or drab the work might be.

As I returned to the door of Yun Shatu's that evening--hideously weary but with the renewed feeling of manhood that comes of honest toil--Hassim met me at the door.

"You been where?" he demanded roughly.

"I've been working on the docks," I answered shortly.

"You don't need to work on docks," he snarled. "The Master got work for you."

He led the way, and again I traversed the dark stairs and the corridor under the earth. This time my faculties were alert and I decided that the passageway could not be over thirty or forty feet in length. Again I stood before the lacquer screen and again I heard the inhuman voice of living death.

"I can give you work," said the voice. "Are you willing to work for me?"

I quickly assented. After all, in spite of the fear which the voice inspired, I was deeply indebted to the owner.

"Good. Take these."

As I started toward the screen a sharp command halted me and Hassim stepped forward and reaching behind took what was offered. This was a bundle of pictures and papers, apparently.

"Study these," said the One behind the screen, "and learn all you can about the man portrayed thereby. Yun Shatu will give you money; buy yourself such clothes as seamen wear and take a room at the front of the Temple. At the end of two days, Hassim will bring you to me again. Go!"

The last impression I had, as the hidden door closed above me, was that the eyes of the idol, blinking through the everlasting smoke, leered mockingly at me.

The front of the Temple of Dreams consisted of rooms for rent, masking the true purpose of the building under the guise of a waterfront boarding house. The police had made several visits to Yun Shatu but had never got any incriminating evidence against him.

So in one of these rooms I took up my abode and set to work studying the material given me.

The pictures were all of one man, a large man, not unlike me in build and general facial outline, except that he wore a heavy beard and was inclined to blondness whereas I am dark. The name, as written on the accompanying papers, was Major Fairlan Morley, special commissioner to Natal and the Transvaal. This office and title were new to me and I wondered at the connection between an African commissioner and an opium house on the Thames waterfront.

The papers consisted of extensive data evidently copied from authentic sources and all dealing with Major Morley, and a number of private documents considerably illuminating on the major's private life.

An exhaustive description was given of the man's personal appearance and habits, some of which seemed very trivial to me. I wondered what the purpose could be, and how the One behind the screen had come in possession of papers of such intimate nature.

I could find no clue in answer to this question but bent all my energies to the task set out for me. I owed a deep debt of gratitude to the unknown man who required this of me and I was determined to repay him to the best of my ability. Nothing, at this time, suggested a snare to me.

* * *

The Man on the Couch

"What dam of lances sent thee forth to jest at dawn with Death?"
- Kipling

At the expiration of two days, Hassim beckoned me as I stood in the opium room. I advanced with a springy, resilient tread, secure in the confidence that I had culled the Morley papers of all their worth. I was a new man; my mental swiftness and physical readiness surprized me--sometimes it seemed unnatural.

Hassim eyed me through narrowed lids and motioned me to follow, as usual. As we crossed the room, my gaze fell upon a man who lay on a couch close to the wall, smoking opium. There was nothing at all suspicious about his ragged, unkempt clothes, his dirty, bearded face or the blank stare, but my eyes, sharpened to an abnormal point, seemed to sense a certain incongruity in the clean-cut limbs which not even the slouchy garments could efface.

Hassim spoke impatiently and I turned away. We entered the rear room, and as he shut the door and turned to the table, it moved of itself and a figure bulked up through the hidden doorway. The Sikh, Ganra Singh, a lean sinister-eyed giant, emerged and proceeded to the door opening into the opium room, where he halted until we should have descended and closed the secret doorway.

Again I stood amid the billowing yellow smoke and listened to the hidden voice.

"Do you think you know enough about Major Morley to impersonate him successfully?"

Startled, I answered, "No doubt I could, unless I met someone who was intimate with him."

"I will take care of that. Follow me closely. Tomorrow you sail on the first boat for Calais. There you will meet an agent of mine who will accost you the instant you step upon the wharfs, and give you further instructions. You will sail second class and avoid all conversation with strangers or anyone. Take the papers with you. The agent will aid you in making up and your masquerade will start in Calais. That is all. Go!"

I departed, my wonder growing. All this rigmarole evidently had a meaning, but one which I could not fathom. Back in the opium room Hassim bade me be seated on some cushions to await his return. To my question he snarled that he was going forth as he had been ordered, to buy me a ticket on the Channel boat. He departed and I sat down, leaning my back against the wall. As I ruminated, it seemed suddenly that eyes were fixed on me so intensely as to disturb my sub-mind. I glanced up quickly but no one seemed to be looking at me. The smoke drifted through the hot atmosphere as usual; Yussef Ali and the Chinese glided back and forth tending to the wants of the sleepers.

Suddenly the door to the rear room opened and a strange and hideous figure came haltingly out. Not all of those who found entrance to Yun Shatu's back room were aristocrats and society members. This was one of the exceptions, and one whom I remembered as having often entered and emerged therefrom. A tall, gaunt figure, shapeless and ragged wrappings and nondescript garments, face entirely hidden. Better that the face be hidden, I thought, for without doubt the wrapping concealed a grisly sight. The man was a leper, who had somehow managed to escape the attention of the public guardians and who was occasionally seen haunting the lower and more mysterious regions of East End--a mystery even to the lowest denizens of Limehouse.

Suddenly my supersensitive mind was aware of a swift tension in the air. The leper hobbled out the door, closed it behind him. My eyes instinctively sought the couch whereon lay the man who had aroused my suspicions earlier in the day. I could have sworn that cold steely eyes glared menacingly before they flickered shut. I crossed to the couch in one stride and bent over the prostrate man. Something about his face seemed unnatural--a healthy bronze seemed to underlie the pallor of complexion.

"Yun Shatu!" I shouted. "A spy is in the house!"

Things happened then with bewildering speed. The man on the couch with one tigerish movement leaped erect and a revolver gleamed in his hand. One sinewy arm flung me aside as I sought to grapple with him and a sharp decisive voice sounded over the babble which broke forth.

"You there! Halt! Halt!"

The pistol in the stranger's hand was leveled at the leper, who was making for the door in long strides!

All about was confusion; Yun Shatu was shrieking volubly in Chinese and the four China boys and Yussef Ali were rushing in from all sides, knives glittering in their hands.

All this I saw with unnatural clearness even as I marked the stranger's face. As the fleeing leper gave no evidence of halting, I saw the eyes harden to steely points of determination, sighting along the pistol barrel--the features set with the grim purpose of the slayer. The leper was almost to the outer door, but death would strike him down ere he could reach it.

And then, just as the finger of the stranger tightened on the trigger, I hurled myself forward and my right fist crashed against his chin. He went down as though struck by a trip-hammer, the revolver exploding harmlessly in the air.

In that instant, with the blinding flare of light that sometimes comes to one, I knew that the leper was none other than the Man Behind the Screen!

I bent over the fallen man, who though not entirely senseless had been rendered temporarily helpless by that terrific blow. He was struggling dazedly to rise but I shoved him roughly down again and seizing the false beard he wore, tore it away. A lean bronzed face was revealed, the strong lines of which not even the artificial dirt and grease-paint could alter.

Yussef Ali leaned above him now, dagger in hand, eyes slits of murder. The brown sinewy hand went up--I caught the wrist.

"Not so fast, you black devil! What are you about to do?"

"This is John Gordon," he hissed, "the Master's greatest foe! He must die, curse you!"

John Gordon! The name was familiar somehow, and yet I did not seem to connect it with the London police nor account for the man's presence in Yun Shatu's dope-joint. However, on one point I was determined.

"You don't kill him, at any rate. Up with you!" This last to Gordon, who with my aid staggered up, still very dizzy.

"That punch would have dropped a bull," I said in wonderment; "I didn't know I had it in me."

The false leper had vanished. Yun Shatu stood gazing at me as immobile as an idol, hands in his wide sleeves, and Yussef Ali stood back, muttering murderously and thumbing his dagger edge, as I led Gordon out of the opium room and through the innocent-appearing bar which lay between that room and the street.

Out in the street I said to him: "I have no idea as to who you are or what you are doing here, but you see what an unhealthful place it is for you. Hereafter be advised by me and stay away."

His only answer was a searching glance, and then be turned and walked swiftly though somewhat unsteadily up the street.

* * *

The Dream Girl

"I have reached these lands but newly
From an ultimate dim Thule."

- Poe

Outside my room sounded a light footstep. The doorknob turned cautiously and slowly; the door opened. I sprang erect with a gasp. Red lips, half-parted, dark eyes like limpid seas of wonder, a mass of shimmering hair--framed in my drab doorway stood the girl of my dreams!

She entered, and half-turning with a sinuous motion, closed the door. I sprang forward, my hands outstretched, then halted as she put a finger to her lips.

"You must not talk loudly," she almost whispered. "He did not say I could not come; yet--"

Her voice was soft and musical, with just a touch of foreign accent which I found delightful. As for the girl herself, every intonation, every movement proclaimed the Orient. She was a fragrant breath from the East. From her night-black hair, piled high above her alabaster forehead, to her little feet, encased in high-heeled pointed slippers, she portrayed the highest ideal of Asiatic loveliness--an effect which was heightened rather than lessened by the English blouse and skirt which she wore.

"You are beautiful!" I said dazedly. "Who are you?"

"I am Zuleika," she answered with a shy smile. "I--I am glad you like me. I am glad you no longer dream hashish dreams."

Strange that so small a thing should set my heart to leaping wildly!

"I owe it all to you, Zuleika," I said huskily. "Had not I dreamed of you every hour since you first lifted me from the gutter, I had lacked the power of even hoping to be freed from my curse."

She blushed prettily and intertwined her white fingers as if in nervousness.

"You leave England tomorrow?" she said suddenly.

"Yes. Hassim has not returned with my ticket--" I hesitated suddenly, remembering the command of silence.

"Yes, I know, I know!" she whispered swiftly, her eyes widening. "And John Gordon has been here! He saw you!"

"Yes!"

She came close to me with a quick lithe movement.

"You are to impersonate some man! Listen, while you are doing this, you must not ever let Gordon see you! He would know you, no matter what your disguise! He is a terrible man!"

"I don't understand," I said, completely bewildered. "How did the Master break me of my hashish craving? Who is this Gordon and why did he come here? Why does the Master go disguised as a leper--and who is he? Above all, why am I to impersonate a man I never saw or heard of?"

"I cannot--I dare not tell you!" she whispered, her face paling. "I--"

Somewhere in the house sounded the faint tones of a Chinese gong. The girl started like a frightened gazelle.

"I must go! He summons me!"

She opened the door, darted through, halted a moment to electrify me with her passionate exclamation: "Oh, be careful, be very careful, sahib!"

Then she was gone.

* * *

The Man of the Skull

"What the hammer? What the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?"

- Blake

A while after my beautiful and mysterious visitor had left, I sat in meditation. I believed that I had at last stumbled onto an explanation of a part of the enigma, at any rate. This was the conclusion I had reached: Yun Shatu, the opium lord, was simply the agent or servant of some organization or individual whose work was on a far larger scale than merely supplying dope addicts in the Temple of Dreams. This man or these men needed co-workers among all classes of people; in other words, I was being let in with a group of opium smugglers on a gigantic scale. Gordon no doubt had been investigating the case, and his presence alone showed that it was no ordinary one, for I knew that he held a high position with the English government, though just what, I did not know.

Opium or not, I determined to carry out my obligation to the Master. My moral sense had been blunted by the dark ways I had traveled, and the thought of despicable crime did not enter my head. I was indeed hardened. More, the mere debt of gratitude was increased a thousand-fold by the thought of the girl. To the Master I owed it that I was able to stand up on my feet and look into her clear eyes as a man should. So if he wished my services as a smuggler of dope, he should have them. No doubt I was to impersonate some man so high in governmental esteem that the usual actions of the customs officers would be deemed unnecessary; was I to bring some rare dream-producer into England?

These thoughts were in my mind as I went downstairs, but ever back of them hovered other and more alluring suppositions--what was the reason for the girl, here in this vile dive--a rose in a garbage-heap--and who was she?

As I entered the outer bar, Hassim came in, his brows set in a dark scowl of anger, and, I believed, fear. He carried a newspaper in his hand, folded.

"I told you to wait in opium room," he snarled.

"You were gone so long that I went up to my room. Have you the ticket?"

He merely grunted and pushed on past me into the opium room, and standing at the door I saw him cross the floor and disappear into the rear room. I stood there, my bewilderment increasing. For as Hassim had brushed past me, I had noted an item on the face of the paper, against which his black thumb was tightly pressed as if to mark that special column of news.

And with the unnatural celerity of action and judgment which seemed to be mine those days, I had in that fleeting instant read:

African Special Commissioner Found Murdered!

The body of Major Fairlan Morley was yesterday discovered in a rotting ship's hold at Bordeaux...

No more I saw of the details, but that alone was enough to make me think! The affair seemed to be taking on an ugly aspect. Yet--

Another day passed. To my inquiries, Hassim snarled that the plans had been changed and I was not to go to France. Then, late in the evening, he came to bid me once more to the room of mystery.

I stood before the lacquer screen, the yellow smoke acrid in my nostrils, the woven dragons writhing along the tapestries, the palm trees rearing thick and oppressive.

"A change has come in our plans," said the hidden voice. "You will not sail as was decided before. But I have other work that you may do. Mayhap this will be more to your type of usefulness, for I admit you have somewhat disappointed me in regard to subtlety. You interfered the other day in such manner as will no doubt cause me great inconvenience in the future."

I said nothing, but a feeling of resentment began to stir in me.

"Even after the assurance of one of my most trusted servants," the toneless voice continued, with no mark of any emotion save a slightly rising note, "you insisted on releasing my most deadly enemy. Be more circumspect in the future."

"I saved your life!" I said angrily.

"And for that reason alone I overlook your mistake--this time!"

A slow fury suddenly surged up in me.

"This time! Make the best of it this time, for I assure you there will be no next time. I owe you a greater debt than I can ever hope to pay, but that does not make me your slave. I have saved your life--the debt is as near paid as a man can pay it. Go your way and I go mine!"

A low, hideous laugh answered me, like a reptilian hiss.

"You fool! You will pay with your whole life's toil! You say you are not my slave? I say you are--just as black Hassim there beside you is my slave--just as the girl Zuleika is my slave, who has bewitched you with her beauty."

These words sent a wave of hot blood to my brain and I was conscious of a flood of fury which completely engulfed my reason for a second. Just as all my moods and senses seemed sharpened and exaggerated those days, so now this burst of rage transcended every moment of anger I had ever had before.

"Hell's fiends!" I shrieked. "You devil--who are you and what is your hold on me? I'll see you or die!"

Hassim sprang at me, but I hurled him backward and with one stride reached the screen and flung it aside with an incredible effort of strength. Then I shrank back, hands outflung, shrieking. A tall, gaunt figure stood before me, a figure arrayed grotesquely in a silk brocaded gown which fell to the floor.

From the sleeves of this gown protruded hands which filled me with crawling horror--long, predatory hands, with thin bony fingers and curved talons--withered skin of a parchment brownish-yellow, like the hands of a man long dead.

The hands--but, oh God, the face! A skull to which no vestige of flesh seemed to remain but on which taut brownish-yellow skin grew fast, etching out every detail of that terrible death's-head. The forehead was high and in a way magnificent, but the head was curiously narrow through the temples, and from under penthouse brows great eyes glimmered like pools of yellow fire. The nose was high-bridged and very thin; the mouth was a mere colorless gash between thin, cruel lips. A long, bony neck supported this frightful vision and completed the effect of a reptilian demon from some medieval hell.

I was face to face with the skull-faced man of my dreams!

* * *

Black Wisdom

"By thought a crawling ruin,
By life a leaping mire.
By a broken heart in the breast of the world
And the end of the world's desire."

- Chesterton

The terrible spectacle drove for the instant all thought of rebellion from my mind. My very blood froze in my veins and I stood motionless. I heard Hassim laugh grimly behind me. The eyes in the cadaverous face blazed fiendishly at me and I blanched from the concentrated satanic fury in them.

Then the horror laughed sibilantly.

"I do you a great honor, Mr. Costigan; among a very few, even of my own servants, you may say that you saw my face and lived. I think you will be more useful to me living than dead."

I was silent, completely unnerved. It was difficult to believe that this man lived, for his appearance certainly belied the thought. He seemed horribly like a mummy. Yet his lips moved when he spoke and his eyes flamed with hideous life.

"You will do as I say," he said abruptly, and his voice had taken on a note of command. "You doubtless know, or know of, Sir Haldred Frenton?"

"Yes."

Every man of culture in Europe and America was familiar with the travel books of Sir Haldred Frenton, author and soldier of fortune.

"You will go to Sir Haldred's estate tonight--"

"Yes?"

"And kill him!"

I staggered, literally. This order was incredible--unspeakable! I had sunk low, low enough to smuggle opium, but to deliberately murder a man I had never seen, a man noted for his kindly deeds! That was too monstrous even to contemplate.

"You do not refuse?"

The tone was as loathly and as mocking as the hiss of a serpent.

"Refuse?" I screamed, finding my voice at last. "Refuse? You incarnate devil! Of course I refuse! You--"

Something in the cold assurance of his manner halted me--froze me into apprehensive silence.

"You fool!" he said calmly. "I broke the hashish chains--do you know how? Four minutes from now you will know and curse the day you were born! Have you not thought it strange, the swiftness of brain, the resilience of body--the brain that should be rusty and slow, the body that should be weak and sluggish from years of abuse? That blow that felled John Gordon--have you not wondered at its might? The ease with which you mastered Major Morley's records--have you not wondered at that? You fool, you are bound to me by chains of steel and blood and fire! I have kept you alive and sane--I alone. Each day the life-saving elixir has been given you in your wine. You could not live and keep your reason without it. And I and only I know its secret!"

He glanced at a queer timepiece which stood on a table at his elbow.

"This time I had Yun Shatu leave the elixir out--I anticipated rebellion. The time is near--ha, it strikes!"

Something else he said, but I did not hear. I did not see, nor did I feel in the human sense of the word. I was writhing at his feet, screaming and gibbering in the flames of such hells as men have never dreamed of.

Aye, I knew now! He had simply given me a dope so much stronger that it drowned the hashish. My unnatural ability was explainable now--I had simply been acting under the stimulus of something which combined all the hells in its makeup, which stimulated, something like heroin, but whose effect was unnoticed by the victim. What it was, I had no idea, nor did I believe anyone knew save that hellish being who stood watching me with grim amusement. But it had held my brain together, instilling into my system a need for it, and now my frightful craving tore my soul asunder.

Never, in my moments of worst shell-shock or my moments of hashish-craving, have I ever experienced anything like that. I burned with the heat of a thousand hells and froze with an iciness that was colder than any ice, a hundred times. I swept down to the deepest pits of torture and up to the highest crags of torment--a million yelling devils hemmed me in, shrieking and stabbing. Bone by bone, vein by vein, cell by cell I felt my body disintegrate and fly in bloody atoms all over the universe--and each separate cell was an entire system of quivering, screaming nerves. And they gathered from far voids and reunited with a greater torment.

Through the fiery bloody mists I heard my own voice screaming, a monotonous yammering. Then with distended eyes I saw a golden goblet, held by a claw-like hand, swim into view--a goblet filled with an amber liquid.

With a bestial screech, I seized it with both hands, being dimly aware that the metal stem gave beneath my fingers, and brought the brim to my lips. I drank in frenzied haste, the liquid slopping down onto my breast.

* * *

Kathulos of Egypt

"Night shall be thrice night over you,
And Heaven an iron cope."

- Chesterton

The Skull-faced One stood watching me critically as I sat panting on a couch, completely exhausted. He held in his hand the goblet and surveyed the golden stem, which was crushed out of all shape. This my maniac fingers had done in the instant of drinking.

"Superhuman strength, even for a man in your condition," he said with a sort of creaky pedantry. "I doubt if even Hassim here could equal it. Are you ready for your instructions now?"

I nodded, wordless. Already the hellish strength of the elixir was flowing through my veins, renewing my burnt-out force. I wondered how long a man could live as I lived being constantly burned out and artificially rebuilt.

"You will be given a disguise and will go alone to the Frenton estate. No one suspects any design against Sir Haldred and your entrance into the estate and the house itself should be a matter of comparative ease. You will not don the disguise--which will be of unique nature--until you are ready to enter the estate. You will then proceed to Sir Haldred's room and kill him, breaking his neck with your bare hands--this is essential--"

The voice droned on, giving the ghastly orders in a frightfully casual and matter-of-fact way. The cold sweat beaded my brow.

"You will then leave the estate, taking care to leave the imprint of your hand somewhere plainly visible, and the automobile, which will be waiting for you at some safe place nearby, will bring you back here, you having first removed the disguise. I have, in case of complications, any amount of men who will swear that you spent the entire night in the Temple of Dreams and never left it. But here must be no detection! Go warily and perform your task surely, for you know the alternative."

I did not return to the opium house but was taken through winding corridors, hung with heavy tapestries, to a small room containing only an oriental couch. Hassim gave me to understand that I was to remain here until after nightfall and then left me. The door was closed but I made no effort to discover if it was locked. The Skull-faced Master held me with stronger shackles than locks and bolts.

Seated upon the couch in the bizarre setting of a chamber which might have been a room in an Indian zenana, I faced fact squarely and fought out my battle. There was still in me some trace of manhood left--more than the fiend had reckoned, and added to this were black despair and desperation. I chose and determined on my only course.

Suddenly the door opened softly. Some intuition told me whom to expect, nor was I disappointed. Zuleika stood, a glorious vision before me--a vision which mocked me, made blacker my despair and yet thrilled me with wild yearning and reasonless joy.

She bore a tray of food which she set beside me, and then she seated herself on the couch, her large eyes fixed upon my face. A flower in a serpent den she was, and the beauty of her took hold of my heart.

"Steephen!" she whispered, and I thrilled as she spoke my name for the first time.

Her luminous eyes suddenly shone with tears and she laid her little hand on my arm. I seized it in both my rough hands.

"They have set you a task which you fear and hate!" she faltered.

"Aye," I almost laughed, "but I'll fool them yet! Zuleika, tell me--what is the meaning of all this?"

She glanced fearfully around her.

"I do not know all"--she hesitated--"your plight is all my fault but I--I hoped--Steephen, I have watched you every time you came to Yun Shatu's for months. You did not see me but I saw you, and I saw in you, not the broken sot your rags proclaimed, but a wounded soul, a soul bruised terribly on the ramparts of life. And from my heart I pitied you. Then when Hassim abused you that day"--again tears started to her eyes--"I could not bear it and I knew how you suffered for want of hashish. So I paid Yun Shatu, and going to the Master I--I--oh, you will hate me for this!" she sobbed.

"No--no--never--"

"I told him that you were a man who might be of use to him and begged him to have Yun Shatu supply you with what you needed. He had already noticed you, for his is the eye of the slaver and all the world is his slave market! So he bade Yun Shatu do as I asked; and now--better if you had remained as you were, my friend."

"No! No!" I exclaimed. "I have known a few days of regeneration, even if it was false! I have stood before you as a man, and that is worth all else!"

And all that I felt for her must have looked forth from my eyes, for she dropped hers and flushed. Ask me not how love comes to a man; but I knew that I loved Zuleika--had loved this mysterious oriental girl since first I saw her--and somehow I felt that she, in a measure, returned my affection. This realization made blacker and more barren the road I had chosen; yet--for pure love must ever strengthen a man--it nerved me to what I must do.

"Zuleika," I said, speaking hurriedly, "time flies and there are things I must learn; tell me--who are you and why do you remain in this den of Hades?"

"I am Zuleika--that is all I know. I am Circassian by blood and birth; when I was very little I was captured in a Turkish raid and raised in a Stamboul harem; while I was yet too young to marry, my master gave me as a present to--to Him."

"And who is he--this skull-faced man?"

"He is Kathulos of Egypt--that is all I know. My master."

"An Egyptian? Then what is he doing in London--why all this mystery?"

She intertwined her fingers nervously.

"Steephen, please speak lower; always there is someone listening everywhere. I do not know who the Master is or why he is here or why he does these things. I swear by Allah! If I knew I would tell you. Sometimes distinguished-looking men come here to the room where the Master receives them--not the room where you saw him--and he makes me dance before them and afterward flirt with them a little. And always I must repeat exactly what they say to me. That is what I must always do--in Turkey, in the Barbary States, in Egypt, in France and in England. The Master taught me French and English and educated me in many ways himself. He is the greatest sorcerer in all the world and knows all ancient magic and everything."

"Zuleika," I said, "my race is soon run, but let me get you out of this--come with me and I swear I'll get you away from this fiend!"

She shuddered and hid her face.

"No, no, I cannot!"

"Zuleika," I asked gently, "what hold has he over you, child--dope also?"

"No, no!" she whimpered. "I do not know--I do not know--but I cannot--I never can escape him!"

I sat, baffled for a few moments; then I asked, "Zuleika, where are we right now?"

"This building is a deserted storehouse back of the Temple of Silence."

"I thought so. What is in the chests in the tunnel?"

"I do not know."

Then suddenly she began weeping softly. "You too, a slave, like me--you who are so strong and kind--oh Steephen, I cannot bear it!"

I smiled. "Lean closer, Zuleika, and I will tell you how I am going to fool this Kathulos."

She glanced apprehensively at the door.

"You must speak low. I will lie in your arms and while you pretend to caress me, whisper your words to me."

She glided into my embrace, and there on the dragon-worked couch in that house of horror I first knew the glory of Zuleika's slender form nestling in my arms--of Zuleika's soft cheek pressing my breast. The fragrance of her was in my nostrils, her hair in my eyes, and my senses reeled; then with my lips hidden by her silky hair I whispered, swiftly:

"I am going first to warn Sir Haldred Frenton--then to find John Gordon and tell him of this den. I will lead the police here and you must watch closely and be ready to hide from Him --until we can break through and kill or capture him. Then you will be free."

"But you!" she gasped, paling. "You must have the elixir, and only he--"

"I have a way of outdoing him, child," I answered.

She went pitifully white and her woman's intuition sprang at the right conclusion.

"You are going to kill yourself!"

And much as it hurt me to see her emotion, I yet felt a torturing thrill that she should feel so on my account. Her arms tightened about my neck.

"Don't, Steephen!" she begged. "It is better to live, even--"

"No, not at that price. Better to go out clean while I have the manhood left."

She stared at me wildly for an instant; then, pressing her red lips suddenly to mine, she sprang up and fled from the room. Strange, strange are the ways of love. Two stranded ships on the shores of life, we had drifted inevitably together, and though no word of love had passed between us, we knew each other's heart--through grime and rags, and through accouterments of the slave, we knew each other's heart and from the first loved as naturally and as purely as it was intended from the beginning of Time.

The beginning of life now and the end for me, for as soon as I had completed my task, ere I felt again the torments of my curse, love and life and beauty and torture should be blotted out together in the stark finality of a pistol ball scattering my rotting brain. Better a clean death than--

The door opened again and Yussef Ali entered.

"The hour arrives for departure," he said briefly. "Rise and follow."

I had no idea, of course, as to the time. No window opened from the room I occupied--I had seen no outer window whatever. The rooms were lighted by tapers in censers swinging from the ceiling. As I rose the slim young Moor slanted a sinister glance in my direction.

"This lies between you and me," he said sibilantly. "Servants of the same Master we--but this concerns ourselves alone. Keep your distance from Zuleika--the Master has promised her to me in the days of the empire."

My eyes narrowed to slits as I looked into the frowning, handsome face of the Oriental, and such hate surged up in me as I have seldom known. My fingers involuntarily opened and closed, and the Moor, marking the action, stepped back, hand in his girdle.

"Not now--there is work for us both--later perhaps." Then in a sudden cold gust of hatred, "Swine! Ape-man! When the Master is finished with you I shall quench my dagger in your heart!"

I laughed grimly.

"Make it soon, desert-snake, or I'll crush your spine between my hands."

* * *

The Dark House

"Against all man-made shackles and a man-made hell--
Alone--at last--unaided--I rebel!"
- Mundy

I followed Yussef Ali along the winding hallways, down the steps--Kathulos was not in the idol room--and along the tunnel, then through the rooms of the Temple of Dreams and out into the street, where the street lamps gleamed drearily through the fogs and a slight drizzle. Across the street stood an automobile, curtains closely drawn.

"That is yours," said Hassim, who had joined us. "Saunter across natural-like. Don't act suspicious. The place may be watched. The driver knows what to do."

Then he and Yussef Ali drifted back into the bar and I took a single step toward the curb.

"Steephen!"

A voice that made my heart leap spoke my name! A white hand beckoned from the shadows of a doorway. I stepped quickly there.

"Zuleika!"

"Shhh!"

She clutched my arm, slipped something into my hand; I made out vaguely a small flask of gold.

"Hide this, quick!" came her urgent whisper. "Don't come back but go away and hide. This is full of elixir--I will try to get you some more before that is all gone. You must find a way of communicating with me."

"Yes, but how did you get this?" I asked amazedly.

"I stole it from the Master! Now please, I must go before he misses me."

And she sprang back into the doorway and vanished. I stood undecided. I was sure that she had risked nothing less than her life in doing this and I was torn by the fear of what Kathulos might do to her, were the theft discovered. But to return to the house of mystery would certainly invite suspicion, and I might carry out my plan and strike back before the Skull-faced One learned of his slave's duplicity.

So I crossed the street to the waiting automobile. The driver was a Negro whom I had never seen before, a lanky man of medium height. I stared hard at him, wondering how much he had seen. He gave no evidence of having seen anything, and I decided that even if he had noticed me step back into the shadows he could not have seen what passed there nor have been able to recognize the girl.

He merely nodded as I climbed in the back seat, and a moment later we were speeding away down the deserted and fog-haunted streets. A bundle beside me I concluded to be the disguise mentioned by the Egyptian.

To recapture the sensations I experienced as I rode through the rainy, misty night would be impossible. I felt as if I were already dead and the bare and dreary streets about me were the roads of death over which my ghost had been doomed to roam forever. A torturing joy was in my heart, and bleak despair--the despair of a doomed man. Not that death itself

was so repellent--a dope victim dies too many deaths to shrink from the last--but it was hard to go out just as love had entered my barren life. And I was still young.

A sardonic smile crossed my lips--they were young, too, the men who died beside me in No Man's Land. I drew back my sleeve and clenched my fists, tensing my muscles. There was no surplus weight on my frame, and much of the firm flesh had wasted away, but the cords of the great biceps still stood out like knots of iron, seeming to indicate massive strength. But I knew my might was false, that in reality I was a broken hulk of a man, animated only by the artificial fire of the elixir, without which a frail girl might topple me over.

The automobile came to a halt among some trees. We were on the outskirts of an exclusive suburb and the hour was past midnight. Through the trees I saw a large house looming darkly against the distant flares of nighttime London.

"This is where I wait," said the Negro. "No one can see the automobile from the road or from the house."

Holding a match so that its light could not be detected outside the car, I examined the "disguise" and was hard put to restrain an insane laugh. The disguise was the complete hide of a gorilla! Gathering the bundle under my arm I trudged toward the wall which surrounded the Frenton estate. A few steps and the trees where the Negro hid with the car merged into one dark mass. I did not believe he could see me, but for safety's sake I made, not for the high iron gate at the front, but for the wall at the side where there was no gate.

No light showed in the house. Sir Haldred was a bachelor and I was sure that the servants were all in bed long ago. I negotiated the wall with ease and stole across the dark lawn to a side door, still carrying the grisly "disguise" under my arm. The door was locked, as I had anticipated, and I did not wish to arouse anyone until I was safely in the house, where the sound of voices would not carry to one who might have followed me. I took hold of the knob with both hands, and, exerting slowly the inhuman strength that was mine, began to twist. The shaft turned in my hands and the lock within shattered suddenly, with a noise that was like the crash of a cannon in the stillness. An instant more and I was inside and had closed the door behind me.

I took a single stride in the darkness in the direction I believed the stair to be, then halted as a beam of light flashed into my face. At the side of the beam I caught the glimmer of a pistol muzzle. Beyond a lean shadowy face floated.

"Stand where you are and put up your hands!"

I lifted my hands, allowing the bundle to slip to the floor. I had heard that voice only once but I recognized it--knew instantly that the man who held that light was John Gordon.

"How many are with you?"

His voice was sharp, commanding.

"I am alone," I answered. "Take me into a room where a light cannot be seen from the outside and I'll tell you some things you want to know."

He was silent; then, bidding me take up the bundle I had dropped, he stepped to one side and motioned me to precede him into the next room. There he directed me to a stairway and at the top landing opened a door and switched on lights.

I found myself in a room whose curtains were closely drawn. During this journey Gordon's alertness had not relaxed, and now he stood, still covering me with his revolver. Clad in conventional garments, he stood revealed a tall, leanly but powerfully built man, taller than I but not so heavy--with steel-gray eyes and clean-cut features. Something about the man attracted me, even as I noted a bruise on his jawbone where my fist had struck in our last meeting.

"I cannot believe," he said crisply, "that this apparent clumsiness and lack of subtlety is real. Doubtless you have your own reasons for wishing me to be in a secluded room at this time, but Sir Haldred is efficiently protected even now. Stand still."

Muzzle pressed against my chest, he ran his hand over my garments for concealed weapons, seeming slightly surprized when he found none.

"Still," he murmured as if to himself, "a man who can burst an iron lock with his bare hands has scant need of weapons."

"You are wasting valuable time," I said impatiently. "I was sent here tonight to kill Sir Haldred Frenton--"

"By whom?" the question was shot at me.

"By the man who sometimes goes disguised as a leper."

He nodded, a gleam in his scintillant eyes.

"My suspicions were correct, then."

"Doubtless. Listen to me closely--do you desire the death or arrest of that man?"

Gordon laughed grimly.

"To one who wears the mark of the scorpion on his hand, my answer would be superfluous."

"Then follow my directions and your wish shall be granted."

His eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"So that was the meaning of this open entry and non-resistance," he said slowly. "Does the dope which dilates your eyeballs so warp your mind that you think to lead me into ambush?"

I pressed my hands against my temples. Time was racing and every moment was precious--how could I convince this man of my honesty?

"Listen; my name is Stephen Costigan of America. I was a frequenter of Yun Shatu's dive and a hashish addict--as you have guessed, but just now a slave of stronger dope. By virtue of this slavery, the man you know as a false leper, whom Yun Shatu and his friends call 'Master,' gained dominance over me and sent me here to murder Sir Haldred--why, God only knows. But I have gained a space of respite by coming into possession of some of this dope which I must have in order to live, and I fear and hate this Master. Listen to me and I swear, by all things holy and unholy, that before the sun rises the false leper shall be in your power!"

I could tell that Gordon was impressed in spite of himself.

"Speak fast!" he rapped.

Still I could sense his disbelief and a wave of futility swept over me.

"If you will not act with me," I said, "let me go and somehow I'll find a way to get to the Master and kill him. My time is short--my hours are numbered and my vengeance is yet to be realized."

"Let me hear your plan, and talk fast," Gordon answered.

"It is simple enough. I will return to the Masters lair and tell him I have accomplished that which he sent me to do. You must follow closely with your men and while I engage the Master in conversation, surround the house. Then, at the signal, break in and kill or seize him."

Gordon frowned. "Where is this house?"

"The warehouse back of Yun Shatu's has been converted into a veritable oriental palace."

"The warehouse!" he exclaimed. "How can that be? I had thought of that first, but I have carefully examined it from without. The windows are closely barred and spiders have built webs across them. The doors are nailed fast on the outside and the seals that mark the warehouse as deserted have never been broken or disturbed in any way."

"They tunneled up from beneath," I answered. "The Temple of Dreams is directly connected with the warehouse."

"I have traversed the alley between the two buildings," said Gordon, "and the doors of the warehouse opening into that alley are, as I have said, nailed shut from without just as the owners left them. There is apparently no rear exit of any kind from the Temple of Dreams."

"A tunnel connects the buildings, with one door in the rear room of Yun Shatu's and the other in the idol room of the warehouse."

"I have been in Yun Shatu's back room and found no such door."

"The table rests upon it. You noted the heavy table in the center of the room? Had you turned it around the secret door would have opened in the floor. Now this is my plan: I will go in through the Temple of Dreams and meet the Master in the idol room. You will have men secretly stationed in front of the warehouse and others upon the other street, in front of the Temple of Dreams. Yun Shatu's building, as you know, faces the waterfront, while the warehouse, fronting the opposite direction, faces a narrow street running parallel with the river. At the signal let the men in this street break open the front of the warehouse and rush in, while simultaneously those in front of Yun Shatu's make an invasion through the Temple of Dreams. Let these make for the rear room, shooting without mercy any who may seek to deter them, and there open the secret door as I have said. There being, to the best of my knowledge, no other exit from the Master's lair, he and his servants will necessarily seek to make their escape through the tunnel. Thus we will have them on both sides."

Gordon ruminated while I studied his face with breathless interest.

"This may be a snare," he muttered, "or an attempt to draw me away from Sir Haldred, but--"

I held my breath.

"I am a gambler by nature," he said slowly. "I am going to follow what you Americans call a hunch--but God help you if you are lying to me!"

I sprang erect.

"Thank God! Now aid me with this suit, for I must be wearing it when I return to the automobile waiting for me."

His eyes narrowed as I shook out the horrible masquerade and prepared to don it.

"This shows, as always, the touch of the master hand. You were doubtless instructed to leave marks of your hands, encased in those hideous gauntlets?"

"Yes, though I have no idea why."

"I think I have--the Master is famed for leaving no real clues to mark his crimes--a great ape escaped from a neighboring zoo earlier in the evening and it seems too obvious for mere chance, in the light of this disguise. The ape would have gotten the blame of Sir Haldred's death."

The thing was easily gotten into and the illusion of reality it created was so perfect as to draw a shudder from me as I viewed myself in a mirror.

"It is now two o'clock," said Gordon. "Allowing for the time it will take you to get back to Limehouse and the time it will take me to get my men stationed, I promise you that at half-past four the house will be closely surrounded. Give me a start--wait here until I have left this house, so I will arrive at least as soon as you."

"Good!" I impulsively grasped his hand. "There will doubtless be a girl there who is in no way implicated with the Master's evil doings, but only a victim of circumstances such as I have been. Deal gently with her."

"It shall be done. What signal shall I look for?"

"I have no way of signaling for you and I doubt if any sound in the house could be heard on the street. Let your men make their raid on the stroke of five."

I turned to go.

"A man is waiting for you with a car, I take it? Is he likely to suspect anything?"

"I have a way of finding out, and if he does," I replied grimly, "I will return alone to the Temple of Dreams."

* * *

Four Thirty-Four

"Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before."

- Poe

The door closed softly behind me, the great dark house looming up more starkly than ever. Stooping, I crossed the wet lawn at a run, a grotesque and unholy figure, I doubt not, since any man had at a glance sworn me to be not a man but a giant ape. So craftily had the Master devised!

I clambered the wall, dropped to the earth beyond and made my way through the darkness and the drizzle to the group of trees which masked the automobile.

The Negro driver leaned out of the front seat. I was breathing hard and sought in various ways to simulate the actions of a man who has just murdered in cold blood and fled the scene of his crime.

"You heard nothing, no sound, no scream?" I hissed, gripping his arm.

"No noise except a slight crash when you first went in," he answered. "You did a good job--nobody passing along the road could have suspected anything."

"Have you remained in the car all the time?" I asked. And when he replied that he had, I seized his ankle and ran my hand over the soles of his shoe; it was perfectly dry, as was the cuff of his trouser leg. Satisfied, I climbed into the back seat. Had he taken a step on the earth, shoe and garment would have showed it by the telltale dampness.

I ordered him to refrain from starting the engine until I had removed the apeskin, and then we sped through the night and I fell victim to doubts and uncertainties. Why should Gordon put any trust in the word of a stranger and a former ally of the Master's? Would he not put my tale down as the ravings of a dope-crazed addict, or a lie to ensnare or befool him? Still, if he had not believed me, why had he let me go?

I could but trust. At any rate, what Gordon did or did not do would scarcely affect my fortunes ultimately, even though Zuleika had furnished me with that which would merely extend the number of my days. My thought centered on her, and more than my hope of vengeance on Kathulos was the hope that Gordon might be able to save her from the clutches of the fiend. At any rate, I thought grimly, if Gordon failed me, I still had my hands and if I might lay them upon the bony frame of the Skull-faced One--

Abruptly I found myself thinking of Yussef Ali and his strange words, the import of which just occurred to me, "The Master has promised her to me in the days of the empire!"

The days of the empire--what could that mean?

The automobile at last drew up in front of the building which hid the Temple of Silence--now dark and still. The ride had seemed interminable and as I dismounted I glanced at the timepiece on the dashboard of the car. My heart leaped--it was four thirty-four, and unless my eyes tricked me I saw a movement in the shadows across the street, out of the flare of the street lamp. At this time of night it could mean only one of two things--some menial of the Master watching for my return or else Gordon had kept his word. The Negro drove away and I opened the door, crossed the deserted bar and entered the opium room. The bunks and the floor were littered with the dreamers, for such places as these know nothing of day or night as normal people know, but all lay deep in sottish slumber.

The lamps glimmered through the smoke and a silence hung mist-like over all.

* * *

The Stroke of Five

"He saw gigantic tracks of death,
And many a shape of doom."
- Chesterton

Two of the China-boys squatted among the smudge fires, staring at me unwinkingly as I threaded my way among the recumbent bodies and made my way to the rear door. For the first time I traversed the corridor alone and found time to wonder again as to the contents of the strange chests which lined the walls.

Four raps on the underside of the floor, and a moment later I stood in the idol room. I gasped in amazement--the fact that across a table from me sat Kathulos in all his horror was not the cause of my exclamation. Except for the table, the chair on which the Skull-faced One sat and the altar--now bare of incense--the room was perfectly bare! Drab, unlovely walls of the unused warehouse met my gaze instead of the costly tapestries I had become accustomed to. The palms, the idol, the lacquered screen--all were gone.

"Ah, Mr. Costigan, you wonder, no doubt."

The dead voice of the Master broke in on my thoughts. His serpent eyes glittered balefully. The long yellow fingers twined sinuously upon the table.

"You thought me to be a trusting fool, no doubt!" he rapped suddenly. "Did you think I would not have you followed? You fool, Yussef Ali was at your heels every moment!"

An instant I stood speechless, frozen by the crash of these words against my brain; then as their import sank home, I launched myself forward with a roar. At the same instant, before my clutching fingers could close on the mocking horror on the other side of the table, men rushed from every side. I whirled, and with the clarity of hate, from the swirl of savage faces I singled out Yussef Ali, and crashed my right fist against his temple with every ounce of my strength. Even as he dropped, Hassim struck me to my knees and a Chinaman flung a man-net over my shoulders. I heaved erect, bursting the stout cords as if they were strings, and then a blackjack in the hands of Ganra Singh stretched me stunned and bleeding on the floor.

Lean sinewy hands seized and bound me with cords that cut cruelly into my flesh. Emerging from the mists of semi-unconsciousness, I found myself lying on the altar with the masked Kathulos towering over me like a gaunt ivory tower. About in a semicircle stood Ganra Singh, Yar Khan, Yun Shatu and several others whom I knew as frequenters of the Temple of Dreams. Beyond them--and the sight cut me to the heart--I saw Zuleika crouching in a doorway, her face white and her hands pressed against her cheeks, in an attitude of abject terror.

"I did not fully trust you," said Kathulos sibilantly, "so I sent Yussef Ali to follow you. He reached the group of trees before you and following you into the estate heard your very interesting conversation with John Gordon--for he scaled the house-wall like a cat and clung to the window ledge! Your driver delayed purposely so as to give Yussef Ali plenty of time to get back--I have decided to change my abode anyway. My furnishings are already on their way to another house, and as soon as we have disposed of the traitor--you!--we shall depart also, leaving a little surprize for your friend Gordon when he arrives at five-thirty."

My heart gave a sudden leap of hope. Yussef Ali had misunderstood, and Kathulos lingered here in false security while the London detective force had already silently surrounded the house. Over my shoulder I saw Zuleika vanish from the door.

I eyed Kathulos, absolutely unaware of what he was saying. It was not long until five--if he dallied longer--then I froze as the Egyptian spoke a word and Li Kung, a gaunt, cadaverous Chinaman, stepped from the silent semicircle and drew from his sleeve a long thin dagger. My eyes sought the timepiece that still rested on the table and my heart sank. It was still ten minutes until five. My death did not matter so much, since it simply hastened the inevitable, but in my mind's eye I could see Kathulos and his murderers escaping while the police awaited the stroke of five.

The Skull-face halted in some harangue, and stood in a listening attitude. I believe his uncanny intuition warned him of danger. He spoke a quick staccato command to Li Kung and the Chinaman sprang forward, dagger lifted above my breast.

The air was suddenly supercharged with dynamic tension. The keen dagger-point hovered high above me--loud and clear sounded the skirl of a police whistle and on the heels of the sound there came a terrific crash from the front of the warehouse!

Kathulos leaped into frenzied activity. Hissing orders like a cat spitting, he sprang for the hidden door and the rest followed him. Things happened with the speed of a nightmare. Li Kung had followed the rest, but Kathulos flung a command over his shoulder and the Chinaman turned back and came rushing toward the altar where I lay, dagger high, desperation in his countenance.

A scream broke through the clamor and as I twisted desperately about to avoid the descending dagger, I caught a glimpse of Kathulos dragging Zuleika away. Then with a frenzied wrench I toppled from the altar just as Li Kung's dagger, grazing my breast, sank inches deep into the dark-stained surface and quivered there.

I had fallen on the side next to the wall and what was taking place in the room I could not see, but it seemed as if far away I could hear men screaming faintly and hideously. Then Li Kung wrenched his blade free and sprang, tigerishly, around the end of the altar. Simultaneously a revolver cracked from the doorway--the Chinaman spun clear around, the dagger flying from his hand--he slumped to the floor.

Gordon came running from the doorway where a few moments earlier Zuleika had stood, his pistol still smoking in his hand. At his heels were three rangy, clean-cut men in plain clothes. He cut my bonds and dragged me upright.

"Quick! Where have they gone?"

The room was empty of life save for myself, Gordon and his men, though two dead men lay on the floor.

I found the secret door and after a few seconds' search located the lever which opened it. Revolvers drawn, the men grouped about me and peered nervously into the dark stairway. Not a sound came up from the total darkness.

"This is uncanny!" muttered Gordon. "I suppose the Master and his servants went this way when they left the building--as they are certainly not here now!--and Leary and his men should have stopped them either in the tunnel itself or in the rear room of Yun Shatu's. At any rate, in either event they should have communicated with us by this time."

"Look out, sir!" one of the men exclaimed suddenly, and Gordon, with an ejaculation, struck out with his pistol barrel and crushed the life from a huge snake which had crawled silently up the steps from the blackness beneath.

"Let us see into this matter," said he, straightening.

But before he could step onto the first stair, I halted him; for, flesh crawling, I began dimly to understand something of what had happened--I began to understand the silence in the tunnel, the absence of the detectives, the screams I had heard some minutes previously while I lay on the altar. Examining the lever which opened the door, I found another smaller lever--I began to believe I knew what those mysterious chests in the tunnel contained.

"Gordon," I said hoarsely, "have you an electric torch?"

One of the men produced a large one.

"Direct the light into the tunnel, but as you value your life, do not put a foot upon the steps."

The beam of light struck through the shadows, lighting the tunnel, etching out boldly a scene that will haunt my brain all the rest of my life. On the floor of the tunnel, between the chests which now gaped open, lay two men who were members of London's finest secret service. Limbs twisted and faces horribly distorted they lay, and above and about them writhed, in long glittering scaly shimmerings, scores of hideous reptiles.

The clock struck five.

* * *

The Blind Beggar Who Rode

"He seemed a beggar such as lags
Looking for crusts and ale."
- Chesterton

The cold gray dawn was stealing over the river as we stood in the deserted bar of the Temple of Dreams. Gordon was questioning the two men who had remained on guard outside the building while their unfortunate companion, went in to explore the tunnel.

"As soon as we heard the whistle, sir, Leary and Murken rushed the bar and broke into the opium room, while we waited here at the bar door according to orders. Right away several ragged dopers came tumbling out and we grabbed them. But no one else came out and we heard nothing from Leary and Murken; so we just waited until you came, sir."

"You saw nothing of a giant Negro, or of the Chinaman Yun Shatu?"

"No, sir. After a while the patrolmen arrived and we threw a cordon around the house, but no one was seen."

Gordon shrugged his shoulders; a few cursory questions had satisfied him that the captives were harmless addicts and he had them released.

"You are sure no one else came out?"

"Yes, sir--no, wait a moment. A wretched old blind beggar did come out, all rags and dirt and with a ragged girl leading him. We stopped him but didn't hold him--a wretch like that couldn't be harmful."

"No?" Gordon jerked out. "Which way did he go?"

"The girl led him down the street to the next block and then an automobile stopped and they got in and drove off, sir."

Gordon glared at him.

"The stupidity of the London detective has rightfully become an international jest," he said acidly. "No doubt it never occurred to you as being strange that a Limehouse beggar should ride about in his own automobile."

Then impatiently waving aside the man, who sought to speak further, he turned to me and I saw the lines of weariness beneath his eyes.

"Mr. Costigan, if you will come to my apartment we may be able to clear up some new things."

* * *

The Black Empire

"Oh the new spears dipped in life-blood as the woman shrieked in vain!

Oh the days before the English! When will those days come again?"

- Mundy

Gordon struck a match and absently allowed it to flicker and go out in his hand. His Turkish cigarette hung unlighted between his fingers.

"This is the most logical conclusion to be reached," he was saying. "The weak link in our chain was lack of men. But curse it, one cannot round up an army at two o'clock in the morning, even with the aid of Scotland Yard. I went on to Limehouse, leaving orders for a number of patrolmen to follow me as quickly as they could be got together, and to throw a cordon about the house.

"They arrived too late to prevent the Master's servants slipping out of the side doors and windows, no doubt, as they could easily do with only Finnegan and Hansen on guard at the front of the building. However, they arrived in time to prevent the Master himself from slipping out in that way--no doubt he lingered to effect his disguise and was caught in that manner. He owes his escape to his craft and boldness and to the carelessness of Finnegan and Hansen. The girl who accompanied him--"

"She was Zuleika, without doubt."

I answered listlessly, wondering anew what shackles bound her to the Egyptian sorcerer.

"You owe your life to her," Gordon rapped, lighting another match. "We were standing in the shadows in front of the warehouse, waiting for the hour to strike, and of course ignorant as to what was going on in the house, when a girl appeared at one of the barred windows and begged us for God's sake to do something, that a man was being murdered. So we broke in at once. However, she was not to be seen when we entered."

"She returned to the room, no doubt," I muttered, "and was forced to accompany the Master. God grant he knows nothing of her trickery."

"I do not know," said Gordon, dropping the charred match stem, "whether she guessed at our true identity or whether she just made the appeal in desperation.

"However, the main point is this: evidence points to the fact that, on hearing the whistle, Leary and Murken invaded Yun Shatu's from the front at the same instant my three men and I made our attack on the warehouse front. As it took us some seconds to batter down the door, it is logical to suppose that they found the secret door and entered the tunnel before we affected an entrance into the warehouse.

"The Master, knowing our plans beforehand, and being aware that an invasion would be made through the tunnel and having long ago made preparations for such an exigency--"

An involuntary shudder shook me.

"--the Master worked the lever that opened the chest--the screams you heard as you lay upon the altar were the death shrieks of Leary and Murken. Then, leaving the Chinaman behind to finish you, the Master and the rest descended into the tunnel--incredible as it seems--and threading their way unharmed among the serpents, entered Yun Shatu's house and escaped therefrom as I have said."

"That seems impossible. Why should not the snakes turn on them?"

Gordon finally ignited his cigarette and puffed a few seconds before replying.

"The reptiles might still have been giving their full and hideous attention to the dying men, or else--I have on previous occasions been confronted with indisputable proof of the Master's dominance over beasts and reptiles of even the lowest or most dangerous orders. How he and his slaves passed unhurt among those scaly fiends must remain, at present, one of the many unsolved mysteries pertaining to that strange man."

I stirred restlessly in my chair. This brought up a point for the purpose of clearing up which I had come to Gordon's neat but bizarre apartments.

"You have not yet told me," I said abruptly, "who this man is and what is his mission."

"As to who he is, I can only say that he is known as you name him--the Master. I have never seen him unmasked, nor do I know his real name nor his nationality."

"I can enlighten you to an extent there," I broke in. "I have seen him unmasked and have heard the name his slaves call him."

Gordon's eyes blazed and he leaned forward.

"His name," I continued, "is Kathulos and he claims to be an Egyptian."

"Kathulos!" Gordon repeated. "You say he claims to be an Egyptian--have you any reason for doubting his claim of that nationality?"

"He may be of Egypt," I answered slowly, "but he is different, somehow, from any human I ever saw or hope to see. Great age might account for some of his peculiarities, but there are certain lineal differences that my anthropological studies tell me have been present since birth--features which would be abnormal to any other man but which are perfectly normal in Kathulos. That sounds paradoxical, I admit, but to appreciate fully the horrid inhumanness of the man, you would have to see him yourself."

Gordon sat at attention while I swiftly sketched the appearance of the Egyptian as I remembered him--and that appearance was indelibly etched on my brain forever.

As I finished he nodded.

"As I have said, I never saw Kathulos except when disguised as a beggar, a leper or some such thing--when he was fairly swathed in rags. Still, I too have been impressed with a strange difference about him--something that is not present in other men."

Gordon tapped his knee with his fingers--a habit of his when deeply engrossed by a problem of some sort.

"You have asked as to the mission of this man," he began slowly. "I will tell you all I know."

"My position with the British government is a unique and peculiar one. I hold what might be called a roving commission--an office created solely for the purpose of suiting my special needs. As a secret service official during the war, I convinced the powers of a need of such office and of my ability to fill it.

"Somewhat over seventeen months ago I was sent to South Africa to investigate the unrest which has been growing among the natives of the interior ever since the World War and which has of late assumed alarming proportions. There I first got on the track of this man Kathulos. I found, in roundabout ways, that Africa was a seething cauldron of rebellion from Morocco to Cape Town. The old, old vow had been made again--the Negroes and the Mohammedans, banded together, should drive the white men into the sea.

"This pact has been made before but always, hitherto, broken. Now, however, I sensed a giant intellect and a monstrous genius behind the veil, a genius powerful enough to accomplish this union and hold it together. Working entirely on hints and vague whispered clues, I followed the trail up through Central Africa and into Egypt. There, at last, I came upon definite evidence that such a man existed. The whispers hinted of a living dead man--a skull-faced man. I learned that this man was the high priest of the mysterious Scorpion society of northern Africa. He was spoken of variously as Skull-face, the Master, and the Scorpion.

"Following a trail of bribed officials and filched state secrets, I at last trailed him to Alexandria, where I had my first sight of him in a dive in the native quarter--disguised as a leper. I heard him distinctly addressed as 'Mighty Scorpion' by the natives, but he escaped me.

"All trace vanished then; the trail ran out entirely until rumors of strange happenings in London reached me and I came back to England to investigate an apparent leak in the war office.

"As I thought, the Scorpion had preceded me. This man, whose education and craft transcend anything I ever met with, is simply the leader and instigator of a world-wide movement such as the world has never seen before. He plots, in a word, the overthrow of the white races!

"His ultimate aim is a black empire, with himself as emperor of the world! And to that end he has banded together in one monstrous conspiracy the black, the brown and the yellow."

"I understand now what Yussef Ali meant when he said 'the days of the empire,'" I muttered.

"Exactly," Gordon rapped with suppressed excitement. "Kathulos' power is unlimited and unguessed. Like an octopus his tentacles stretch to the high places of civilization and the far corners of the world. And his main weapon is--dope! He has flooded Europe and no doubt America with opium and hashish, and in spite of all effort it has been impossible to discover the break in the barriers through which the hellish stuff is coming. With this he ensnares and enslaves men and women.

"You have told me of the aristocratic men and women you saw coming to Yun Shatu's dive. Without doubt they were dope addicts--for, as I said, the habit lurks in high places--holders of governmental positions, no doubt, coming to trade for the stuff they craved and giving in return state secrets, inside information and promise of protection for the Master's crimes.

"Oh, he does not work haphazardly! Before ever the black flood breaks, he will be prepared; if he has his way, the governments of the white races will be honeycombs of corruption--the strongest men of the white races will be dead. The white men's secrets of war will be his. When it comes, I look for a simultaneous uprising against white supremacy, of all the colored races--races who, in the last war, learned the white men's ways of battle, and who, led by such a man as Kathulos and armed with white men's finest weapons, will be almost invincible.

"A steady stream of rifles and ammunition has been pouring into East Africa and it was not until I discovered the source that it was stopped. I found that a staid and reliable Scotch firm was smuggling these arms among the natives and I found more: the manager of this firm was an opium slave. That was enough. I saw Kathulos' hand in the matter. The manager was arrested and committed suicide in his cell--that is only one of the many situations with which I am called upon to deal.

"Again, the case of Major Fairlan Morley. He, like myself, held a very flexible commission and had been sent to the Transvaal to work upon the same case. He sent to London a number of secret papers for safekeeping. They arrived some weeks ago and were put in a bank vault. The letter accompanying them gave explicit instructions that they were to be delivered to no one but the major himself, when he called for them in person, or in event of his death, to myself.

"As soon as I learned that he had sailed from Africa I sent trusted men to Bordeaux, where he intended to make his first landing in Europe. They did not succeed in saving the major's life, but they certified his death, for they found his body in a deserted ship whose hulk was stranded on the beach. Efforts were made to keep the affair a secret but somehow it leaked into the papers with the result--"

"I begin to understand why I was to impersonate the unfortunate major," I interrupted.

"Exactly. A false beard furnished you, and your black hair dyed blond, you would have presented yourself at the bank, received the papers from the banker, who knew Major Morley just intimately enough to be deceived by your appearance, and the papers would have then fallen into the hands of the Master.

"I can only guess at the contents of those papers, for events have been taking place too swiftly for me to call for and obtain them. But they must deal with subjects closely connected with the activities of Kathulos. How he learned of them and of the provisions of the letter accompanying them, I have no idea, but as I said, London is honeycombed with his spies.

"In my search for clues, I often frequented Limehouse disguised as you first saw me. I went often to the Temple of Dreams and even once managed to enter the back room, for I suspected some sort of rendezvous in the rear of the building. The absence of any exit baffled me and I had no time to search for secret doors before I was ejected by the giant black man Hassim, who had no suspicion of my true identity. I noticed that very often the leper entered or left Yun Shatu's, and finally it was borne on me that past a shadow of doubt this supposed leper was the Scorpion himself.

"That night you discovered me on the couch in the opium room, I had come there with no especial plan in mind. Seeing Kathulos leaving, I determined to rise and follow him, but you spoiled that."

He fingered his chin and laughed grimly.

"I was an amateur boxing champion in Oxford," said he, "but Tom Cribb himself could not have withstood that blow--or have dealt it."

"I regret it as I regret few things."

"No need to apologize. You saved my life immediately afterward--I was stunned, but not too much to know that that brown devil Yussef Ali was burning to cut out my heart."

"How did you come to be at Sir Haldred Frenton's estate? And how is it that you did not raid Yun Shatu's dive?"

"I did not have the place raided because I knew somehow Kathulos would be warned and our efforts would come to naught. I was at Sir Haldred's that night because I have contrived to spend at least part of each night with him since he returned from the Congo. I anticipated an attempt upon his life when I learned from his own lips that he was preparing, from the studies he made on this trip, a treatise on the secret native societies of West Africa. He hinted that the disclosures he intended to make therein might prove sensational, to say the least. Since it is to Kathulos' advantage to destroy such men as might be able to arouse the Western world to its danger, I knew that Sir Haldred was a marked man. Indeed, two distinct attempts were made upon his life on his journey to the coast from the African interior. So I put two trusted men on guard and they are at their post even now.

"Roaming about the darkened house, I heard the noise of your entry, and, warning my men, I stole down to intercept you. At the time of our conversation, Sir Haldred was sitting in his unlighted study, a Scotland Yard man with drawn pistol on each side of him. Their vigilance no doubt accounts for Yussef Ali's failure to attempt what you were sent to do.

"Something in your manner convinced me in spite of yourself," he meditated. "I will admit I had some bad moments of doubt as I waited in the darkness that precedes dawn, outside the warehouse."

Gordon rose suddenly and going to a strong box which stood in a corner of the room, drew thence a thick envelope.

"Although Kathulos has checkmated me at almost every move," he said, "I have not been entirely idle. Noting the frequenters of Yun Shatu's, I have compiled a partial list of the Egyptian's right-hand men, and their records. What you have told me has enabled me to complete that list. As we know, his henchmen are scattered all over the world, and there are possibly hundreds of them here in London. However, this is a list of those I believe to be in his closest council, now with him in England. He told you himself that few even of his followers ever saw him unmasked."

We bent together over the list, which contained the following names: "Yun Shatu, Hong Kong Chinese, suspected opium smuggler--keeper of Temple of Dreams--resident of Limehouse seven years. Hassim, ex-Senegalese Chief--wanted in French Congo for murder. Santiago, Negro--fled from Haiti under suspicion of voodoo worship atrocities. Yar Khan, Afridi, record unknown. Yussef Ali, Moor, slave-dealer in Morocco--suspected of being a German spy in the World War--an instigator of the Fellaheen Rebellion on the upper Nile. Ganra Singh, Lahore, India, Sikh--smuggler of arms into Afghanistan--took an active part in the Lahore and Delhi riots--suspected of murder on two occasions--a dangerous man. Stephen Costigan, American--resident in England since the war--hashish addict--man of remarkable strength. Li Kung, northern China, opium smuggler."

Lines were drawn significantly through three names--mine, Li Kung's and Yussef Ali's. Nothing was written next to mine, but following Li Kung's name was scrawled briefly in Gordon's rambling characters: "Shot by John Gordon during the raid on Yun Shatu's." And following the name of Yussef Ali: "Killed by Stephen Costigan during the Yun Shatu raid."

I laughed mirthlessly. Black empire or not, Yussef Ali would never hold Zuleika in his arms, for he had never risen from where I felled him.

"I know not," said Gordon somberly as he folded the list and replaced it in the envelope, "what power Kathulos has that draws together black men and yellow men to serve him--that unites world-old foes. Hindu, Moslem and pagan are among his followers. And back in the mists of the East where mysterious and gigantic forces are at work, this uniting is culminating on a monstrous scale."

He glanced at his watch.

"It is nearly ten. Make yourself at home here, Mr. Costigan, while I visit Scotland Yard and see if any clue has been found as to Kathulos' new quarters. I believe that the webs are closing on him, and with your aid I promise you we will have the gang located within a week at most."

* * *

The Mark of the Tulwar

"The fed wolf curls by his drowsy mate
In a tight-trod earth; but the lean wolves wait."
- Mundy

I sat alone in John Gordon's apartments and laughed mirthlessly. In spite of the elixir's stimulus, the strain of the previous night, with its loss of sleep and its heartrending actions, was telling on me. My mind was a chaotic whirl wherein the faces of Gordon, Kathulos and Zuleika shifted with numbing swiftness. All the mass of information Gordon had given to me seemed jumbled and incoherent.

Through this state of being, one fact stood out boldly. I must find the latest hiding-place of the Egyptian and get Zuleika out of his hands--if indeed she still lived.

A week, Gordon had said--I laughed again--a week and I would be beyond aiding anyone. I had found the proper amount of elixir to use--knew the minimum amount my system required--and knew that I could make the flask last me four days at most. Four days! Four days in which to comb the rat-holes of Limehouse and Chinatown--four days in which to ferret out, somewhere in the mazes of East End, the lair of Kathulos.

I burned with impatience to begin, but nature rebelled, and staggering to a couch, I fell upon it and was asleep instantly.

Then someone was shaking me.

"Wake up, Mr. Costigan!"

I sat up, blinking. Gordon stood over me, his face haggard.

"There's devil's work done, Costigan! The Scorpion has struck again!"

I sprang up, still half-asleep and only partly realizing what he was saying. He helped me into my coat, thrust my hat at me, and then his firm grip on my arm was propelling me out of his door and down the stairs. The street lights were blazing; I had slept an incredible time.

"A logical victim!" I was aware that my companion was saying. "He should have notified me the instant of his arrival!"

"I don't understand--" I began dazedly.

We were at the curb now and Gordon hailed a taxi, giving the address of a small and unassuming hotel in a staid and prim section of the city.

"The Baron Rokoff," he rapped as we whirled along at reckless speed, "a Russian free-lance, connected with the war office. He returned from Mongolia yesterday and apparently went into hiding. Undoubtedly he had learned something vital in regard to the slow waking of the East. He had not yet communicated with us, and I had no idea that he was in England until just now."

"And you learned--"

"The baron was found in his room, his dead body mutilated in a frightful manner!"

The respectable and conventional hotel which the doomed baron had chosen for his hiding-place was in a state of mild uproar, suppressed by the police. The management had attempted to keep the matter quiet, but somehow the guests had learned of the atrocity and many were leaving in haste--or preparing to, as the police were holding all for investigation.

The baron's room, which was on the top floor, was in a state to defy description. Not even in the Great War have I seen a more complete shambles. Nothing had been touched; all remained just as the chambermaid had found it a half-hour since. Tables and chairs lay shattered on the floor, and the furniture, floor and walls were spattered with blood. The baron, a tall, muscular man in life, lay in the middle of the room, a fearful spectacle. His skull had been cleft to the brows, a deep gash under his left armpit had shorn through his ribs, and his left arm hung by a shred of flesh. The cold bearded face was set in a look of indescribable horror.

"Some heavy, curved weapon must have been used," said Gordon, "something like a saber, wielded with terrific force. See where a chance blow sank inches deep into the windowsill. And again, the thick back of this heavy chair has been split like a shingle. A saber, surely."

"A tulwar," I muttered, somberly. "Do you not recognize the handiwork of the Central Asian butcher? Yar Khan has been here."

"The Afghan! He came across the roofs, of course, and descended to the window-ledge by means of a knotted rope made fast to something on the edge of the roof. About one-thirty the maid, passing through the corridor, heard a terrific commotion in the baron's room--smashing of chairs and a sudden short shriek which died abruptly into a ghastly gurgle and then ceased--to the sound of heavy blows, curiously muffled, such as a sword might make when driven deep into human flesh. Then all noises stopped suddenly.

"She called the manager and they tried the door and, finding it locked, and receiving no answer to their shouts, opened it with the desk key. Only the corpse was there, but the window was open. This is strangely unlike Kathulos' usual procedure. It lacks subtlety. Often his victims have appeared to have died from natural causes. I scarcely understand."

"I see little difference in the outcome," I answered. "There is nothing that can be done to apprehend the murderer as it is."

"True," Gordon scowled. "We know who did it but there is no proof--not even a fingerprint. Even if we knew where the Afghan is hiding and arrested him, we could prove nothing--there would be a score of men to swear alibis for him. The baron returned only yesterday. Kathulos probably did not know of his arrival until tonight. He knew that on the morrow Rokoff would make known his presence to me and impart what he learned in northern Asia. The Egyptian knew he must strike quickly, and lacking time to prepare a safer and more elaborate form of murder, he sent the Afridi with his tulwar. There is nothing we can do, at least not until we discover the Scorpion's hiding-place; what the baron had learned in Mongolia, we shall never know, but that it dealt with the plans and aspirations of Kathulos, we may be sure."

We went down the stairs again and out on the street, accompanied by one of the Scotland Yard men, Hansen. Gordon suggested that we walk back to his apartment and I greeted the opportunity to let the cool night air blow some of the cobwebs out of my mazed brain.

As we walked along the deserted streets, Gordon suddenly cursed savagely.

"This is a veritable labyrinth we are following, leading nowhere! Here, in the very heart of civilization's metropolis, the direct enemy of that civilization commits crimes of the most outrageous nature and goes free! We are children, wandering in the night, struggling with an unseen evil--dealing with an incarnate devil, of whose true identity we know nothing and whose true ambitions we can only guess.

"Never have we managed to arrest one of the Egyptian's direct henchmen, and the few dupes and tools of his we have apprehended have died mysteriously before they could tell us anything. Again I repeat: what strange power has Kathulos that dominates these men of different creeds and races? The men in London with him are, of course, mostly renegades, slaves of dope, but his tentacles stretch all over the East. Some dominance is his: the power that sent the Chinaman, Li Kung, back to kill you, in the face of certain death; that sent Yar Khan the Moslem over the roofs of London to do murder; that holds Zuleika the Circassian in unseen bonds of slavery.

"Of course we know," he continued after a brooding silence, "that the East has secret societies which are behind and above all considerations of creeds. There are cults in Africa and the Orient whose origin dates back to Ophir and the fall of Atlantis. This man must be a power in some or possibly all of these societies. Why, outside the Jews, I know of no oriental race which is so cordially despised by the other Eastern races, as the Egyptians! Yet here we have a man, an Egyptian by his own word, controlling the lives and destinies of orthodox Moslems, Hindus, Shintos and devil-worshippers. It's unnatural.

"Have you ever"--he turned to me abruptly--"heard the ocean mentioned in connection with Kathulos?"

"Never."

"There is a widespread superstition in northern Africa, based on a very ancient legend, that the great leader of the colored races would come out of the sea! And I once heard a Berber speak of the Scorpion as 'The Son of the Ocean.'"

"That is a term of respect among that tribe, is it not?"

"Yes; still I wonder sometimes."

* * *

The Mummy Who Laughed

"Laughing as littered skulls that lie
After lost battles turn to the sky
An everlasting laugh."
- Chesterton

"A shop open this late," Gordon remarked suddenly.

A fog had descended on London and along the quiet street we were traversing the lights glimmered with the peculiar reddish haze characteristic of such atmospheric conditions. Our footfalls echoed drearily. Even in the heart of a great city there are always sections which seem overlooked and forgotten. Such a street was this. Not even a policeman was in sight.

The shop which had attracted Gordon's attention was just in front of us, on the same side of the street. There was no sign over the door, merely some sort of emblem, something like a dragon. Light flowed from the open doorway and the small show windows on each side. As it was neither a cafe nor the entrance to a hotel we found ourselves idly speculating over its reason for being open. Ordinarily, I suppose, neither of us would have given the matter a thought, but our nerves were so keyed up that we found ourselves instinctively suspicious of anything out of the ordinary. Then something occurred which was distinctly out of the ordinary.

A very tall, very thin man, considerably stooped, suddenly loomed up out of the fog in front of us, and beyond the shop. I had only a glance of him--an impression of incredible gauntness, of worn, wrinkled garments, a high silk hat drawn close over the brows, a face entirely hidden by a muffler; then he turned aside and entered the shop. A cold wind whispered down the street, twisting the fog into wispy ghosts, but the coldness that came upon me transcended the wind's.

"Gordon!" I exclaimed in a fierce, low voice; "my senses are no longer reliable or else Kathulos himself has just gone into that house!"

Gordon's eyes blazed. We were now close to the shop, and lengthening his strides into a run he hurled himself into the door, the detective and I close upon his heels.

A weird assortment of merchandise met our eyes. Antique weapons covered the walls, and the floor was piled high with curious things. Maori idols shouldered Chinese josses, and suits of medieval armor bulked darkly against stacks of rare oriental rugs and Latin-make shawls. The place was an antique shop. Of the figure who had aroused our interest we saw nothing.

An old man clad bizarrely in red fez, brocaded jacket and Turkish slippers came from the back of the shop; he was a Levantine of some sort.

"You wish something, sirs?"

"You keep open rather late," Gordon said abruptly, his eyes traveling swiftly over the shop for some secret hiding-place that might conceal the object of our search.

"Yes, sir. My customers number many eccentric professors and students who keep very irregular hours. Often the night boats unload special pieces for me and very often I have customers later than this. I remain open all night, sir."

"We are merely looking around," Gordon returned, and in an aside to Hansen: "Go to the back and stop anyone who tries to leave that way."

Hansen nodded and strolled casually to the rear of the shop. The back door was clearly visible to our view, through a vista of antique furniture and tarnished hangings strung up for exhibition. We had followed the Scorpion--if he it was--so closely that I did not believe he would have had time to traverse the full length of the shop and make his exit without our having seen him as we came in. For our eyes had been on the rear door ever since we had entered.

Gordon and I browsed around casually among the curios, handling and discussing some of them but I have no idea as to their nature. The Levantine had seated himself cross-legged on a Moorish mat close to the center of the shop and apparently took only a polite interest in our explorations.

After a time Gordon whispered to me: "There is no advantage in keeping up this pretense. We have looked everywhere the Scorpion might be hiding, in the ordinary manner. I will make known my identity and authority and we will search the entire building openly."

Even as he spoke a truck drew up outside the door and two burly Negroes entered. The Levantine seemed to have expected them, for he merely waved them toward the back of the shop and they responded with a grunt of understanding.

Gordon and I watched them closely as they made their way to a large mummy-case which stood upright against the wall not far from the back. They lowered this to a level position and then started for the door, carrying it carefully between them.

"Halt!" Gordon stepped forward, raising his hand authoritatively.

"I represent Scotland Yard," he said swiftly, "and have sanction for anything I choose to do. Set that mummy down; nothing leaves this shop until we have thoroughly searched it."

The Negroes obeyed without a word and my friend turned to the Levantine, who, apparently not perturbed or even interested, sat smoking a Turkish water-pipe.

"Who was that tall man who entered just before we did, and where did he go?"

"No one entered before you, sir. Or, if anyone did, I was at the back of the shop and did not see him. You are certainly at liberty to search my shop, sir."

And search it we did, with the combined craft of a secret service expert and a denizen of the underworld--while Hansen stood stolidly at his post, the two Negroes standing over the carved mummy-case watched us impassively and the Levantine sitting like a sphinx on his mat, puffing a fog of smoke into the air. The whole thing had a distinct effect of unreality.

At last, baffled, we returned to the mummy-case, which was certainly long enough to conceal even a man of Kathulos' height. The thing did not appear to be sealed as is the usual custom, and Gordon opened it without difficulty. A formless shape, swathed in moldering wrappings, met our eyes. Gordon parted some of the wrappings and revealed an inch or so of withered, brownish, leathery arm. He shuddered involuntarily as he touched it, as a man will do at the touch of a reptile or some inhumanly cold thing. Taking a small metal idol from a stand nearby, he rapped on the shrunken breast and the arm. Each gave out a solid thumping, like some sort of wood.

Gordon shrugged his shoulders. "Dead for two thousand years anyway and I don't suppose I should risk destroying a valuable mummy simply to prove what we know to be true."

He closed the case again.

"The mummy may have crumbled some, even from this much exposure, but perhaps it did not."

This last was addressed to the Levantine who replied merely by a courteous gesture of his hand, and the Negroes once more lifted the case and carried it to the truck, where they loaded it on, and a moment later mummy, truck and Negroes had vanished in the fog.

Gordon still nosed about the shop, but I stood stock-still in the center of the floor. To my chaotic and dope-ridden brain I attribute it, but the sensation had been mine, that through the wrappings of the mummy's face, great eyes had burned into mine, eyes like pools of yellow fire, that seared my soul and froze me where I stood. And as the case had been carried through the door, I knew that the lifeless thing in it, dead, God only knows how many centuries, was laughing, hideously and silently.

* * *

The Dead Man from the Sea

"The blind gods roar and rave and dream
Of all cities under the sea."
- Chesterton

Gordon puffed savagely at his Turkish cigarette, staring abstractedly and unseeingly at Hansen, who sat opposite him.

"I suppose we must chalk up another failure against ourselves. That Levantine, Kamonos, is evidently a creature of the Egyptian's and the walls and floors of his shop are probably honeycombed with secret panels and doors which would baffle a magician."

Hansen made some answer but I said nothing. Since our return to Gordon's apartment, I had been conscious of a feeling of intense languor and sluggishness which not even my condition could account for. I knew that my system was full of the elixir--but my mind seemed strangely slow and hard of comprehension in direct contrast with the average state of my mentality when stimulated by the hellish dope.

This condition was slowly leaving me, like mist floating from the surface of a lake, and I felt as if I were waking gradually from a long and unnaturally sound sleep.

Gordon was saying: "I would give a good deal to know if Kamonos is really one of Kathulos' slaves or if the Scorpion managed to make his escape through some natural exit as we entered."

"Kamonos is his servant, true enough," I found myself saying slowly, as if searching for the proper words. "As we left, I saw his gaze light upon the scorpion which is traced on my hand. His eyes narrowed, and as we were leaving he contrived to brush close against me--and to whisper in a quick low voice: 'Soho, 48.'"

Gordon came erect like a loosened steel bow.

"Indeed!" he rapped. "Why did you not tell me at the time?"

"I don't know."

My friend eyed me sharply.

"I noticed you seemed like a man intoxicated all the way from the shop," said he. "I attributed it to some aftermath of hashish. But no. Kathulos is undoubtedly a masterful disciple of Mesmer--his power over venomous reptiles shows that, and I am beginning to believe it is the real source of his power over humans.

"Somehow, the Master caught you off your guard in that shop and partly asserted his dominance over your mind. From what hidden nook he sent his thought waves to shatter your brain, I do not know, but Kathulos was somewhere in that shop, I am sure."

"He was. He was in the mummy-case."

"The mummy-case!" Gordon exclaimed rather impatiently. "That is impossible! The mummy quite filled it and not even such a thin being as the Master could have found room there."

I shrugged my shoulders, unable to argue the point but somehow sure of the truth of my statement.

"Kamonos," Gordon continued, "doubtless is not a member of the inner circle and does not know of your change of allegiance. Seeing the mark of the scorpion, he undoubtedly supposed you to be a spy of the Master's. The whole thing may be a plot to ensnare us, but I feel that the man was sincere--Soho 48 can be nothing less than the Scorpion's new rendezvous."

I too felt that Gordon was right, though a suspicion lurked in my mind.

"I secured the papers of Major Morley yesterday," be continued, "and while you slept, I went over them. Mostly they but corroborated what I already knew--touched on the unrest of the natives and repeated the theory that one vast genius was behind all. But there was one matter which interested me greatly and which I think will interest you also."

From his strong box he took a manuscript written in the close, neat characters of the unfortunate major, and in a monotonous droning voice which betrayed little of his intense excitement he read the following nightmarish narrative:

"This matter I consider worth jotting down--as to whether it has any bearing on the case at hand, further developments will show. At Alexandria, where I spent some weeks seeking further clues as to the identity of the man known as the Scorpion, I made the acquaintance, through my friend Ahmed Shah, of the noted Egyptologist Professor Ezra Schuyler of New York. He verified the statement made by various laymen, concerning the legend of the 'ocean-man.' This myth, handed down from generation to generation, stretches back into the very mists of antiquity and is, briefly, that someday a man shall come up out of the sea and shall lead the people of Egypt to victory over all others. This legend has spread over the continent so that now all black races consider that it deals with the coming of a universal emperor. Professor Schuyler gave it as his opinion that the myth was somehow connected with the lost Atlantis, which, he maintains, was located between the African and South American continents and to whose inhabita nts the ancestors of the Egyptians were tributary. The reasons for his connection are too lengthy and vague to note here, but following the line of his theory he told me a strange and fantastic tale. He said that a close friend of his, Von Lorfmon of Germany, a sort of free-lance scientist, now dead, was sailing off the coast of Senegal some years ago, for the purpose of investigating and classifying the rare specimens of sea life found there. He was using for his purpose a small trading-vessel, manned by a crew of Moors, Greeks and Negroes.

"Some days out of sight of land, something floating was sighted, and this object, being grappled and brought aboard, proved to be a mummy-case of a most curious kind. Professor Schuyler explained to me the features whereby it differed from the ordinary Egyptian style, but from his rather technical account I merely got the impression that it was a strangely shaped affair carved with characters neither cuneiform nor hieroglyphic. The case was heavily lacquered, being watertight and airtight, and Von Lorfmon had considerable difficulty in opening it. However, he managed to do so without damaging the case, and a most unusual mummy was revealed. Schuyler said that he never saw either the mummy or the case, but that from descriptions given him by the Greek skipper who was present at the opening of the case, the mummy differed as much from the ordinary man as the case differed from the conventional type.

"Examination proved that the subject had not undergone the usual procedure of mummification. All parts were intact just as in life, but the whole form was shrunk and hardened to a wood-like consistency. Cloth wrappings swathed the thing and they crumbled to dust and vanished the instant air was let in upon them.

"Von Lorfmon was impressed by the effect upon the crew. The Greeks showed no interest beyond that which would ordinarily be shown by any man, but the Moors, and even more the Negroes, seemed to be rendered temporarily insane! As the case was hoisted on board, they all fell prostrate on the deck and raised a sort of worshipful chant, and it was necessary to use force in order to exclude them from the cabin wherein the mummy was exposed. A number of fights broke out between them and the Greek element of the crew, and the skipper and Von Lorfmon thought best to put back to the nearest port in all haste. The skipper attributed it to the natural aversion of seamen toward having a corpse on board, but Von Lorfmon seemed to sense a deeper meaning.

"They made port in Lagos, and that very night Von Lorfmon was murdered in his stateroom and the mummy and its case vanished. All the Moor and Negro sailors deserted ship the same night. Schuyler said--and here the matter took on a most sinister and mysterious aspect--that immediately afterward this widespread unrest among the natives began to smolder and take tangible form; he connected it in some manner with the old legend.

"An aura of mystery, also, hung over Von Lorfmon's death. He had taken the mummy into his stateroom, and anticipating an attack from the fanatical crew, had carefully barred and bolted door and portholes. The skipper, a reliable man, swore that it was virtually impossible to affect an entrance from without. And what signs were present pointed to the fact that the locks had been worked from within. The scientist was killed by a dagger which formed part of his collection and which was left in his breast.

"As I have said, immediately afterward the African cauldron began to seethe. Schuyler said that in his opinion the natives considered the ancient prophecy fulfilled. The mummy was the man from the sea.

"Schuyler gave as his opinion that the thing was the work of Atlanteans and that the man in the mummy-case was a native of lost Atlantis. How the case came to float up through the fathoms of water which cover the forgotten land, he does not venture to offer a theory. He is sure that somewhere in the ghost-ridden mazes of the African jungles the mummy has been enthroned as a god, and, inspired by the dead thing, the black warriors are gathering for a wholesale massacre. He believes, also, that some crafty Moslem is the direct moving power of the threatened rebellion."

Gordon ceased and looked up at me.

"Mummies seem to weave a weird dance through the warp of the tale," he said. "The German scientist took several pictures of the mummy with his camera, and it was after seeing these--which strangely enough were not stolen along with the thing--that Major Morley began to think himself on the brink of some monstrous discovery. His diary reflects his state of mind and becomes incoherent--his condition seems to have bordered on insanity. What did he learn to unbalance him so? Do you suppose that the mesmeric spells of Kathulos were used against him?"

"These pictures--" I began.

"They fell into Schuyler's hands and he gave one to Morley. I found it among the manuscripts."

He handed the thing to me, watching me narrowly. I stared, then rose unsteadily and poured myself a tumbler of wine.

"'Not a dead idol in a voodoo hut," I said shakily, "but a monster animated by fearsome life, roaming the world for victims. Morley had seen the Master--that is why his brain crumbled. Gordon, as I hope to live again, that face is the face of Kathulos !"

Gordon stared wordlessly at me.

"The Master hand, Gordon," I laughed. A certain grim enjoyment penetrated the mists of my horror, at the sight of the steel-nerved Englishman struck speechless, doubtless for the first time in his life.

He moistened his lips and said in a scarcely recognizable voice, "Then, in God's name, Costigan, nothing is stable or certain, and mankind hovers at the brink of untold abysses of nameless horror. If that dead monster found by Von Lorfmon be in truth the Scorpion, brought to life in some hideous fashion, what can mortal effort do against him?"

"The mummy at Kamonos'--" I began.

"Aye, the man whose flesh, hardened by a thousand years of non-existence--that must have been Kathulos himself! He would have just had time to strip, wrap himself in the linens and step into the case before we entered. You remember that the case, leaning upright against the wall, stood partly concealed by a large Burmese idol, which obstructed our view and doubtless gave him time to accomplish his purpose. My God, Costigan, with what horror of the prehistoric world are we dealing?"

"I have heard of Hindu fakirs who could induce a condition closely resembling death," I began. "Is it not possible that Kathulos, a shrewd and crafty Oriental, could have placed himself in this state and his followers have placed the case in the ocean where it was sure to be found? And might not he have been in this shape tonight at Kamonos'?"

Gordon shook his head.

"No, I have seen these fakirs. None of them ever feigned death to the extent of becoming shriveled and hard--in a word, dried up. Morley, narrating in another place the description of the mummy-case as jotted down by Von Lorfmon and passed on to Schuyler, mentions the fact that large portions of seaweed adhered to it--seaweed of a kind found only at great depths, on the bottom of the ocean. The wood, too, was of a kind which Von Lorfmon failed to recognize or to classify, in spite of the fact that he was one of the greatest living authorities on flora. And his notes again and again emphasize the enormous age of the thing. He admitted that there was no way of telling how old the mummy was, but his hints intimate that he believed it to be, not thousands of years old, but millions of years!

"No. We must face the facts. Since you are positive that the picture of the mummy is the picture of Kathulos--and there is little room for fraud--one of two things is practically certain: the Scorpion was never dead but ages ago was placed in that mummy-case and his life preserved in some manner, or else--he was dead and has been brought to life! Either of these theories, viewed in the cold light of reason, is absolutely untenable. Are we all insane?"

"Had you ever walked the road to hashish land," I said somberly, "you could believe anything to be true. Had you ever gazed into the terrible reptilian eyes of Kathulos the sorcerer, you would not doubt that he was both dead and alive."

Gordon gazed out the window, his fine face haggard in the gray light which had begun to steal through them.

"At any rate," said he, "there are two places which I intend exploring thoroughly before the sun rises again--Kamonos' antique shop and Soho 48."

* * *

The Grip of the Scorpion

"While from a proud tower in the town
Death looks gigantically down."
- Poe

Hansen snored on the bed as I paced the room. Another day had passed over London and again the street lamps glimmered through the fog. Their lights affected me strangely. They seemed to beat, solid waves of energy, against my brain. They twisted the fog into strange sinister shapes. Footlights of the stage that is the streets of London, how many grisly scenes had they lighted? I pressed my hands hard against my throbbing temples, striving to bring my thoughts back from the chaotic labyrinth where they wandered.

Gordon I had not seen since dawn. Following the clue of "Soho 48" he had gone forth to arrange a raid upon the place and he thought it best that I should remain under cover. He anticipated an attempt upon my life, and again he feared that if I went searching among the dives I formerly frequented it would arouse suspicion.

Hansen snored on. I seated myself and began to study the Turkish shoes which clothed my feet. Zuleika had worn Turkish slippers--how she floated through my waking dreams, gilding prosaic things with her witchery! Her face smiled at me from the fog; her eyes shone from the flickering lamps; her phantom footfalls re-echoed through the misty chambers of

my skull.

They beat an endless tattoo, luring and haunting till it seemed that these echoes found echoes in the hallway outside the room where I stood, soft and stealthy. A sudden rap at the door and I started.

Hansen slept on as I crossed the room and flung the door swiftly open. A swirling wisp of fog had invaded the corridor, and through it, like a silver veil, I saw her--Zuleika stood before me with her shimmering hair and her red lips parted and her great dark eyes.

Like a speechless fool I stood and she glanced quickly down the hallway and then stepped inside and closed the door.

"Gordon!" she whispered in a thrilling undertone. "Your friend! The Scorpion has him!"

Hansen had awakened and now sat gaping stupidly at the strange scene which met his eyes.

Zuleika did not heed him.

"And oh, Steephen!" she cried, and tears shone in her eyes, "I have tried so hard to secure some more elixir but I could not."

"Never mind that," I finally found my speech. "Tell me about Gordon."

"He went back to Kamonos' alone, and Hassim and Ganra Singh took him captive and brought him to the Master's house. Tonight assemble a great host of the people of the Scorpion for the sacrifice."

"Sacrifice!" A grisly thrill of horror coursed down my spine. Was there no limit to the ghastliness of this business?

"Quick, Zuleika, where is this house of the Master's?"

"Soho, 48. You must summon the police and send many men to surround it, but you must not go yourself--"

Hansen sprang up quivering for action, but I turned to him. My brain was clear now, or seemed to be, and racing unnaturally.

"Wait!" I turned back to Zuleika. "When is this sacrifice to take place?"

"At the rising of the moon."

"That is only a few hours before dawn. Time to save him, but if we raid the house they'll kill him before we can reach them. And God only knows how many diabolical things guard all approaches."

"I do not know," Zuleika whimpered. "I must go now, or the Master will kill me."

Something gave way in my brain at that; something like a flood of wild and terrible exultation swept over me.

"The Master will kill no one!" I shouted, flinging my arms on high. "Before ever the east turns red for dawn, the Master dies! By all things holy and unholy I swear it!"

Hansen stared wildly at me and Zuleika shrank back as I turned on her. To my dope-inspired brain had come a sudden burst of light, true and unerring. I knew Kathulos was a mesmerist--that he understood fully the secret of dominating another's mind and soul. And I knew that at last I had hit upon the reason of his power over the girl. Mesmerism! As a snake fascinates and draws to him a bird, so the Master held Zuleika to him with unseen shackles. So absolute was his rule over her that it held even when she was out of his sight, working over great distances.

There was but one thing which would break that hold: the magnetic power of some other person whose control was stronger with her than Kathulos'. I laid my hands on her slim little shoulders and made her face me.

"Zuleika," I said commandingly, "here you are safe; you shall not return to Kathulos. There is no need of it. Now you are free."

But I knew I had failed before I ever started. Her eyes held a look of amazed, unreasoning fear and she twisted timidly in my grasp.

"Steephen, please let me go!" she begged. "I must--I must!"

I drew her over to the bed and asked Hansen for his handcuffs. He handed them to me, wonderingly, and I fastened one cuff to the bedpost and the other to her slim wrist. The girl whimpered but made no resistance, her limpid eyes seeking mine in mute appeal.

It cut me to the quick to enforce my will upon her in this apparently brutal manner but I steeled myself.

"Zuleika," I said tenderly, "you are now my prisoner. The Scorpion cannot blame you for not returning to him when you are unable to do so--and before dawn you shall be free of his rule entirely."

I turned to Hansen and spoke in a tone which admitted of no argument.

"Remain here, just without the door, until I return. On no account allow any strangers to enter--that is, anyone whom you do not personally know. And I charge you, on your honor as a man, do not release this girl, no matter what she may say. If neither I nor Gordon have returned by ten o'clock tomorrow, take her to this address--that family once was friends of mine and will take care of a homeless girl. I am going to Scotland Yard."

"Steephen," Zuleika wailed, "you are going to the Master's lair! You will be killed. Send the police, do not go!"

I bent, drew her into my arms, felt her lips against mine, then tore myself away.

The fog plucked at me with ghostly fingers, cold as the hands of dead men, as I raced down the street. I had no plan, but one was forming in my mind, beginning to seethe in the stimulated cauldron that was my brain. I halted at the sight of a policeman pacing his beat, and beckoning him to me, scribbled a terse note on a piece of paper torn from a notebook and handed it to him.

"Get this to Scotland Yard; it's a matter of life and death and it has to do with the business of John Gordon."

At that name, a gloved hand came up in swift assent, but his assurance of haste died out behind me as I renewed my flight. The note stated briefly that Gordon was a prisoner at Soho 48 and advised an immediate raid in force--advised, nay, in Gordon's name, commanded it.

My reason for my actions was simple; I knew that the first noise of the raid sealed John Gordon's doom. Somehow I first must reach him and protect or free him before the police arrived.

The time seemed endless, but at last the grim gaunt outlines of the house that was Soho 48 rose up before me, a giant ghost in the fog. The hour grew late; few people dared the mists and the dampness as I came to a halt in the street before this forbidding building. No lights showed from the windows, either upstairs or down. It seemed deserted. But the lair of the scorpion often seems deserted until the silent death strikes suddenly.

Here I halted and a wild thought struck me. One way or another, the drama would be over by dawn. Tonight was the climax of my career, the ultimate top of life. Tonight I was the strongest link in the strange chain of events. Tomorrow it would not matter whether I lived or died. I drew the flask of elixir from my pocket and gazed at it. Enough for two more days if properly eked out. Two more days of life! Or--I needed stimulation as I never needed it before; the task in front of me was one no mere human could hope to accomplish. If I drank the entire remainder of the elixir, I had no idea as to the duration of its effect, but it would last the night through. And my legs were shaky; my mind had curious periods of utter vacuity; weakness of brain and body assailed me. I raised the flask and with one draft drained it.

For an instant I thought it was death. Never had I taken such an amount.

Sky and world reeled and I felt as if I would fly into a million vibrating fragments, like the bursting of a globe of brittle steel. Like fire, like hell-fire the elixir raced along my veins and I was a giant! A monster! A superman!

Turning, I strode to the menacing, shadowy doorway. I had no plan; I felt the need of none. As a drunken man walks blithely into danger, I strode to the lair of the Scorpion, magnificently aware of my superiority, imperially confident of my stimulation and sure as the unchanging stars that the way would open before me.

Oh, there never was a superman like that who knocked commandingly on the door of Soho 48 that night in the rain and the fog!

I knocked four times, the old signal that we slaves had used to be admitted into the idol room at Yun Shatu's. An aperture opened in the center of the door and slanted eyes looked warily out. They slightly widened as the owner recognized me, then narrowed wickedly.

"You fool!" I said angrily. "Don't you see the mark?"

I held my hand to the aperture.

"Don't you recognize me? Let me in, curse you."

I think the very boldness of the trick made for its success. Surely by now all the Scorpion's slaves knew of Stephen Costigan's rebellion, knew that he was marked for death. And the very fact that I came there, inviting doom, confused the doorman.

The door opened and I entered. The man who had admitted me was a tall, lank Chinaman I had known as a servant at Kathulos. He closed the door behind me and I saw we stood in a sort of vestibule, lighted by a dim lamp whose glow could not be seen from the street for the reason that the windows were heavily curtained. The Chinaman glowered at me undecided. I looked at him, tensed. Then suspicion flared in his eyes and his hand flew to his sleeve. But at the instant I was on him and his lean neck broke like a rotten bough between my hands.

I eased his corpse to the thickly carpeted floor and listened. No sound broke the silence. Stepping as stealthily as a wolf, fingers spread like talons, I stole into the next room. This was furnished in oriental style, with couches and rugs and gold-worked drapery, but was empty of human life. I crossed it and went into the next one. Light flowed softly from the censers which were swung from the ceiling, and the Eastern rugs deadened the sound of my footfalls; I seemed to be moving through a castle of enchantment.

Every moment I expected a rush of silent assassins from the doorways or from behind the curtains or screen with their writhing dragons. Utter silence reigned. Room after room I explored and at last halted at the foot of the stairs. The inevitable censer shed an uncertain light, but most of the stairs were veiled in shadows. What horrors awaited me above?

But fear and the elixir are strangers and I mounted that stair of lurking terror as boldly as I had entered that house of terror. The upper rooms I found to be much like those below and with them they had this fact in common: they were empty of human life. I sought an attic but there seemed no door letting into one. Returning to the first floor, I made a search for an entrance into the basement, but again my efforts were fruitless. The amazing truth was borne in upon me: except for myself and that dead man who lay sprawled so grotesquely in the outer vestibule, there were no men in that house, dead or living.

I could not understand it. Had the house been bare of furniture I should have reached the natural conclusion that Kathulos had fled--but no signs of flight met my eye. This was unnatural, uncanny. I stood in the great shadowy library and pondered. No, I had made no mistake in the house. Even if the broken corpse in the vestibule were not there to furnish mute testimony, everything in the room pointed toward the presence of the Master. There were the artificial palms, the lacquered screens, the tapestries, even the idol, though now no incense smoke rose before it. About the walls were ranged long shelves of books, bound in strange and costly fashion--books in every language in the world, I found from a swift examination, and on every subject--outre and bizarre, most of them.

Remembering the secret passage in the Temple of Dreams, I investigated the heavy mahogany table which stood in the center of the room. Bur nothing resulted. A sudden blaze of fury surged up in me, primitive and unreasoning. I snatched a statuette from the table and dashed it against the shelf-covered wall. The noise of its breaking would surely bring the gang from their hiding-place. But the result was much more startling than that!

The statuette struck the edge of a shelf and instantly the whole section of shelves with their load of books swung silently outward, revealing a narrow doorway! As in the other secret door, a row of steps led downward. At another time I would have shuddered at the thought of descending, with the horrors of the other tunnel fresh in my mind, but inflamed as I

was by the elixir, I strode forward without an instant's hesitancy.

Since there was no one in the house, they must be somewhere in the tunnel or in whatever lair to which the tunnel led. I stepped through the doorway, leaving the door open; the police might find it that way and follow me, though somehow I felt as if mine would be a lone hand from start to grim finish.

I went down a considerable distance and then the stair debouched into a level corridor some twenty feet wide--a remarkable thing. In spite of the width, the ceiling was rather low and from it hung small, curiously shaped lamps which flung a dim light. I stalked hurriedly along the corridor like old Death seeking victims, and as I went I noted the work of the thing. The floor was of great broad flags and the walls seemed to be of huge blocks of evenly set stone. This passage was clearly no work of modern days; the slaves of Kathulos never tunneled there. Some secret way of medieval times, I thought--and after all, who knows what catacombs lie below London, whose secrets are greater and darker than those of Babylon and Rome?

On and on I went, and now I knew that I must be far below the earth. The air was dank and heavy, and cold moisture dripped from the stones of walls and ceiling. From time to time I saw smaller passages leading away in the darkness but I determined to keep to the larger main one.

A ferocious impatience gripped me. I seemed to have been walking for hours and still only dank damp walls and bare flags and guttering lamps met my eyes. I kept a close watch for sinister-appearing chests or the like--saw no such things.

Then as I was about to burst into savage curses, another stair loomed up in the shadows in front of me.

* * *

Dark Fury

"The ringed wolf glared the circle round
Through baleful, blue-lit eye,
Not unforgetful of his debt.
Quoth he, 'I'll do some damage yet
Or ere my turn to die!'"

- Mundy

Like a lean wolf I glided up the stairs. Some twenty feet up there was a sort of landing from which other corridors diverged, much like the lower one by which I had come. The thought came to me that the earth below London must be honeycombed with such secret passages, one above the other.

Some feet above this landing the steps halted at a door, and here I hesitated, uncertain as to whether I should chance knocking or not. Even as I meditated, the door began to open. I shrank back against the wall, flattening myself out as much as possible. The door swung wide and a Moor came through. Only a glimpse I had of the room beyond, out of the corner of my eye, but my unnaturally alert senses registered the fact that the room was empty.

And on the instant, before be could turn, I smote the Moor a single deathly blow behind the angle of the jawbone and be toppled headlong down the stairs, to lie in a crumpled heap on the landing, his limbs tossed grotesquely about.

My left hand caught the door as it started to slam shut and in an instant I was through and standing in the room beyond. As I had thought, there was no occupant of this room. I crossed it swiftly and entered the next. These rooms were furnished in a manner before which the furnishings of the Soho house paled into insignificance. Barbaric, terrible, unholy--these words alone convey some slight idea of the ghastly sights which met my eyes. Skulls, bones and complete skeletons formed much of the decorations, if such they were. Mummies leered from their cases and mounted reptiles ranged the walls. Between these sinister relics hung African shields of hide and bamboo, crossed with assagais and war daggers. Here and there reared obscene idols, black and horrible.

And in between and scattered about among these evidences of savagery and barbarism were vases, screens, rugs and hangings of the highest oriental workmanship; a strange and incongruous effect.

I had passed through two of these rooms without seeing a human being, when I came to stairs leading upward. Up these I went, several flights, until I came to a door in a ceiling. I wondered if I was still under the earth. Surely the first stairs had let into a house of some sort. I raised the door cautiously. Starlight met my eyes and I drew myself warily up and out. There I halted. A broad flat roof stretched away on all sides and beyond its rim on all sides glimmered the lights of London. Just what building I was on, I had no idea, but that it was a tall one I could tell, for I seemed to be above most of the lights I saw. Then I saw that I was not alone.

Over against the shadows of the ledge that ran around the roof's edge, a great menacing form bulked in starlight. A pair of eyes glinted at me with a light not wholly sane; the starlight glanced silver from a curving length of steel. Yar Khan the Afghan killer fronted me in the silent shadows.

A fierce wild exultation surged over me. Now I could begin to pay the debt I owed Kathulos and all his hellish band! The dope fired my veins and sent waves of inhuman power and dark fury through me. A spring and I was on my feet in a silent, deathly rush.

Yar Khan was a giant, taller and bulkier than I. He held a tulwar, and from the instant I saw him I knew that he was full of the dope to the use of which he was addicted--heroin.

As I came in he swung his heavy weapon high in the air, but ere he could strike I seized his sword wrist in an iron grip and with my free hand drove smashing blows into his midriff.

Of that hideous battle, fought in silence above the sleeping city with only the stars to see, I remember little. I remember tumbling back and forth, locked in a death embrace. I remember the stiff beard rasping my flesh as his dope-fired eyes gazed wildly into mine. I remember the taste of hot blood in my mouth, the tang of fearful exultation in my soul, the onrushing and upsurging of inhuman strength and fury.

God, what a sight for a human eye, had anyone looked upon that grim roof where two human leopards, dope maniacs, tore each other to pieces!

I remember his arm breaking like rotten wood in my grip and the tulwar falling from his useless hand. Handicapped by a broken arm, the end was inevitable, and with one wild uproaring flood of might, I rushed him to the edge of the roof and bent him backward far out over the ledge. An instant we struggled there; then I tore loose his hold and hurled him over, and one single shriek came up as he hurtled into the darkness below.

I stood upright, arms hurled up toward the stars, a terrible statue of primordial triumph. And down my breast trickled streams of blood from the long wounds left by the Afghan's frantic nails, on neck and face.

Then I turned with the craft of the maniac. Had no one heard the sound of that battle? My eyes were on the door through which I had come, but a noise made me turn, and for the first time I noticed a small affair like a tower jutting up from the roof. There was no window there, but there was a door, and even as I looked that door opened and a huge black form framed itself in the light that streamed from within. Hassim!

He stepped out on the roof and closed the door, his shoulders hunched and neck outthrust as he glanced this way and that. I struck him senseless to the roof with one hate-driven smash. I crouched over him, waiting some sign of returning consciousness; then away in the sky close to the horizon, I saw a faint red tint. The rising of the moon!

Where in God's name was Gordon? Even as I stood undecided, a strange noise reached me. It was curiously like the droning of many bees.

Striding in the direction from which it seemed to come, I crossed the roof and leaned over the ledge. A sight nightmarish and incredible met my eyes.

Some twenty feet below the level of the roof on which I stood, there was another roof, of the same size and clearly a part of the same building. On one side it was bounded by the wall; on the other three sides a parapet several feet high took the place of a ledge.

A great throng of people stood, sat and squatted, close-packed on the roof--and without exception they were Negroes! There were hundreds of them, and it was their low-voiced conversation which I had heard. But what held my gaze was that upon which their eyes were fixed.

About the center of the roof rose a sort of teocalli some ten feet high, almost exactly like those found in Mexico and on which the priests of the Aztecs sacrificed human victims. This, allowing for its infinitely smaller scale, was an exact type of those sacrificial pyramids. On the flat top of it was a curiously carved altar, and beside it stood a lank, dusky form whom even the ghastly mask he wore could not disguise to my gaze--Santiago, the Haiti voodoo fetish man. On the altar lay John Gordon, stripped to the waist and bound hand and foot, but conscious.

I reeled back from the roof edge, rent in twain by indecision. Even the stimulus of the elixir was not equal to this. Then a sound brought me about to see Hassim struggling dizzily to his knees. I reached him with two long strides and ruthlessly smashed him down again. Then I noticed a queer sort of contrivance dangling from his girdle. I bent and examined it. It was a mask similar to that worn by Santiago. Then my mind leaped swift and sudden to a wild desperate plan, which to my dope-ridden brain seemed not at all wild or desperate. I stepped softly to the tower and, opening the door, peered inward. I saw no one who might need to be silenced, but I saw a long silken robe hanging upon a peg in the wall. The luck of the dope fiend! I snatched it and closed the door again. Hassim showed no signs of consciousness but I gave him another smash on the chin to make sure and, seizing his mask, hurried to the ledge.

A low guttural chant floated up to me, jangling, barbaric, with an undertone of maniacal blood-lust. The Negroes, men and women, were swaying back and forth to the wild rhythm of their death chant. On the teocalli Santiago stood like a statue of black basalt, facing the east, dagger held high--a wild and terrible sight, naked as he was save for a wide silken girdle and that inhuman mask on his face. The moon thrust a red rim above the eastern horizon and a faint breeze stirred the great black plumes which nodded above the voodoo man's mask. The chant of the worshipers dropped to a low, sinister whisper.

I hurriedly slipped on the death mask, gathered the robe close about me and prepared for the descent. I was prepared to drop the full distance, being sure in the superb confidence of my insanity that I would land unhurt, but as I climbed over the ledge I found a steel ladder leading down. Evidently Hassim, one of the voodoo priests, intended descending this way. So down I went, and in haste, for I knew that the instant the moon's lower rim cleared the city's skyline, that motionless dagger would descend into Gordon's breast.

Gathering the robe close about me so as to conceal my white skin, I stepped down upon the roof and strode forward through rows of black worshipers who shrank aside to let me through. To the foot of the teocalli I stalked and up the stair that ran about it, until I stood beside the death altar and marked the dark red stains upon it. Gordon lay on his back, his eyes open, his face drawn and haggard, but his gaze dauntless and unflinching.

Santiago's eyes blazed at me through the slits of his mask, but I read no suspicion in his gaze until I reached forward and took the dagger from his hand. He was too much astonished to resist, and the black throng fell suddenly silent. That he saw my hand was not that of a Negro it is certain, but he was simply struck speechless with astonishment. Moving swiftly I cut Gordon's bonds and hauled him erect. Then Santiago with a shriek leaped upon me--shrieked again and, arms flung high, pitched headlong from the teocalli with his own dagger buried to the hilt in his breast.

Then the black worshipers were on us with a screech and a roar--leaping on the steps of the teocalli like black leopards in the moonlight, knives flashing, eyes gleaming whitely.

I tore mask and robe from me and answered Gordon's exclamation with a wild laugh. I had hoped that by virtue of my disguise I might get us both safely away but now I was content to die there at his side.

He tore a great metal ornament from the altar, and as the attackers came he wielded this. A moment we held them at bay and then they flowed over us like a black wave. This to me was Valhalla! Knives stung me and blackjacks smashed against me, but I laughed and drove my iron fists in straight, steam-hammer smashes that shattered flesh and bone. I saw Gordon's crude weapon rise and fall, and each time a man went down. Skulls shattered and blood splashed and the dark fury swept over me. Nightmare faces swirled about me and I was on my knees; up again and the faces crumpled before my blows. Through far mists I seemed to hear a hideous familiar voice raised in imperious command.

Gordon was swept away from me but from the sounds I knew that the work of death still went on. The stars reeled through fogs of blood, but Hell's exaltation was on me and I reveled in the dark tides of fury until a darker, deeper tide swept over me and I knew no more.

* * *

Ancient Horror

"Here now in his triumph where all things falter,
Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread,
As a God self-slain on his own strange altar,
Death lies dead."

- Swinburne

Slowly I drifted back into life--slowly, slowly. A mist held me and in the mist I saw a Skull--

I lay in a steel cage like a captive wolf, and the bars were too strong, I saw, even for my strength. The cage seemed to be set in a sort of niche in the wall and I was looking into a large room. This room was under the earth, for the floor was of stone flags and the walls and ceiling were composed of gigantic block of the same material. Shelves ranged the walls, covered with weird appliances, apparently of a scientific nature, and more were on the great table that stood in the center of the room. Beside this sat Kathulos.

The sorcerer was clad in a snaky yellow robe, and those hideous hands and that terrible head were more pronouncedly reptilian than ever. He turned his great yellow eyes toward me, like pools of livid fire, and his parchment-thin lips moved in what probably passed for a smile.

I staggered erect and gripped the bars, cursing.

"Gordon, curse you, where is Gordon?"

Kathulos took a test-tube from the table, eyed it closely and emptied it into another.

"Ah, my friend awakes," he murmured in his voice--the voice of a living dead man.

He thrust his hands into his long sleeves and turned fully to me.

"I think in you," he said distinctly, "I have created a Frankenstein monster. I made of you a superhuman creature to serve my wishes and you broke from me. You are the bane of my might, worse than Gordon even. You have killed valuable servants and interfered with my plans. However, your evil comes to an end tonight. Your friend Gordon broke away but he is being hunted through the tunnels and cannot escape.

"You," he continued with the sincere interest of the scientist, "are a most interesting subject. Your brain must be formed differently from any other man that ever lived. I will make a close study of it and add it to my laboratory. How a man, with the apparent need of the elixir in his system, has managed to go on for two days still stimulated by the last draft is more than I can understand."

My heart leaped. With all his wisdom, little Zuleika had tricked him and he evidently did not know that she had filched a flask of the life-giving stuff from him.

"The last draft you had from me," he went on, "was sufficient only for some eight hours. I repeat, it has me puzzled. Can you offer any suggestion?"

I snarled wordlessly. He sighed.

"As always the barbarian. Truly the proverb speaks: 'Jest with the wounded tiger and warm the adder in your bosom before you seek to lift the savage from his savagery.'"

He meditated awhile in silence. I watched him uneasily. There was about him a vague and curious difference--his long fingers emerging from the sleeves drummed on the chair arms and some hidden exultation strummed at the back of his voice, lending it unaccustomed vibrancy.

"And you might have been a king of the new regime," he said suddenly. "Aye, the new--new and inhumanly old!"

I shuddered as his dry cackling laugh rasped out.

He bent his head as if listening. From far off seemed to come a hum of guttural voices. His lips writhed in a smile.

"My black children," he murmured. "They tear my enemy Gordon to pieces in the tunnels. They, Mr. Costigan, are my real henchmen and it was for their edification tonight that I laid John Gordon on the sacrificial stone. I would have preferred to have made some experiments with him, based on certain scientific theories, but my children must be humored. Later under my tutelage they will outgrow their childish superstitions and throw aside their foolish customs, but now they must be led gently by the hand.

"How do you like these under-the-earth corridors, Mr. Costigan?" he switched suddenly. "You thought of them--what? No doubt that the white savages of your Middle Ages built them? Faugh! These tunnels are older than your world! They were brought into being by mighty kings, too many eons ago for your mind to grasp, when an imperial city towered where this crude village of London stands. All trace of that metropolis has crumbled to dust and vanished, but these corridors were built by more than human skill--ha ha! Of all the teeming thousands who move daily above them, none knows of their existence save my servants--and not all of them. Zuleika, for instance, does not know of them, for of late I have begun to doubt her loyalty and shall doubtless soon make of her an example."

At that I hurled myself blindly against the side of the cage, a red wave of hate and fury tossing me in its grip. I seized the bars and strained until the veins stood out on my forehead and the muscles bulged and crackled in my arms and shoulders. And the bars bent before my onslaught--a little but no more, and finally the power flowed from my limbs and I sank down trembling and weakened. Kathulos watched me imperturbably.

"The bars hold," be announced with something almost like relief in his tone. "Frankly, I prefer to be on the opposite side of them. You are a human ape if there was ever one."

He laughed suddenly and wildly.

"But why do you seek to oppose me?" he shrieked unexpectedly. "Why defy me, who am Kathulos, the Sorcerer, great even in the days of the old empire? Today, invincible! A magician, a scientist, among ignorant savages! Ha ha!"

I shuddered, and sudden blinding light broke in on me. Kathulos himself was an addict, and was fired by the stuff of his choice! What hellish concoction was strong enough, terrible enough to thrill the Master and inflame him, I do not know, nor do I wish to know. Of all the uncanny knowledge that was his, I, knowing the man as I did, count this the most weird and grisly.

"You, you paltry fool!" he was ranting, his face lit supernaturally.

"Know you who I am? Kathulos of Egypt! Bah! They knew me in the old days! I reigned in the dim misty sea lands ages and ages before the sea rose and engulfed the land. I died, not as men die; the magic draft of life everlasting was ours! I drank deep and slept. Long I slept in my lacquered case! My flesh withered and grew hard; my blood dried in my veins. I became as one dead. But still within me burned the spirit of life, sleeping but anticipating the awakening. The great cities crumbled to dust. The sea drank the land. The tall shrines and the lofty spires sank beneath the green waves. All this I knew as I slept, as a man knows in dreams. Kathulos of Egypt? Faugh! Kathulos of Atlantis !"

I uttered a sudden involuntary cry. This was too grisly for sanity.

"Aye, the magician, the sorcerer.

"And down the long years of savagery, through which the barbaric races struggled to rise without their masters, the legend came of the day of empire, when one of the Old Race would rise up from the sea. Aye, and lead to victory the black people who were our slaves in the old days.

"These brown and yellow people, what care I for them? The blacks were the slaves of my race, and I am their god today. They will obey me. The yellow and the brown peoples are fools--I make them my tools and the day will come when my black warriors will turn on them and slay at my word. And you, you white barbarians, whose ape-ancestors forever defied my race and me, your doom is at hand! And when I mount my universal throne, the only whites shall be white slaves!

"The day came as prophesied, when my case, breaking free from the halls where it lay--where it had lain when Atlantis was still sovereign of the world--where since her empery it had sunk into the green fathoms--when my case, I say, was smitten by the deep sea tides and moved and stirred, and thrust aside the clinging seaweed that masks temples and minarets, and came floating up past the lofty sapphire and golden spires, up through the green waters, to float upon the lazy waves of the sea.

"Then came a white fool carrying out the destiny of which he was not aware. The men on his ship, true believers, knew that the time had come. And I--the air entered my nostrils and I awoke from the long, long sleep. I stirred and moved and lived. And rising in the night, I slew the fool that had lifted me from the ocean, and my servants made obeisance to me and took me into Africa, where I abode awhile and learned new languages and new ways of a new world and became strong.

"The wisdom of your dreary world--ha ha! I who delved deeper in the mysteries of the old than any man dared go! All that men know today, I know, and the knowledge beside that which I have brought down the centuries is as a grain of sand beside a mountain! You should know something of that knowledge! By it I lifted you from one hell to plunge you into a greater! You fool, here at my hand is that which would lift you from this! Aye, would strike from you the chains whereby I have bound you!"

He snatched up a golden vial and shook it before my gaze. I eyed it as men dying in the desert must eye the distant mirages. Kathulos fingered it meditatively. His unnatural excitement seemed to have passed suddenly, and when he spoke again it was in the passionless, measured tones of the scientist.

"That would indeed be an experiment worthwhile--to free you of the elixir habit and see if your dope-riddled body would sustain life. Nine times out of ten the victim, with the need and stimulus removed, would die--but you are such a giant of a brute--"

He sighed and set the vial down.

"The dreamer opposes the man of destiny. My time is not my own or I should choose to spend my life pent in my laboratories, carrying out my experiments. But now, as in the days of the old empire when kings sought my counsel, I must work and labor for the good of the race at large. Aye, I must toil and sow the seed of glory against the full coming of the imperial days when the seas give up all their living dead."

I shuddered. Kathulos laughed wildly again. His fingers began to drum his chair arms and his face gleamed with the unnatural light once more. The red visions had begun to seethe in his skull again.

"Under the green seas they lie, the ancient masters, in their lacquered cases, dead as men reckon death, but only sleeping. Sleeping through the long ages as hours, awaiting the day of awakening! The old masters, the wise men, who foresaw the day when the sea would gulp the land, and who made ready. Made ready that they might rise again in the barbaric days to come. As did I. Sleeping they lie, ancient kings and grim wizards, who died as men die, before Atlantis sank. Who, sleeping, sank with her but who shall arise again!

"Mine the glory! I rose first. And I sought out the site of old cities, on shores that did not sink. Vanished, long vanished. The barbarian tide swept over them thousands of years ago as the green waters swept over their elder sister of the deeps. On some, the deserts stretch bare. Over some, as here, young barbarian cities rise."

He halted suddenly. His eyes sought one of the dark openings that marked a corridor. I think his strange intuition warned him of some impending danger but I do not believe that he had any inkling of how dramatically our scene would be interrupted.

As he looked, swift footsteps sounded and a man appeared suddenly in the doorway--a man disheveled, tattered and bloody. John Gordon! Kathulos sprang erect with a cry, and Gordon, gasping as from superhuman exertion, brought down the revolver he held in his hand and fired point-blank. Kathulos staggered, clapping his hand to his breast, and then, groping wildly, reeled to the wall and fell against it. A doorway opened and he reeled through, but as Gordon leaped fiercely across the chamber, a blank stone surface met his gaze, which yielded not to his savage hammerings.

He whirled and ran drunkenly to the table where lay a bunch of keys the Master had dropped there.

"The vial!" I shrieked. "Take the vial!" And he thrust it into his pocket.

Back along the corridor through which he had come sounded a faint clamor growing swiftly like a wolf-pack in full cry. A few precious seconds spent with fumbling for the right key, then the cage door swung open and I sprang out. A sight for the gods we were, the two of us! Slashed, bruised and cut, our garments hanging in tatters--my wounds had ceased to bleed, but now as I moved they began again, and from the stiffness of my hands I knew that my knuckles were shattered. As for Gordon, he was fairly drenched in blood from crown to foot.

We made off down a passage in the opposite direction from the menacing noise, which I knew to be the black servants of the Master in full pursuit of us. Neither of us was in good shape for running, but we did our best. Where we were going I had no idea. My superhuman strength had deserted me and I was going now on willpower alone. We switched off into another corridor and we had not gone twenty steps until, looking back, I saw the first of the black devils round the corner.

A desperate effort increased our lead a trifle. But they had seen us, were in full view now, and a yell of fury broke from them to be succeeded by a more sinister silence as they bent all efforts to overhauling us.

There a short distance in front of us we saw a stair loom suddenly in the gloom. If we might reach that--but we saw something else.

Against the ceiling, between us and the stairs, hung a huge thing like an iron grille, with great spikes along the bottom--a portcullis. And even as we looked, without halting in our panting strides, it began to move.

"They're lowering the portcullis!" Gordon croaked, his blood-streaked face a mask of exhaustion and will.

Now the blacks were only ten feet behind us--now the huge grate, gaining momentum, with a creak of rusty, unused mechanism, rushed downward. A final spurt, a gasping straining nightmare of effort--and Gordon, sweeping us both along in a wild burst of pure nerve-strength, hurled us under and through, and the grate crashed behind us!

A moment we lay gasping, not heeding the frenzied horde who raved and screamed on the other side of the grate. So close had that final leap been, that the great spikes in their descent had torn shreds from our clothing.

The blacks were thrusting at us with daggers through the bars, but we were out of reach and it seemed to me that I was content to lie there and die of exhaustion. But Gordon weaved unsteadily erect and hauled me with him.

"Got to get out," he croaked; "go to warn--Scotland Yard--honeycombs in heart of London--high explosives--arms--ammunition."

We blundered up the steps, and in front of us I seemed to hear a sound of metal grating against metal. The stairs ended abruptly, on a landing that terminated in a blank wall. Gordon hammered against this and the inevitable secret doorway opened. Light streamed in, through the bars of a sort of grille. Men in the uniform of London police were sawing at these with hacksaws, and even as they greeted us, an opening was made through which we crawled.

"You're hurt, sir!" One of the men took Gordon's arm.

My companion shook him off.

"There's no time to lose! Out of here, as quick as we can go!"

I saw that we were in a basement of some sort. We hastened up the steps and out into the early dawn which was turning the east scarlet. Over the tops of smaller houses I saw in the distance a great gaunt building on the roof of which, I felt instinctively, that wild drama had been enacted the night before.

"That building was leased some months ago by a mysterious Chinaman," said Gordon, following my gaze. "Office building originally--the neighborhood deteriorated and the building stood vacant for some time. The new tenant added several stories to it but left it apparently empty. Had my eye on it for some time."

This was told in Gordon's jerky swift manner as we started hurriedly along the sidewalk. I listened mechanically, like a man in a trance. My vitality was ebbing fast and I knew that I was going to crumple at any moment.

"The people living in the vicinity had been reporting strange sights and noises. The man who owned the basement we just left heard queer sounds emanating from the wall of the basement and called the police. About that time I was racing back and forth among those cursed corridors like a hunted rat and I heard the police banging on the wall. I found the secret door and opened it but found it barred by a grating. It was while I was telling the astounded policemen to procure a hacksaw that the pursuing Negroes, whom I had eluded for the moment, came into sight and I was forced to shut the door and run for it again. By pure luck I found you and by pure luck managed to find the way back to the door.

"Now we must get to Scotland Yard. If we strike swiftly, we may capture the entire band of devils. Whether I killed Kathulos or not I do not know, or if he can be killed by mortal weapons. But to the best of my knowledge all of them are now in those subterranean corridors and--"

At that moment the world shook! A brain-shattering roar seemed to break the sky with its incredible detonation; houses tottered and crashed to ruins; a mighty pillar of smoke and flame burst from the earth and on its wings great masses of debris soared skyward. A black fog of smoke and dust and falling timbers enveloped the world, a prolonged thunder seemed to rumble up from the center of the earth as of walls and ceilings falling, and amid the uproar and the screaming I sank down and knew no more.

* * *

The Breaking of the Chain!

"And like a soul belated,
In heaven and hell unmated;
By cloud and mist abated;
Come out of darkness morn."

- Swinburne

There is little need to linger on the scenes of horror of that terrible London morning. The world is familiar with and knows most of the details attendant to the great explosion which wiped out a tenth of that great city with a resultant loss of lives and property. For such a happening some reason must needs be given; the tale of the deserted building got out, and many wild stories were circulated. Finally, to still the rumors, the report was unofficially given out that this building had been the rendezvous and secret stronghold of a gang of international anarchists, who had stored its basement full of high explosives and who had supposedly ignited these accidentally. In a way there was a good deal to this tale, as you know, but the threat that had lurked there far transcended any anarchist.

All this was told to me, for when I sank unconscious, Gordon, attributing my condition to exhaustion and a need of the hashish to the use of which he thought I was addicted, lifted me and with the aid of the stunned policemen got me to his rooms before returning to the scene of the explosion. At his rooms he found Hansen, and Zuleika handcuffed to the bed as I had left her. He released her and left her to tend to me, for all London was in a terrible turmoil and he was needed elsewhere.

When I came to myself at last, I looked up into her starry eyes and lay quiet, smiling up at her. She sank down upon my bosom, nestling my head in her arms and covering my face with her kisses.

"Steephen!" she sobbed over and over, as her tears splashed hot on my face.

I was scarcely strong enough to put my arms about her but I managed it, and we lay there for a space, in silence, except for the girl's hard, racking sobs.

"Zuleika, I love you," I murmured.

"And I love you, Steephen," she sobbed. "Oh, it is so hard to part now--but I'm going with you, Steephen; I can't live without you!"

"My dear child," said John Gordon, entering the room suddenly, "Costigan's not going to die. We will let him have enough hashish to tide him along, and when he is stronger we will take him off the habit slowly."

"You don't understand, sahib; it is not hashish Steephen must have. It is something which only the Master knew, and now that he is dead or is fled, Steephen cannot get it and must die."

Gordon shot a quick, uncertain glance at me. His fine face was drawn and haggard, his clothes sooty and torn from his work among the debris of the explosion.

"She's right, Gordon," I said languidly. "I'm dying. Kathulos killed the hashish-craving with a concoction he called the elixir. I've been keeping myself alive on some of the stuff that Zuleika stole from him and gave me, but I drank it all last night."

I was aware of no craving of any kind, no physical or mental discomfort even. All my mechanism was slowing down fast; I had passed the stage where the need of the elixir would tear and rend me. I felt only a great lassitude and a desire to sleep. And I knew that the moment I closed my eyes, I would die.

"A strange dope, that elixir," I said with growing languor. "It burns and freezes and then at last the craving kills easily and without torment."

"Costigan, curse it," said Gordon desperately, "you can't go like this! That vial I took from the Egyptian's table--what is in it?"

"The Master swore it would free me of my curse and probably kill me also," I muttered. "I'd forgotten about it. Let me have it; it can no more than kill me and I'm dying now."

"Yes, quick, let me have it!" exclaimed Zuleika fiercely, springing to Gordon's side, her hands passionately outstretched. She returned with the vial which he had taken from his pocket, and knelt beside me, holding it to my lips, while she murmured to me gently and soothingly in her own language.

I drank, draining the vial, but feeling little interest in the whole matter. My outlook was purely impersonal, at such a low ebb was my life, and I cannot even remember how the stuff tasted. I only remember feeling a curious sluggish fire burn faintly along my veins, and the last thing I saw was Zuleika crouching over me, her great eyes fixed with a burning intensity on me. Her tense little hand rested inside her blouse, and remembering her vow to take her own life if I died I tried to lift a hand and disarm her, tried to tell Gordon to take away the dagger she had hidden in her garments. But speech and action failed me and I drifted away into a curious sea of unconsciousness.

Of that period I remember nothing. No sensation fired my sleeping brain to such an extent as to bridge the gulf over which I drifted. They say I lay like a dead man for hours, scarcely breathing, while Zuleika hovered over me, never leaving my side an instant, and fighting like a tigress when anyone tried to coax her away to rest. Her chain was broken.

As I had carried the vision of her into that dim land of nothingness, so her dear eyes were the first thing which greeted my returning consciousness. I was aware of a greater weakness than I thought possible for a man to feel, as if I had been an invalid for months, but the life in me, faint though it was, was sound and normal, caused by no artificial stimulation. I smiled up at my girl and murmured weakly:

"Throw away your dagger, little Zuleika; I'm going to live."

She screamed and fell on her knees beside me, weeping and laughing at the same time. Women are strange beings, of mixed and powerful emotions, truly.

Gordon entered and grasped the hand which I could not lift from the bed.

"You're a case for an ordinary human physician now, Costigan," he said. "Even a layman like myself can tell that. For the first time since I've known you, the look in your eyes is entirely sane. You look like a man who has had a complete nervous breakdown, and needs about a year of rest and quiet. Great heavens, man, you've been through enough, outside your dope experience, to last you a lifetime."

"Tell me first," said I, "was Kathulos killed in the explosion?"

"I don't know," answered Gordon somberly. "Apparently the entire system of subterranean passages was destroyed. I know my last bullet--the last bullet that was in the revolver which I wrested from one of my attackers--found its mark in the Master's body, but whether he died from the wound, or whether a bullet can hurt him, I do not know. And whether in his death agonies he ignited the tons and tons of high explosives which were stored in the corridors, or whether the Negroes did it unintentionally, we shall never know.

"My God, Costigan, did you ever see such a honeycomb? And we know not how many miles in either direction the passages reached. Even now Scotland Yard men are combing the subways and basements of the town for secret openings. All known openings, such as the one through which we came and the one in Soho 48, were blocked by falling walls. The office building was simply blown to atoms."

"What about the men who raided Soho 48?"

"The door in the library wall had been closed. They found the Chinaman you killed, but searched the house without avail. Lucky for them, too, else they had doubtless been in the tunnels when the explosion came, and perished with the hundreds of Negroes who must have died then."

"Every Negro in London must have been there."

"I dare say. Most of them are voodoo worshipers at heart and the power the Master wielded was incredible. They died, but what of him? Was he blown to atoms by the stuff which he had secretly stored, or crushed when the stone walls crumbled and the ceilings came thundering down?"

"There is no way to search among those subterranean ruins, I suppose?"

"None whatever. When the walls caved in, the tons of earth upheld by the ceilings also came crashing down, filling the corridors with dirt and broken stone, blocking them forever. And on the surface of the earth, the houses which the vibration shook down were heaped high in utter ruins. What happened in those terrible corridors must remain forever a mystery."

My tale draws to a close. The months that followed passed uneventfully, except for the growing happiness which to me was paradise, but which would bore you were I to relate it. But one day Gordon and I again discussed the mysterious happenings that had had their being under the grim hand of the Master.

"Since that day," said Gordon, "the world has been quiet. Africa has subsided and the East seems to have returned to her ancient sleep. There can be but one answer--living or dead, Kathulos was destroyed that morning when his world crashed about him."

"Gordon," said I, "what is the answer to that greatest of all mysteries?"

My friend shrugged his shoulders.

"I have come to believe that mankind eternally hovers on the brinks of secret oceans of which it knows nothing. Races have lived and vanished before our race rose out of the slime of the primitive, and it is likely still others will live upon the earth after ours has vanished. Scientists have long upheld the theory that the Atlanteans possessed a higher civilization than our own, and on very different lines. Certainly Kathulos himself was proof that our boasted culture and knowledge were nothing beside that of whatever fearful civilization produced him.

"His dealings with you alone have puzzled all the scientific world, for none of them has been able to explain how he could remove the hashish craving, stimulate you with a drug so infinitely more powerful, and then produce another drug which entirely effaced the effects of the other."

"I have him to thank for two things," I said slowly; "the regaining of my lost manhood--and Zuleika. Kathulos, then, is dead, as far as any mortal thing can die. But what of those others--those 'ancient masters' who still sleep in the sea?"

Gordon shuddered.

"As I said, perhaps mankind loiters on the brink of unthinkable chasms of horror. But a fleet of gunboats is even now patrolling the oceans unobtrusively, with orders to destroy instantly any strange case that may be found floating--to destroy it and its contents. And if my word has any weight with the English government and the nations of the world, the seas will be so patrolled until doomsday shall let down the curtain on the races of today."

"At night I dream of them, sometimes," I muttered, "sleeping in their lacquered cases, which drip with strange seaweed, far down among the green surges--where unholy spires and strange towers rise in the dark ocean."

"We have been face to face with an ancient horror," said Gordon somberly, "with a fear too dark and mysterious for the human brain to cope with. Fortune has been with us; she may not again favor the sons of men. It is best that we be ever on our guard. The universe was not made for humanity alone; life takes strange phases and it is the first instinct of nature for the different species to destroy each other. No doubt we seemed as horrible to the Master as he did to us. We have scarcely tapped the chest of secrets which nature has stored, and I shudder to think of what that chest may hold for the human race."

"That's true," said I, inwardly rejoicing at the vigor which was beginning to course through my wasted veins, "but men will meet obstacles as they come, as men have always risen to meet them. Now, I am beginning to know the full worth of life and love, and not all the devils from all the abysses can hold me."

Gordon smiled.

"You have it coming to you, old comrade. The best thing is to forget all that dark interlude, for in that course lies light and happiness."

Contents

THE TOMB'S SECRET

By Robert E. Howard

When James Willoughby, millionaire philanthropist, realized that the dark, lightless car was deliberately crowding him into the curb, he acted with desperate decision. Snapping off his own lights, he threw open the door on the opposite side from the onrushing stranger, and leaped out, without stopping his own car. He landed sprawling on all fours, shredding the knees of his trousers and tearing the skin on his hands. An instant later his auto crashed cataclysmically into the curb, and the crunch of crumpled fenders and the tinkle of breaking glass mingled with the deafening reverberation of a sawed-off shotgun as the occupants of the mysterious car, not yet realizing that their intended victim had deserted his automobile, blasted the machine he had just left.

Before the echoes died away, Willoughby was up and running through the darkness with an energy remarkable for his years. He knew that his ruse was already discovered, but it takes longer to swing a big car around than for a desperately frightened man to burst through a hedge, and a flitting figure in the darkness is a poor target. So James Willoughby lived where others had died, and presently came on foot and in disheveled condition to his home, which adjoined the park beside which the murderous attempt had been made. The police, hastening to his call, found him in a condition of mingled fear and bewilderment. He had seen none of his attackers; he could give no reason for the attack. All that he seemed to know was that death had struck at him from the dark, suddenly, terribly and mysteriously.

It was only reasonable to suppose that death would strike again at its chosen victim, and that was why Brock Rollins, detective, kept a rendezvous the next evening with one Joey Glick, a nondescript character of the underworld who served his purpose in the tangled scheme of things.

Rollins bulked big in the dingy back-room appointed for the meeting. His massive shoulders and thick body dwarfed his height. His cold blue eyes contrasted with the thick black hair that crowned his low broad forehead, and his civilized garments could not conceal the almost savage muscularity of his hard frame.

Opposite him Joey Glick, never an impressive figure, looked even more insignificant than usual. And Joey's skin was a pasty grey, and Joey's fingers shook as he fumbled with a bit of paper on which was drawn a peculiar design.

"Somebody planted it on me," he chattered. "Right after I phoned you. In the jamb on the uptown train. Me, Joey Glick! They plant it on me and I don't even know it. Only one man in this burg handles dips that slick--even if I didn't know already.

"Look! It's the death-blossom! The symbol of the Sons of Erlik! They're after me! They've been shadowing me--tapping wires. They know I know too much--"

"Come to the point, will you?" grunted Rollins "You said you had a tip about the gorillas who tried to put the finger on Jim Willoughby. Quit shaking and spill it. And tell me, cold turkey--who was it?"

"The man behind it is Yarghouz Barolass."

Rollins grunted in some surprise.

"I didn't know murder was his racket."

"Wait!" Joey babbled, so scared he was scarcely coherent. His brain was addled, his speech disjointed. "He's head of the American branch of the Sons of Erlik--I know he is--"

"Chinese?"

"He's a Mongol. His racket is blackmailing nutty old dames who fall for his black magic. You know that. But this is bigger. Listen, you know about Richard Lynch?"

"Sure; got smashed up in an auto wreck by a hit-and-run speed maniac a week ago. Lay unidentified in a morgue all night before they discovered who he was. Some crazy loon tried to steal the corpse off the slab. What's that got to do with Willoughby?"

"It wasn't an accident." Joey was fumbling for a cigarette. "They meant to get him--Yarghouz's mob. It was them after the body that night--"

"Have you been hitting the pipe?" demanded Rollins harshly.

"No, damn it!" shrilled Joey. "I tell you, Yarghouz was after Richard Lynch's corpse, just like he's sending his mob after Job Hopkins' body tomorrow night--"

"What?" Rollins came erect, glaring incredulously.

"Don't rush me," begged Joey, striking a match. "Gimme time. That death-blossom has got me jumping sideways. I'm jittery--"

"I'll say you are," grunted Rollins. "You've been babbling a lot of stuff that don't mean anything, except it's Yarghouz Barolass who had Lynch bumped off, and now is after Willoughby. Why? That's what I want to know. Straighten it out and give me the low-down."

"Alright," promised Joey, sucking avidly at his cigarette. "Lemme have a drag. I been so upset I haven't even smoked since I reached into my pocket for a fag and found that damned death-flower. This is straight goods. I know why they want the bodies of Richard Lynch, Job Hopkins and James Willoughby--"

With appalling suddenness his hands shot to his throat, crushing the smoldering cigarette in his fingers. His eyes distended, his face purpled. Without a word he swayed upright, reeled and crashed to the floor. With a curse Rollins sprang up, bent over him, ran skilled hands over his body.

"Dead as Judas Iscariot," swore the detective. "What an infernal break! I knew his heart would get him some day, if he kept hitting the pipe--"

He halted suddenly. On the floor where it had fallen beside the dead man lay the bit of ornamented paper Joey had called the blossom of death, and beside it lay a crumpled package of cigarettes.

"When did he change his brand?" muttered Rollins. "He never smoked any kind but a special Egyptian make before; never saw him use this brand." He lifted the package, drew out a cigarette and broke it into his hand, smelling the contents gingerly. There was a faint but definite odor which was not part of the smell of the cheap tobacco.

"The fellow who slipped that death-blossom into his pocket could have shifted fags on him just as easy," muttered the detective. "They must have known he was coming here to talk to me. But the question is, how much do they know now? They can't know how much or how little he told me. They evidently didn't figure on him reaching me at all--thought he'd take a draw before he got here. Ordinarily he would have; but this time he was too scared even to remember to smoke. He needed dope, not tobacco, to steady his nerve."

Going to the door, he called softly. A stocky bald-headed man answered his call, wiping his hands on a dirty apron. At the sight of the crumpled body he recoiled, paling.

"Heart attack, Spike," grunted Rollins. "See that he gets what's needed." And the big dick thrust a handful of crumpled bills into Spike's fingers as he strode forth. A hard man, Rollins, but one mindful of his debts to the dead as well as the living.

A few minutes later be was crouched over a telephone.

"This you, Hoolihan?"

A voice booming back over the wires assured him that the chief of police was indeed at the other end.

"What killed Job Hopkins?" he asked abruptly.

"Why, heart attack, I understand." There was some surprise in the chief's voice. "Passed out suddenly, day before yesterday, while smoking his after-dinner cigar, according to the papers. Why?"

"Who's guarding Willoughby?" demanded Rollins without answering.

"Laveaux, Hanson, McFarlane and Harper. But I don't see--"

"Not enough," snapped Rollins. "Beat it over there yourself with three or four more men."

"Say, listen here, Rollins!" came back the irate bellow. "Are you telling me how to run my business?"

"Right now I am." Rollins' cold hard grin was almost tangible in his voice. "This happens to be in my particular domain. We're not fighting white men; it's a gang of River Street yellow-bellies who've put Willoughby on the spot. I won't say any more right now. There's been too damned much wire-tapping in this burg. But you beat it over to Willoughby's as fast as you can get there. Don't let him out of your sight. Don't let him smoke, eat or drink anything till I get there. I'll be right on over."

"Okay," came the answer over the wires. "You've been working the River Street quarter long enough to know what you're doing."

Rollins snapped the receiver back on its hook and strode out into the misty dimness of River Street, with its furtive hurrying forms--stooped alien figures which would have fitted less incongruously into the scheme of Canton, Bombay or Stamboul.

The big dick walked with a stride even springier than usual, a more aggressive lurch of his massive shoulders. That betokened unusual wariness, a tension of nerves. He knew that he was a marked man, since his talk with Joey Glick. He did not try to fool himself; it was certain that the spies of the man he was fighting knew that Joey had reached him before he died. The fact that they could not know just how much the fellow had told before he died, would make them all the more dangerous. He did not underestimate his own position. He knew that if there was one man in the city capable of dealing with Yarghouz Barolass, it was himself, with his experience gained from years of puzzling through the devious and often grisly mysteries of River Street, with its swarms of brown and yellow inhabitants.

"Taxi?" A cab drew purring up beside the curb, anticipating his summoning gesture. The driver did not lean out into the light of the street. His cap seemed to be drawn low, not unnaturally so, but, standing on the sidewalk, it was impossible for the detective to tell whether or not he was a white man.

"Sure," grunted Rollins, swinging open the door and climbing in. "540 Park Place, and step on it."

The taxi roared through the crawling traffic, down shadowy River Street, wheeled off onto 35th Avenue, crossed over, and sped down a narrow side street.

"Taking a short cut?" asked the detective.

"Yes, sir." The driver did not look back. His voice ended in a sudden hissing intake of breath. There was no partition between the front and back seats. Rollins was leaning forward, his gun jammed between the shoulders of the driver.

"Take the next right-hand turn and drive to the address I gave you," he said softly. "Think I can't tell the back of a yellow neck by the street lamp? You drive, but you drive careful. If you try to wreck us, I'll fill you full of lead before you can twist that wheel. No monkey business now; you wouldn't be the first man I've plugged in the course of duty."

The driver twisted his head about to stare briefly into the grim face of his captor; his wide thin mouth gaped, his coppery features were ashy. Not for nothing had Rollins established his reputation as a man-hunter among the sinister denizens of the Oriental quarter.

"Joey was right," muttered Rollins between his teeth. "I don't know your name, but I've seen you hanging around Yarghouz Barolass's joint when he had it over on Levant Street. You won't take me for a ride, not tonight. I know that trick, old copper-face. You'd have a flat, or run out of gas at some convenient spot. Any excuse for you to get out of the car and out of range while a hatchet-man hidden somewhere mows me down with a sawed-off. You better hope none of your friends see us and try anything, because this gat has a hair-trigger, and it's cocked. I couldn't die quick enough not to pull the trigger."

The rest of that grim ride was made in silence, until the reaches of South Park rose to view--darkened, except for a fringe of lights around the boundaries, because of municipal economy which sought to reduce the light bill.

"Swing into the park," ordered Rollins, as they drove along the street which passed the park, and, further on, James Willoughby's house. "Cut off your lights, and drive as I tell you. You can feel your way between the trees."

The darkened car glided into a dense grove and came to a halt. Rollins fumbled in his pockets with his left hand and drew out a small flashlight, and a pair of handcuffs. In climbing out, he was forced to remove his muzzle from close contact with his prisoner's back, but the gun menaced the Mongol in the small ring of light emanating from the flash.

"Climb out," ordered the detective. "That's right--slow and easy. You're going to have to stay here awhile. I didn't want to take you to the station right now, for several reasons. One of them is I didn't want your pals to know I turned the tables on you. I'm hoping they'll still be patiently waiting for you to bring me into range of their sawed-offs--ha, would you?"

The Mongol, with a desperate wrench, struck the flashlight from the detective's hand, plunging them into darkness.

Rollins' clutching fingers locked like a vise on his adversary's coat sleeve, and at the same instant he instinctively threw out his .45 before his belly, to parry the stroke he knew would instantly come. A knife clashed venomously against the blue steel cylinder, and Rollins hooked his foot about an ankle and jerked powerfully. The fighters went down together, and the knife sliced the detective's coat as they fell. Then his blindingly driven gun barrel crunched glancingly against a shaven skull, and the straining form went limp.

Panting and swearing beneath his breath, Rollins retrieved the flashlight and cuffs, and set to work securing his prisoner. The Mongol was completely out; it was no light matter to stop a full-arm swing from Brock Rollins. Had the blow landed solidly it would have caved in the skull like an egg-shell.

Handcuffed, gagged with strips torn from his coat, and his feet bound with the same material, the Mongol was placed in the car, and Rollins turned and strode through the shadows of the park, toward the eastern hedge beyond which lay James Willoughby's estate. He hoped that this affair would give him some slight advantage in this blind battle. While the Mongols waited for him to ride into the trap they had undoubtedly laid for him somewhere in the city, perhaps he could do a little scouting unmolested.

James Willoughby's estate adjoined South Park on the east. Only a high hedge separated the park from his grounds. The big three-storied house--disproportionately huge for a bachelor--towered among carefully trimmed trees and shrubbery, amidst a level, shaven lawn. There were lights in the two lower floors, none in the third. Rollins knew that Willoughby's study was a big room on the second floor, on the west side of the house. From that room no light issued between the heavy shutters. Evidently curtains and shades were drawn inside. The big dick grunted in approval as he stood looking through the hedge.

He knew that a plainclothes man was watching the house from each side, and he marked the bunch of shrubbery amidst which would be crouching the man detailed to guard the west side. Craning his neck, he saw a car in front of the house, which faced south, and he knew it to be that of Chief Hoolihan.

With the intention of taking a short cut across the lawn he wormed through the hedge, and, not wishing to be shot by mistake, he called softly: "Hey, Harper!"

There was no answer. Rollins strode toward the shrubbery.

"Asleep at the post?" he muttered angrily. "Eh, what's this?"

He had stumbled over something in the shadows of the shrubs. His hurriedly directed beam shone on the white, upturned face of a man. Blood dabbled the features, and a crumpled hat lay near by, an unfired pistol near the limp hand.

"Knocked stiff from behind!" muttered Rollins. "What--"

Parting the shrub he gazed toward the house. On that side an ornamental chimney rose tier by tier, until it towered above the roof. And his eyes became slits as they centered on a window on the third floor within easy reach of that chimney. On all other windows the shutters were closed; but these stood open.

With frantic haste he tore through the shrubbery and ran across the lawn, stooping like a bulky bear, amazingly fleet for one of his weight. As he rounded the corner of the house and rushed toward the steps, a man rose swiftly from among the hedges lining the walk, and covered him, only to lower his gun with an exclamation of recognition.

"Where's Hoolihan?" snapped the detective.

"Upstairs with old man Willoughby. What's up?"

"Harper's been slugged," snarled Rollins. "Beat it out there; you know where he was posted. Wait there until I call you. If you see anything you don't recognize trying to leave the house, plug it! I'll send out a man to take your place here."

He entered the front door and saw four men in plain clothes lounging about in the main hall.

"Jackson," he snapped, "take Hanson's place out in front. I sent him around to the west side. The rest of you stand by for anything."

Mounting the stair in haste, he entered the study on the second floor, breathing a sigh of relief as he found the occupants apparently undisturbed.

The curtains were closely drawn over the windows, and only the door letting into the hall was open. Willoughby was there, a tall spare man, with a scimitar sweep of nose and a bony aggressive chin. Chief Hoolihan, big, bear-like, rubicund, boomed a greeting.

"All your men downstairs?" asked Rollins.

"Sure; nothin' can get past 'em and I'm stayin' here with Mr. Willoughby--"

"And in a few minutes more you'd both have been scratching gravel in Hell," snapped Rollins. "Didn't I tell you we were dealing with Orientals? You concentrated all your force below, never thinking that death might slip in on you from above. But I haven't time to turn out that light. Mr. Willoughby, get over there in that alcove. Chief, stand in front of him, and watch that door that leads into the hall. I'm going to leave it open. Locking it would be useless, against what we're fighting. If anything you don't recognize comes through it, shoot to kill."

"What the devil are you driving at, Rollins?" demanded Hoolihan.

"I mean one of Yarghouz Barolass's killers is in this house!" snapped Rollins. "There may be more than one; anyway, he's somewhere upstairs. Is this the only stair, Mr. Willoughby? No back-stair?"

"This is the only one in the house," answered the millionaire. "There are only bedrooms on the third floor."

"Where's the light button for the hall on that floor?"

"At the head of the stairs, on the left; but you aren't--"

"Take your places and do as I say," grunted Rollins, gliding out into the hallway.

He stood glaring at the stair which wound up above him, its upper part masked in shadow. Somewhere up there lurked a soulless slayer--a Mongol killer, trained in the art of murder, who lived only to perform his master's will. Rollins started to call the men below, then changed his mind. To raise his voice would be to warn the lurking murderer above. Setting his teeth, he glided up the stair. Aware that he was limned in the light below, he realized the desperate recklessness of his action; but he had long ago learned that he could not match subtlety

against the Orient. Direct action, however desperate, was always his best bet. He did not fear a bullet as he charged up; the Mongols preferred to slay in silence; but a thrown knife could kill as promptly as tearing lead. His one chance lay in the winding of the stair.

He took the last steps with a thundering rush, not daring to use his flash, plunged into the gloom of the upper hallway, frantically sweeping the wall for the light button. Even as he felt life and movement in the darkness beside him, his groping fingers found it. The scrape of a foot on the floor beside him galvanized him, and as he instinctively flinched back, something whined past his breast and thudded deep into the wall. Then under his frenzied fingers, light flooded the hall.

Almost touching him, half crouching, a copper-skinned giant with a shaven head wrenched at a curved knife which was sunk deep in the woodwork. He threw up his head, dazzled by the light, baring yellow fangs in a bestial snarl.

Rollins had just left a lighted area. His eyes accustomed themselves more swiftly to the sudden radiance. He threw his left like a hammer at the Mongol's jaw. The killer swayed and fell out cold.

Hoolilhan was bellowing from below.

"Hold everything," answered Rollins. "Send one of the boys up here with the cuffs. I'm going through these bedrooms."

Which he did, switching on the lights, gun ready, but finding no other lurking slayer. Evidently Yarghouz Barolass considered one would be enough. And so it might have been, but for the big detective.

Having latched all the shutters and fastened the windows securely, he returned to the study, whither the prisoner had been taken. The man had recovered his senses and sat, handcuffed, on a divan. Only the eyes, black and snaky, seemed alive in the copperish face.

"Mongol alright," muttered Rollins. "No Chinaman."

"What is all this?" complained Hoolihan, still upset by the realization that an invader had slipped through his cordon.

"Easy enough. This fellow sneaked up on Harper and laid him cold. Some of these fellows could steal the teeth right out of your mouth. With all those shrubs and trees it was a cinch. Say, send out a couple of the boys to bring in Harper, will you? Then he climbed that fancy chimney. That was a cinch, too. I could do it myself. Nobody had thought to fasten the shutters on that floor, because nobody expected an attack from that direction.

"Mr. Willoughby, do you know anything about Yarghouz Barolass?"

"I never heard of him," declared the philanthropist, and though Rollins scanned him narrowly, he was impressed by the ring of sincerity in Willoughby's voice.

"Well, he's a mystic fakir," said Rollins. "Hangs around Levant Street and preys on old ladies with more money than sense--faddists. Gets them interested in Taoism and Lamaism and then plays on their superstitions and blackmails them. I know his racket, but I've never been able to put the finger on him, because his victims won't squeal. But he's behind these attacks on you."

"Then why don't we go grab him?" demanded Hoolihan.

"Because we don't know where he is. He knows that I know he's mixed up in this. Joey Glick spilled it to me, just before he croaked. Yes, Joey's dead--poison; more of Yarghouz's work. By this time Yarghouz will have deserted his usual hang-outs, and be hiding somewhere--probably in some secret underground dive that we couldn't find in a hundred years, now that Joey is dead."

"Let's sweat it out of this yellow-belly," suggested Hoolihan.

Rollins grinned coldly. "You'd sweat to death yourself before he'd talk. There's another tied up in a car out in the park. Send a couple of boys after him, and you can try your hand on both of them. But you'll get damned little out of them. Come here, Hoolihan."

Drawing him aside, he said: "I'm sure that Job Hopkins was poisoned in the same manner they got Joey Glick. Do you remember anything unusual about the death of Richard Lynch?"

"Well, not about his death; but that night somebody apparently tried to steal and mutilate his corpse--"

"What do you mean, mutilate?" demanded Rollins.

"Well, a watchman heard a noise and went into the room and found Lynch's body on the floor, as if somebody had tried to carry it off, and then maybe got scared off. And a lot of the teeth had been pulled or knocked out!"

"Well, I can't explain the teeth," grunted Rollins. "Maybe they were knocked out in the wreck that killed Lynch. But this is my hunch: Yarghouz Barolass is stealing the bodies of wealthy men, figuring on screwing a big price out of their families. When they don't die quick enough, he bumps them off."

Hoolihan cursed in shocked horror.

"But Willoughby hasn't any family."

"Well, I reckon they figure the executors of his estate will kick in. Now listen: I'm borrowing your car for a visit to Job Hopkins' vault. I got a tip that they're going to lift his corpse tomorrow night. I believe they'll spring it tonight, on the chance that I might have gotten the tip. I believe they'll try to get ahead of me. They may have already, what with all this delay. I figured on being out there long before now.

"No, I don't want any help. Your flat-feet are more of a hindrance than a help in a job like this. You stay here with Willoughby. Keep men upstairs as well as down. Don't let Willoughby open any packages that might come, don't even let him answer a phone call. I'm going to Hopkins' vault, and I don't know when I'll be back; may roost out there all night. It just depends on when--or if--they come for the corpse."

A few minutes later he was speeding down the road on his grim errand. The graveyard which contained the tomb of Job Hopkins was small, exclusive, where only the bones of rich men were laid to rest. The wind moaned through the cypress trees which bent shadow-arms above the gleaming marble.

Rollins approached from the back side, up a narrow, tree-lined side street. He left the car, climbed the wall, and stole through the gloom, beneath the pallid shafts, under the cypress shadows. Ahead of him Job Hopkins' tomb glimmered whitely. And he stopped short, crouching low in the shadows. He saw a glow--a spark of light--it was extinguished, and through the open door of the tomb trooped half a dozen shadowy forms. His hunch had been right, but they had gotten there ahead of him. Fierce anger sweeping him at the ghoulish crime, he leaped forward, shouting a savage command.

They scattered like rats, and his crashing volley re-echoed futilely among the sepulchers. Rushing forward recklessly, swearing savagely, he came into the tomb, and turning his light into the interior, winced at what he saw. The coffin had been burst open, but the tomb itself was not empty. In a careless heap on the floor lay the embalmed corpse of Job Hopkins--and the lower jawbone had been sawed away.

"What the Hell!" Rollins stopped short, bewildered at the sudden disruption of his theory. "They didn't want the body. What did they want? His teeth? And they got Richard Lynch's teeth--"

Lifting the body back into its resting place, he hurried forth, shutting the door of the tomb behind him. The wind whined through the cypress, and mingled with it was a low moaning sound. Thinking that one of his shots had gone home, after all, he followed the noise, warily, pistol and flash ready.

The sound seemed to emanate from a bunch of low cedars near the wall, and among them he found a man lying. The beam revealed the stocky figure, the square, now convulsed face of a Mongol. The slant eyes were glazed, the back of the coat soaked with blood. The man was gasping his last, but Rollins found no trace of a bullet wound on him. In his back, between his shoulders, stood up the hilt of a curious skewer-like knife. The fingers of his right hand had been horribly gashed, as if he had sought to retain his grasp on something which his slayers desired.

"Running from me he bumped into somebody hiding among these cedars," muttered Rollins. "But who? And why? By God, Willoughby hasn't told me everything."

He stared uneasily at the crowding shadows. No stealthy shuffling footfall disturbed the sepulchral quiet. Only the wind whimpered through the cypress and the cedars. The detective was alone with the dead--with the corpses of rich men in their ornate tombs, and with the staring yellow man whose flesh was not yet rigid.

"You're back in a hurry," said Hoolihan, as Rollins entered the Willoughby study. "Do any good?"

"Did the yellow boys talk?" countered Rollins.

"They did not," growled the chief. "They sat like pot-bellied idols. I sent 'em to the station, along with Harper. He was still in a daze."

"Mr. Willoughby," Rollins sank down rather wearily into an arm-chair and fixed his cold gaze on the philanthropist, "am I right in believing that you and Richard Lynch and Job Hopkins were at one time connected with each other in some way?"

"Why do you ask?" parried Willoughby.

"Because somehow the three of you are connected in this matter. Lynch's death was not accidental, and I'm pretty sure that Job Hopkins was poisoned. Now the same gang is after you. I thought it was a body-snatching racket, but an apparent attempt to steal Richard Lynch's corpse out of the morgue, now seems to resolve itself into what was in reality a successful attempt to get his teeth. Tonight a gang of Mongols entered the tomb of Job Hopkins, obviously for the same purpose--"

A choking cry interrupted him. Willoughby sank back, his face livid.

"My God, after all these years!"

Rollins stiffened.

"Then you do know Yarghouz Barolass? You know why he's after you?"

Willoughby shook his head. "I never heard of Yarghouz Barolass before. But I know why they killed Lynch and Hopkins."

"Then you'd better spill the works," advised Rollins. "We're working in the dark as it is."

"I will!" The philanthropist was visibly shaken. He mopped his brow with a shaking hand, and reposed himself with an effort.

"Twenty years ago," he said, "Lynch, Hopkins and myself, young men just out of college, were in China, in the employ of the war-lord Yuen Chin. We were chemical engineers. Yuen Chin was a far-sighted man--ahead of his time, scientifically speaking. He visioned the day when men would war with gases and deadly chemicals. He supplied us with a splendid laboratory, in which to discover or invent some such element of destruction for his use.

"He paid us well; the foundations of all of our fortunes were laid there. We were young, poor, unscrupulous.

"More by chance than skill we stumbled onto a deadly secret--the formula for a poisonous gas, a thousand times more deadly than anything yet dreamed of. That was what he was paying us to invent or discover for him, but the discovery sobered us. We realized that the man who possessed the secret of that gas, could easily conquer the world. We were willing to aid Yuen Chin against his Mongolian enemies; we were not willing to elevate a yellow mandarin to world empire, to see our hellish discovery directed against the lives of our own people.

"Yet we were not willing to destroy the formula, because we foresaw a time when America, with her back to the wall, might have a desperate need for such a weapon. So we wrote out the formula in code, but left out three symbols, without any of which the formula is meaningless and undecipherable. Each of us then, had a lower jaw tooth pulled out, and on the gold tooth put in its place, was carved one of the three symbols. Thus we took precautions against our own greed, as well as against the avarice of outsiders. One of us might conceivably fall so low as to sell the secret, but it would be useless without the other two symbols.

"Yuen Chin fell and was beheaded on the great execution ground at Peking. We escaped, Lynch, Hopkins and I, not only with our lives but with most of the money which had been paid us. But the formula, scrawled on parchment, we were obliged to leave, secreted among musty archives in an ancient temple.

"Only one man knew our secret: an old Chinese tooth-puller, who aided us in the matter of the teeth. He owed his life to Richard Lynch, and when he swore the oath of eternal silence, we knew we could trust him."

"Yet you think somebody is after the secret symbols?"

"What else could it be? I cannot understand it. The old tooth-puller must have died long ago. Who could have learned of it? Torture would not have dragged the secret from him. Yet it can be for no other reason that this fellow you call Yarghouz Barolass murdered and mutilated the bodies of my former companions, and now is after me.

"Why, I love life as well as any man, but my own peril shrinks into insignificance compared to the world-wide menace contained in those little carven symbols--two of which are now, according to what you say, in the hands of some ruthless foe of the western world.

"Somebody has found the formula we left hidden in the temple, and has learned somehow of its secret. Anything can come out of China. Just now the bandit war-lord Yah Lai is threatening to overthrow the National government--who knows what devilish concoction that Chinese caldron is brewing?

"The thought of the secret of that gas in the hands of some Oriental conqueror is appalling. My God, gentlemen, I fear you do not realize the full significance of the matter!"

"I've got a faint idea," grunted Rollins. "Ever see a dagger like this?" He presented the weapon that had killed the Mongol.

"Many of them, in China," answered Willoughby promptly.

"Then it isn't a Mongol weapon?"

"No; it's distinctly Chinese; there is a conventional Manchu inscription on the hilt."

"Ummmmmm!" Rollins sat scowling, chin on fist, idly tapping the blade against his shoe, lost in meditation. Admittedly, he was all at sea, lost in a bewildering tangle. To his companions he looked like a grim figure of retribution, brooding over the fate of the wicked. In reality he was cursing his luck.

"What are you going to do now?" demanded Hoolihan.

"Only one thing to do," responded Rollins. "I'm going to try to run down Yarghouz Barolass. I'm going to start with River Street--God knows, it'll be like looking for a rat in a swamp. I want you to contrive to let one of those Mongols escape, Hoolihan. I'll try to trail him back to Yarghouz's hangout--"

The phone tingled loudly.

Rollins reached it with a long stride.

"Who speaks, please?" Over the wire came a voice with a subtle but definite accent.

"Brock Rollins," grunted the big dick.

"A friend speaks, Detective," came the bland voice. "Before we progress further, let me warn you that it will be impossible to trace this call, and would do you no good to do so."

"Well?" Rollins was bristling like a big truculent dog.

"Mr. Willoughby," the suave voice continued, "is a doomed man. He is as good as dead already. Guards and guns will not save him, when the Sons of Erlik are ready to strike. But you can save him, without firing a shot!"

"Yeah?" It was a scarcely articulate snarl humming bloodthirstily from Rollins' bull-throat.

"If you were to come alone to the House of Dreams on Levant street, Yarghouz Barolass would speak to you, and a compromise might be arranged whereby Mr. Willoughby's life would be spared."

"Compromise, Hell!" roared the big dick, the skin over his knuckles showing white. "Who do you think you're talking to? Think I'd fall into a trap like that?"

"You have a hostage," came back the voice. "One of the men you hold is Yarghouz Barolass's brother. Let him suffer if there is treachery. I swear by the bones of my ancestors, no harm shall come to you!"

The voice ceased with a click at the other end of the wire.

Rollins wheeled.

"Yarghouz Barolass must be getting desperate to try such a child's trick as that!" he swore. Then he considered, and muttered, half to himself: "By the bones of his ancestors! Never heard of a Mongolian breaking that oath. All that stuff about Yarghouz's brother may be the bunk. Yet--well, maybe he's trying to outsmart me--draw me away from Willoughby--on the other hand, maybe he thinks that I'd never fall for a trick like that--aw, to Hell with thinking! I'm going to start acting!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Hoolihan.

"I mean I'm going to the House of Dreams, alone."

"You're crazy!" exclaimed Hoolihan. "Take a squad, surround the house, and raid it!"

"And find an empty rat-den," grunted Rollins, his peculiar obsession for working alone again asserting itself.

Dawn was not far away when Rollins entered the smoky den near the waterfront which was known to the Chinese as the House of Dreams, and whose dingy exterior masked a subterranean opium joint. Only a pudgy Chinaboy nodded behind the counter; he looked up with no apparent surprise. Without a word he led Rollins to a curtain in the back of the shop, pulled it aside, and revealed a door. The detective gripped his gun under his coat, nerves taut with excitement that must come to any man who has deliberately walked into what might prove to be a death-trap. The boy knocked, lifting a sing-song monotone, and a voice answered from within. Rollins started. He recognized that voice. The boy opened the door, bobbed his head and was gone. Rollins entered, pulling the door to behind him.

He was in a room heaped and strewn with divans and silk cushions. If there were other doors, they were masked by the black velvet hangings, which, worked with gilt dragons, covered the walls. On a divan near the further wall squatted a stocky, pot-bellied shape, in black silk, a close-fitting velvet cap on his shaven head.

"So you came, after all!" breathed the detective. "Don't move, Yarghouz Barolass. I've got you covered through my coat. Your gang can't get me quick enough to keep me from getting you first."

"Why do you threaten me, Detective?" Yarghouz Barolass's face was expressionless, the square, parchment-skinned face of a Mongol from the Gobi, with wide thin lips and glittering black eyes. His English was perfect.

"See, I trust you. I am here, alone. The boy who let you in said that you are alone. Good. You kept your word, I keep my promise. For the time there is truce between us, and I am ready to bargain, as you suggested."

"As I suggested?" demanded Rollins.

"I have no desire to harm Mr. Willoughby, any more than I wished to harm either of the other gentlemen," said Yarghouz Barolass. "But knowing them all as I did--from report and discreet observation--it never occurred to me that I could obtain what I wished while they lived. So I did not enter into negotiations with them."

"So you want Willoughby's tooth, too?"

"Not I," disclaimed Yarghouz Barolass. "It is an honorable person in China, the grandson of an old man who babbled in his dotage, as old men often do, drooling secrets torture could not have wrung from him in his soundness of mind. The grandson, Yah Lai, has risen from a mean position to that of war-lord. He listened to the mumblings of his grandfather, a tooth-puller. He found a formula, written in code, and learned of symbols on the teeth of old men. He sent a request to me, with promise of much reward. I have one tooth, procured from the unfortunate person, Richard Lynch. Now if you will hand over the other--that of Job Hopkins--as you promised, perhaps we may reach a compromise by which Mr. Willoughby will be allowed to keep his life, in return for a tooth, as you hinted."

"As I hinted?" exclaimed Rollins. "What are you driving at? I made no promise; and I certainly haven't Job Hopkins' tooth. You've got it, yourself."

"All this is unnecessary," objected Yarghouz, an edge to his tone. "You have a reputation for veracity, in spite of your violent nature. I was relying upon your reputation for honesty when I accepted this appointment. Of course, I already knew that you had Hopkins' tooth. When my blundering servants, having been frightened by you as they left the vaults, gathered at the appointed rendezvous, they discovered that he to whom was entrusted the jaw-bone containing the precious tooth, was not among them. They returned to the graveyard and found his body, but not the tooth. It was obvious that you had killed him and taken it from him."

Rollins was so thunderstruck by this new twist, that he remained speechless, his mind a tangled whirl of bewilderment.

Yarghouz Barolass continued tranquilly: "I was about to send my servants out in another attempt to secure you, when your agent phoned me--though how he located me on the telephone is still a mystery into which I must inquire--and announced that you were ready to meet me at the House of Dreams, and give me Job Hopkins' tooth, in return for an opportunity to bargain personally for Mr. Willoughby's life. Knowing you to be a man of honor, I agreed, trusting you--"

"This is madness!" exclaimed Rollins "I didn't call you, or have anybody call you. You, or rather, one of your men, called me."

"I did not!" Yarghouz was on his feet, his stocky body under the rippling black silk quivering with rage and suspicion. His eyes narrowed to slits, his wide mouth knotted viciously.

"You deny that you promised to give me Job Hopkins' tooth?"

"Sure I do!" snapped Rollins. "I haven't got it, and what's more, I'm not 'compromising' as you call it--"

"Liar!" Yarghouz spat the epithet like a snake hissing. "You have tricked--betrayed me--used my trust in your blackened honor to dupe me--"

"Keep cool," advised Rollins. "Remember, I've got a Colt .45 trained on you."

"Shoot and die!" retorted Yarghouz. "I do not know what your game is, but I know that if you shoot me, we will fall together. Fool, do you think I would keep my promise to a barbarian dog? Behind this hanging is the entrance to a tunnel through which I can escape before any of your stupid police, if you have brought any with you, can enter this room. You have been covered since you came through that door, by a man hiding behind the tapestry. Try to stop me, and you die!"

"I believe you're telling the truth about not calling me," said Rollins slowly. "I believe somebody tricked us both, for some reason. You were called, in my name, and I was called, in yours."

Yarghouz halted short in some hissing tirade. His eyes were like black evil jewels in the lamplight.

"More lies?" he demanded uncertainly.

"No; I think somebody in your gang is double-crossing you. Now easy, I'm not pulling a gun. I'm just going to show you the knife that I found sticking in the back of the fellow you seem to think I killed."

He drew it from his coat-pocket with his left hand--his right still gripped his gun beneath the garment--and tossed it on the divan.

Yarghouz pounced on it. His slit eyes flared wide with a terrible light; his yellow skin went ashen. He cried out something in his own tongue, which Rollins did not understand.

In a torrent of hissing sibilances, he lapsed briefly into English: "I see it all now! This was too subtle for a barbarian! Death to them all!" Wheeling toward the tapestry behind the divan he shrieked: "Gutchluk!"

There was no answer, but Rollins thought he saw the black velvety expanse billow slightly. With his skin the color of old ashes, Yarghouz Barolass ran at the hanging, ignoring Rollins' order to halt, seized the tapestries, tore them aside--something flashed between them like a beam of white hot light. Yarghouz's scream broke in a ghastly gurgle. His head pitched

forward, then his whole body swayed backward, and he fell heavily among the cushions, clutching at the hilt of a skewer-like dagger that quivered upright in his breast. The Mongol's yellow claw-like hands fell away from the crimsoned hilt, spread wide, clutching at the thick carpet; a convulsive spasm ran through his frame, and those taloned yellow fingers went limp.

Gun in hand, Rollins took a single stride toward the tapestries--then halted short, staring at the figure which moved imperturbably through them: a tall yellow man in the robes of a mandarin, who smiled and bowed, his hands hidden in his wide sleeves.

"You killed Yarghous Barolass!" accused the detective.

"The evil one indeed has been dispatched to join his ancestors by my hand," agreed the mandarin. "Be not afraid. The Mongol who covered you through a peep-hole with an abbreviated shotgun has likewise departed this uncertain life, suddenly and silently. My own people hold supreme in the House of Dreams this night. All that we ask is that you make no attempt to stay our departure."

"Who are you?" demanded Rollins.

"But a humble servant of Fang Yin, lord of Peking. When it was learned that these unworthy ones sought a formula in America that might enable the upstart Yah Lai to overthrow the government of China, word was sent in haste to me. It was almost too late. Two men had already died. The third was menaced."

"I sent my servants instantly to intercept the evil Sons of Erlik at the vaults they desecrated. But for your appearance, frightening the Mongols to scattering in flight, before the trap could be sprang, my servants would have caught them all in ambush. As it was, they did manage to slay he who carried the relic Yarghouz sought, and this they brought to me."

"I took the liberty of impersonating a servant of the Mongol in my speech with you, and of pretending to be a Chinese agent of yours, while speaking with Yarghouz. All worked out as I wished. Lured by the thought of the tooth, at the loss of which he was maddened, Yarghouz came from his secret, well-guarded lair, and fell into my hands. I brought you here to witness his execution, so that you might realize that Mr. Willoughby is no longer in danger. Fang Yin has no ambitions for world empire; he wishes but to hold what is his. That he is well able to do, now that the threat of the devil-gas is lifted. And now I must be gone. Yarghouz had laid careful plans for his flight out of the country. I will take advantage of his preparations."

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Rollins. "I've got to arrest you for the murder of this rat."

"I am sorry," murmured the mandarin. "I am in much haste. No need to lift your revolver. I swore that you would not be injured and I keep my word."

As he spoke, the light went suddenly out. Rollins sprang forward, cursing, fumbling at the tapestries which had swished in the darkness as if from the passing of a large body between them. His fingers met only solid walls, and when at last the light came on again, he was alone in the room, and behind the hangings a heavy door had been slid shut. On the divan lay something that glinted in the lamplight, and Rollins looked down on a curiously carven gold tooth.

Contents

AHA! OR THE MYSTERY OF THE QUEEN'S NECKLACE

by Robert Ervin Howard

Hawkshaw, the great detective, was smoking a stogy refelctively when the Colonel burst into the room.

"Have you heard—" he began excitedly, but Hawkshaw raised his hand depreciatingly.

"My dear Colonel," he said. "You excite yourself unduly: you were about to tell me that the Queen's necklace, valued at fifteen million shillings, was stolen from her boudoir and that so far Scotland Yard has found no trace of the thief although they have ransacked London."

"You are a wonder, Hawkshaw," exclaimed the Colonel admirlingly. "How did you know that?"

"Deduction, my dear Colonel," replied Hawkshaw, surreptitiously concealing the newspaper in which was a full account of the robbery.

"Have you been to the palace?" he asked.

"I have," was the reply. "And I brought the only clew to be found. This cigar stub was found just beneath the palace window.

Hawkshaw seized the stub and examined it carefully.

"Aha!" he exclaimed. "The man who stole the necklace was a very tall, lank, gangling person, with very large feet and cross-eyed. He wears a number 5 hat."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed the Colonel, "and how may I ask do you deduce that? How do you even know that a person who smoked that cigar stole the necklace?"

"The stub is flattened on one side. That proves that its smoker had a large foot. He stepped on it and it would take a great deal of weight to even dent a cigar like that. I know that its smoker is the thief because it is a long stub and anyone who could stand one whiff of that cigar would smoke it entirely up. He would be that kind of man. He evidently dropped it in his haste to make his getaway."

"But that hat? And his tallness and cross-eyes?"

"Any man that would smoke a cigar like that would wear about a number 5 hat. As for the tallness and cross-eyes I will explain later."

Just then there came a tap at the door. The Colonel opened it and an old man entered. He wore large green glasses, was a great deal stooped and had white hair and a long white beard.

"You are the famous detective?" he addressed Hawkshaw. "I believe I have a clew to this theft. I passed along the opposite side of the street about the time the robbery was supposed to have taken place. A man jumped out of the palace window and walked rapidly up the street."

"Umhum," remarked Hawkshaw, "what kind of man was this?"

"He was about five feet tall and weighed perhaps three hundred lbs.," was the reply.

"Umhum," commented Hawkshaw, "would you mind listening to my theory?"

"I would be delighted," answered the old man as he seated himself in the best chair.

"Well, then!" began Hawkshaw, rising and walking to the middle of the room so that he could gesture without knocking the table over. "At the time of robbery was committed a man was returning home from a fishing trip on the Thames. He carried a fishing pole on his shoulder and as he walked along he looked into the windows of houses he had passed while seemingly gazing straight ahead for he was very cross-eyed." (Here the visitor started.) Hawkshaw went on, "The gentleman at last arrived in Windsor and passing the palace saw the necklace lying on the mahogany table. The window was open and though it was high off the ground he saw a way to get it. He was (and is) a very tall man and he had a long rod and line. Standing on tiptoes he made a cast through the window as if casting for trout. He hooked the necklace at the first throw and fled, dropping his cigar in his flight. He also stepped on the cigar. He eluded the police easily and thought to elude me by coming to me in disguise and seeking to divert suspicion in another direction."

And with that Hawkshaw leaped upon the old man and gripped him by the beard and gave a terrific jerk. The old man gave a yell as he was jerked erect and yanked across the floor. Hawkshaw turned pale. He had made a mistake in identity? He placed a foot against the old gentleman's face and grasping the beard firmly in both hands gave another jerk. Something gave way and Hawkshaw and his victim sprawled on the floor, Hawkshaw holding in his hands the false beard and wig. While the impostor was trying to rise, encumbered by his long coat the detective sprang nimbly up and with great dexterity kicked the huge green glasses from his face.

The "old man" was revealed as a tall, gangling man with huge feet and cross-eyes!

As he rose Hawkshaw advanced toward him with a pair of handcuffs.

"You are under arrest," he said.

The man stepped back and drew a glittering butter knife from his pocket.

"I am a desperate man! Beware!" he said fiercely.

At that moment the Colonel recovered from his amazement enough to push the muzzle of a howitzer against the villain and he was soon handcuffed.

"Call the police, Colonel," directed Hawkshaw, taking the necklace out of the fellow's pocket.

"Curses!" hissed the villain, "tricked, foiled, baffled! Curses!"

"But, Hawkshaw," asked the Colonel a few hours later, after they had collected the enormous reward that had been offered for the recovery of the necklace. "But Hawkshaw, how did you know that was the man?"

"My dear Colonel," answered Hawkshaw as with a smile he lighted a stogy, "I smelt the fish on his hands."

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HALT! WHO GOES THERE?

by Robert E. Howard

Prologue

A blazing sun blazed out of a blazing sky and blazed down blazingly on a blazing expanse of blazing, barren sand, in a blazing desert.

Naught was to be except sand dunes. And yet, aha! A long caravan of camels emerged from behind a sand dune and meandered along the ancient desert trail which was ancient before the memory of man. Aye, it was even said that the trail had been made before William Jennings Bryan began to run for president.

The Taureg chieftain looked about him with a sneer on his handsome face. With contempt he gazed at the sand dunes. Somehow he felt superior to them. Presently the caravan stopped by an ancient city, half-hidden beneath the sands of the desert. It was almost ruins. A very ancient city; it had been deserted long before Congress began to discuss the

immigration problem, even.

The Taureg dismounted from his camel and entered his tent. A slave girl offered him a chaw of Beech-nut from her own private plug. He kicked her with a harsh tone of voice.

Seating himself on an expensive divan from Bokhara, he reflected meditatively.

"Durn it," he soliloquized.

Chapter I—"Awhaw"

"One million dollars," mused the Colonel.

"Exactly, my dear Colonel," returned Hawkshaw, the great detective, wittily.

"But what details of the crime?"

"As follows," Hawkshaw replied. "The night watchman of the Stacksuhkale bank, London, was knocked unconscious and a million dollars in American thrift-stamps as well as one million pounds of sterling and a box of fine cigars were taken."

"The villain!" exclaimed the Colonel indignantly. "And cigars as expensive as they are.

"How are you going to go about finding the guilty person?" asked the Colonel.

"In the following manner," answered Hawkshaw. "Let us first begin by deduction. Let us say, for example, that three persons have robbed the bank. You, I, or the Khedive of Egypt. Now it is impossible that you could commit the robbery because at the time the robbery was committed you were playing a foursome of tiddledy winks with the duke of Buckingham."

"That's true but how did you now?" exclaimed the Colonel.

"My dear Colonel," answered Hawkshaw, "I saw the crumbs on your opera hat. Now, as for myself, I could not have done the robbery because I was in a theatre in Drury Lane. I almost distinctly remember the play even. It was called 'The Store-keeper of Venice' and was written by a fellow named Shooksbeer or something, who is a native of Algeria.

"Then, consider the Khedive of Egypt, he could not have committed the robbery because he was on his sugar-moon, I mean his molasses-moon, with his 99999999999999999th wife, hunting social lions, lounge-lizards, zebras and other big game, in the wilds of Schenectady, New Tork. And, having eliminated myself, you and the Khedive, do you see what this points to?"

"No," the Colonel answered.

"It indicates that the robbery was done by someone else!" said Hawkshaw, dramatically.

"Indeed!" exclaimed the Colonel in admiration. "Awhaw! Wonderful!"

"I shal now," Hawkshaw continued, "go into the street and arrest everyone I meet. To each I shall put the auestion: 'Did you rob the Stacksuhkale bank or did you not?' and I shall be governed by their answers."

Chapter II—The Anarchist.

"Curses!" hissed Alexichsky Grooglegoofgiveimoffaswiftskykickovitchinsky-therearovitchsky.

"Curses!" Alexichsky, etc., hissed again even more hissier thatn before. "This nation of England shall fall or my name is not A'sky Majlmp." (Giving the correct pronunciation of the name Alexichsky, etc.)

The anarchist, with great stealth, then placed a bomb under a girls' school.

"There," he hissed, "that be a defeat to the accursed burgwassol!"

After going several blocks he stopped with an enraged look in his coat pocket.

"Ten billion imprecations!" he hissed, "I forgot to light the fuse."

He walked on through London.

Presently the anarchist came to a palatial mansion in the slums which was the clubhouse of all the anarchists in London.

He walked up to the door and rang the old fashioned doorknocker.

"Giff der pass-vord," hissed a voice from within.

"The wages of sin are a mansion on Riverside Drive," answered the anarchist. The door swung open and he entered. There were several members of the Anarchist club in the club room, engaged in anarchist past times, such as swinging ginger-ale, playing marbles for keeps, growing whiskers and cussing the bourgeoisie.

Feeling in a reckless mood, Alexichsky spent a nickel for ginger-ale and offered to bet three cetns either way on the next Olympic games. One of the club members, Heinie Von Shtoofe, then made a speech.

"Vass iss?" he began eloquently. "Vot iss der nation goming do evn der cost of hog-iron, I mean pig-iron iss gone up two cents on der vard, alretty yet? Und vot for iss so may Irisher loafers getting chobs ven vhite men like me cant, yet? I haf meet a Irisher on der street und I say, 'Get oudt of mine way, you no-good bumf!' Und look at der black eye vot he giffs me. Dey say dot Irishers is such goot fighters, Bah! Dot makes me tired feel. Vhy, over to Gretchen's vedding, dot drunken O'Hooligan come in und tried to raise it a rough-house und me und my cousin, Abie, und Ludvig und Hands und four or five others, vhy ve pretty threw dot Irishman right oudt of der house! I vont never go to Ireland."

The anarchists applauded and then Alexichsky proposed a toast, "Down with everything!" Long live Lendnine and Lopesky and hurrah for Russia!"

Chapter III—"Brittania Rules the Waves."

As Alexichsky the anarchist walked down Piccadilly Circus, he glanced about hoping to see a bank that he could rob.

As he came into another street, to men accosted him, one a tall thin man, and the other a short, stocky man.

"Aha!" said Hawkshaw, for it was he, "Methinks yon unshaven Russian with the cannibalistic face has the guilty look of a first-class criminal."

The detective stopped Alexichsky, "Wait a moment, my friend, pause while I gaze on you un-handsome visage and ask you a question or three or four."

"What do you want?" asked Alexichsky, having swiftly selected a fiendish sneer from his extensive collection of mocking smiles, derisive leers, glares, dirty looks, unholy mirth, chuckles, diabolical stares, etc.

"Did you rob the Stacksuhkale bank?" asked Hawkshaw.

"No," answered Alexichsky.

"Dern it," said the Colonel, "Baffled again."

"Hold on," said Hawkshaw, "My Russian friend, you are under arrest."

The Russian was seized by policemen and Scotland Yard detectives.

"Brittania rules the waves," said Mr. Hawkshaw, "another triumph for Scotland Yard."

He addressed Alexichsky, "I knew you were telling a falsehood because when you denied robbing the bank, you raised an eyebrow and wiggled your toes. Also, I had suspicions of you when you asked the inspector of Scotland Yard if they found a set of burglar's tools in the Stacksuhkale bank. You said they were yours and if they were found to deliver them to the Anarchist's Clubhouse. I delivered them myself, disguised as a rear admiral of the Swiss army. Then when I saw the million dollar notes and thrift-stamps in your vest pocket, I took a chance and arrested you."

"Curses," cussed Alexichsky.

"The way you robbed the bank was in the following manner," said Hawkshaw. "You came to the bank, disguised as a king of the South Sea islands. You climbed up the fire escape and down one of the marble pillars of the bank front. Then, having taken an impression of the keyhole with wax, you filed out a key to fit, from a cigar made in Dusseldorf, Germany. Then you entered and robbed the bank. Is that correct?"

"No, the watchman had left the door open and I went up the back steps and walked in," answered the Russian.

Epilogue

The Eskimo floundered through the deep snow and kicked an iceberg out of his way. Reaching his igloo, he unharnessed his team of whales from his sled and entered the igloo.

Snow covered the land, yards deep. Here and there mighty icebergs reared up toward the sky.

For it was mid-summer in northern Alaska.

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UNHAND ME, VILLAIN!

by Robert Ervin Howard

"Be mine, my love!" pleaded young Reginald Adjernon Lancelot Montmorency to the beautiful Gwinivere de Readycash, the lovely and accomplished heiress, daughter of old Readycash, the multi-millionaire.

"Alas," she sighed; "It cannot be. My father does not like you. Only today he mentioned you and made some remarks about you in a language I took to be Greek for I could not understand it. And there is the duke de Blooey from Montenegro. He is courting me and father likes him because he can play checkers."

"I will call the scoundrel out," whooped Reginald passionately; "he shall fight a duel with me!"

"No, no!" begged Gwinivere, clinging to her lover's necktie; "you must not! I beg you!"

"Very well, my love!" replied Reggie, with great relief; "I knew you would say so or I would not have—I mean it is a good thing for the duke that I love you too much to disobey your command. I will not force himm into a duel."

He was silent for a few minutes, then "But what are we to do?"

She chewed a cud of gum meditatively for several seconds. "Why not ask father for me?" she suggested.

"I will," he exclaimed. "This very hour! I will be masterful with him! I shall say, 'Sir, I am your new son-in-law. No arguments now!'"

"But don't harm him, Reggie!" she begged; "remember he is my father."

"I will not touch him," he promised magnanimously; "I will quell him with the power of my eye."

He rushed from the room. As he strode toward old Readycash's study, he rehearsed the speech he would make. "I will say, 'Sir, I am going to marry your daughter. Be silent, sir! I have decided to do this and I will not be balked by a gouty old father-in-law. I want you to understand that from now on I am the master of this house. You may write out a check for ten thousand dollars for our honeymoon.' If he refuses and talks impudently I may forget he is my future father-in-law and handle him roughly."

He was now at the door of the study. He paused before it. Glancing around, he found several cushions on chairs and sofas. These he placed on the floor in front of the door. Then after several attempts, he put on a bold front and knocked timidly on the door. A deep, gruff voice from within said, "Come in!"

Reginald pushed open the door and entered cautiously. Old man Readycash glared furiously at him.

"Oh, it's you, eh? What the —— do you want?"

"Why," replied Reginald, " I, er, you, er, that is, your girl, I mean my girl, what I meant to say is that I, er she, you, er, that is to say you."

"No doubt," old Readycash answered dryly, "have you anything else to tell me?"

"Sir," said Reginald with dignity, "you have a daughter—a girl."

"Remarkable," exclaimed the old man.

"As I said, sir," continued Reginald, ignoring the interruption, " you have a daughter."

"I have several," was the reply; "also seven old maid sisters. I will introduce them to you, if you like."

Reginald shuddered. "I ccccame ttto aaask yyou ffor your daughter's, your daughter's, your daughter's."

"My daughter's what?" roared old man Readycash.

"Hand!" gasped Reginald.

Old Readycash rose. "Would you just as soon take my foot?" he asked.

Reggie fled. As he neared the door he was struck from behind by a force that lifted him from his feet and propelled him irresistibly through the door which was opened just then by a well-dressed gentleman with a monocle and mustache. Reggie lit on this gentleman and they rolled across the hall, until stopped by the wall.

"Sapristi!" exclaimed the duke de Blooey (for it was he), leaping to his feet. "Caramba! Le diable! Tamale! Asparagus tips! I will have your life for this!"

Just at that moment old Readycash charged out of his room. "You young villain!" he yelled at Reggie, "what do you mean by knocking down my guests?"

Reggie fled toward the stairs. At the top step he felt the same force that had sent him from the presence of Readycash. The young man soared gracefully into the air and floated down the stairs.

"What!" yelled old Readycash; "you still here? Get out of my house! And as for you," turning to the girl, "you shall marry the duke this very day."

"But father," began Gwinivere.

"Shut up!" yelled old Readycash, brutally; do you want me to whip you?"

The duke seized her my the wrist. "Aha, me proud beauty," he exclaimed, diabolically; "I have you in my powerr at last!"

"Unhand me, villain!" she cried.

At that moment the door flew open and two men rushed in. One was a tall, thin man and the other a short stocky man.

They rushed upon the duke, knocked him down and handcuffed him.

"Aha," exclaimed the tall man, "a duke now, are you, eh?"

"What does this mean, sir?" asked old Readycash.

"This man is a crook in disguise," the tall man answered. "I have followed him half across the world. You see before you," he continued, kicking off the duke's mustache and monocle, "Booze Bill, the Bowery Bum! One of the slickest crooks on record."

"Curses," hissed the duke. "One thousand curses. Ay, one thousand five hundred curses!"

"As for you, sir," the stranger continued, to old Readycash, "your daughter wants to marry this young man," indicating Reggie, "and you give him your consent and your check for £10,000. Also a check for the same amount to me as a token of your gratitude in preventing you from marrying your daughter to a villain. If you do not I will send you to jail for 2,000 years. I used to drink my beer at Dinty Moore's saloon when you were bartender there and you often shortchanged me." Then to the short man, "Take the prisoner outside and call a cab, Colonel; I will follow presently."

"But, who are you?" asked old Readycash, as he reached for his checkbook and Reggie and Gwinivere fell into each other's arms, "who are you?"

"I?" answered the stranger with a smile; "I am Hawkshaw, the Detective."

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ALMURIC
by Robert E. Howard

Foreword

It was not my original intention ever to divulge the whereabouts of Esau Cairn, or the mystery surrounding him. My change of mind was brought about by Cairn himself, who retained a perhaps natural and human desire to give his strange story to the world which had disowned him and whose members can now never reach him. What he wishes to tell is his affair. One phase of my part of the transaction I refuse to divulge; I will not make public the means by which I transported Esau Cairn from his native Earth to a planet in a solar system undreamed of by even the wildest astronomical theorists. Nor will I divulge by what means I later achieved communication with him, and heard his story from his own lips, whispering ghostily across the cosmos.

Let me say that it was not premeditated. I stumbled upon the Great Secret quite by accident in the midst of a scientific experiment, and never thought of putting it to any practical use, until that night when Esau Cairn groped his way into my darkened observatory, a hunted man, with the blood of a human being on his hands. It was chance led him there, the blind instinct of the hunted thing to find a den wherein to turn at bay.

Let me state definitely and flatly, that, whatever the appearances against him, Esau Cairn is not, and was never, a criminal. In that specific case he was merely the pawn of a corrupt political machine which turned on him when he realized his position and refused to comply further with its demands. In general, the acts of his life which might suggest a violent and unruly nature simply sprang from his peculiar mental make-up.

Science is at last beginning to perceive that there is sound truth in the popular phrase, "born out of his time." Certain natures are attuned to certain phases or epochs of history, and these natures, when cast by chance into an age alien to their reactions and emotions, find difficulty in adapting themselves to their surroundings. It is but another example of nature's inscrutable laws, which sometimes are thrown out of stride by some cosmic friction or rift, and result in havoc to the individual and the mass.

Many men are born outside their century; Esau Cairn was born outside his epoch. Neither a moron nor a low-class primitive, possessing a mind well above the average, he was, nevertheless, distinctly out of place in the modern age. I never knew a man of intelligence so little fitted for adjustment in a machine-made civilization. (Let it be noted that I speak of him in the past tense; Esau Cairn lives, as far as the cosmos is concerned; as far as the Earth is concerned, he is dead, for he will never again set foot upon it.)

He was of a restless mold, impatient of restraint and resentful of authority. Not by any means a bully, he at the same time refused to countenance what he considered to be the slightest infringement on his rights. He was primitive in his passions, with a gusty temper and a courage inferior to none on this planet. His life was a series of repressions. Even in athletic contests he was forced to hold himself in, lest he injure his opponents. Esau Cairn was, in short, a freak--a man whose physical body and mental bent leaned back to the primordial.

Born in the Southwest, of old frontier stock, he came of a race whose characteristics were inclined toward violence, and whose traditions were of war and feud and battle against man and nature. The mountain country in which he spent his boyhood carried out the tradition. Contest--physical contest--was the breath of life to him. Without it he was unstable and uncertain. Because of his peculiar physical make-up, full enjoyment in a legitimate way, in the ring or on the football field was denied him. His career as a football player was marked by crippling injuries received by men playing against him, and he was branded as an unnecessarily brutal man, who fought to maim his opponents rather than win games. This was unfair. The injuries were simply resultant from the use of his great strength, always so far superior to that of the men opposed to him. Cairn was not a great sluggish lethargic giant as so many powerful men are; he was vibrant with fierce life, ablaze with dynamic energy. Carried away by the lust of combat, he forgot to control his powers, and the result was broken limbs or fractured skulls for his opponents.

It was for this reason that he withdrew from college life, unsatisfied and embittered, and entered the professional ring. Again his fate dogged him. In his training-quarters, before he had had a single match, he almost fatally injured a sparring partner. Instantly the papers pounced upon the incident, and played it up beyond its natural proportions. As a result Cairn's license was revoked.

Bewildered, unsatisfied, he wandered over the world, a restless Hercules, seeking outlet for the immense vitality that surged tumultuously within him, searching vainly for some form of life wild and strenuous enough to satisfy his cravings, born in the dim red days of the world's youth.

Of the final burst of blind passion that banished him for ever from the life wherein he roamed, a stranger, I need say little. It was a nine-days' wonder, and the papers exploited it with screaming headlines. It was an old story--a rotten city government, a crooked political boss, a man chosen, unwittingly on his part, to be used as a tool and serve as a puppet.

Cairn, restless, weary of the monotony of a life for which he was unsuited, was an ideal tool--for a while. But Cairn was neither a criminal nor a fool. He understood their game quicker than they expected, and took a stand surprisingly firm to them, who did not know the real man.

Yet, even so, the result would not have been so violent if the man who had used and ruined Cairn had any real intelligence. Used to grinding men under his feet and seeing them cringe and beg for mercy, Boss Blaine could not understand that he was dealing with a man to whom his power and wealth meant nothing. Yet so schooled was Cairn to iron self-control

that it required first a gross insult, then an actual blow on the part of Blaine, to rouse him. Then for the first time in his life, his wild nature blazed into full being. All his thwarted and repressed life surged up behind the clenched fist that broke Blaine's skull like an eggshell and stretched him lifeless on the floor, behind the desk from which he had for years ruled a whole district.

Cairn was no fool. With the red haze of fury fading from his glare, he realized that he could not hope to escape the vengeance of the machine that controlled the city. It was not because of fear that he fled Blaine's house. It was simply because of his primitive instinct to find a more convenient place to turn at bay and fight out his death fight.

So it was that chance led him to my observatory.

He would have left, instantly, not wishing to embroil me in his trouble, but I persuaded him to remain and tell me his story. I had long expected some catastrophe of the sort. That he had repressed himself as long as he did, shows something of his iron character. His nature was as wild and untamed as that of a maned lion.

He had no plan--he simply intended to fortify himself somewhere and fight it out with the police until he was riddled with lead.

I at first agreed with him, seeing no better alternative. I was not so naive as to believe he had any chance in the courts with the evidence that would be presented against him. Then a sudden thought occurred to me, so fantastic and alien, and yet so logical, that I instantly propounded it to my companion. I told him of the Great Secret, and gave him proof of its possibilities.

In short, I urged him to take the chance of a flight through space, rather than meet the certain death that awaited him.

And he agreed. There was no place in the universe which would support human life. But I had looked beyond the knowledge of men, in universes beyond universes. And I chose the only planet I knew on which a human being could exist--the wild, primitive, and strange planet I named Almuric.

Cairn understood the risks and uncertainties as well as I. But he was utterly fearless--and the thing was done. Esau Cairn left the planet of his birth, for a world swimming afar in space, alien, aloof, strange.

Esau Cairn's Narrative

Chapter 01

The Transition was so swift and brief, that it seemed less than a tick of time lay between the moment I placed myself in Professor Hildebrand's strange machine, and the instant when I found myself standing upright in the clear sunlight that flooded a broad plain. I could not doubt that I had indeed been transported to another world. The landscape was not so grotesque and fantastic as I might have supposed, but it was indisputably alien to anything existing on the Earth.

But before I gave much heed to my surroundings, I examined my own person to learn if I had survived that awful flight without injury. Apparently I had. My various parts functioned with their accustomed vigor. But I was naked. Hildebrand had told me that inorganic substance could not survive the transmutation. Only vibrant, living matter could pass unchanged through the unthinkable gulfs which lie between the planets. I was grateful that I had not fallen into a land of ice and snow. The plain seemed filled with a lazy summerlike heat. The warmth of the sun was pleasant on my bare limbs.

On every side stretched away a vast level plain, thickly grown with short green grass. In the distance this grass attained a greater height, and through it I caught the glint of water. Here and there throughout the plain this phenomenon was repeated, and I traced the meandering course of several rivers, apparently of no great width. Black dots moved through the grass near the rivers, but their nature I could not determine. However, it was quite evident that my lot had not been cast on an uninhabited planet, though I could not guess the nature of the inhabitants. My imagination peopled the distances with nightmare shapes.

It is an awesome sensation to be suddenly hurled from one's native world into a new strange alien sphere. To say that I was not appalled at the prospect, that I did not shrink and shudder in spite of the peaceful quiet of my environs, would be hypocrisy. I, who had never known fear, was transformed into a mass of quivering, cowering nerves, starting at my own shadow. It was that man's utter helplessness was borne in upon me, and my mighty frame and massive thews seemed frail and brittle as the body of a child. How could I pit them against an unknown world? In that instant I would gladly have returned to Earth and the gallows that awaited me, rather than face the nameless terrors with which imagination peopled my new-found world. But I was soon to learn that those thews I now despised were capable of carrying me through greater perils than I dreamed.

A slight sound behind me brought me around to stare amazedly at the first inhabitant of Almuric I was to encounter. And the sight, awesome and menacing as it was, yet drove the ice from my veins and brought back some of my dwindling courage. The tangible and material can never be as grisly as the unknown, however perilous.

At my first startled glance I thought it was a gorilla which stood before me. Even with the thought I realized that it was a man, but such a man as neither I nor any other Earthman had ever looked upon.

He was not much taller than I, but broader and heavier, with a great spread of shoulders, and thick limbs knotted with muscles. He wore a loincloth of some silklike material girdled with a broad belt which supported a long knife in a leather sheath. High-strapped sandals were on his feet. These details I took in at a glance, my attention being instantly fixed in fascination on his face.

Such a countenance it is difficult to imagine or describe. The head was set squarely between the massive shoulders, the neck so squat as to be scarcely apparent. The jaw was square and powerful, and as the wide thin lips lifted in a snarl, I glimpsed brutal tusklike teeth. A short bristly beard masked the jaw, set off by fierce, up-curving mustaches. The nose was almost rudimentary, with wide flaring nostrils. The eyes were small, bloodshot, and an icy gray in color. From the thick black brows the forehead, low and receding, sloped back into a tangle of coarse, bushy hair. The ears were small and very close-set.

The mane and beard were very blue-black, and the creature's limbs and body were almost covered with hair of the same hue. He was not, indeed, as hairy as an ape, but he was hairier than any human being I had ever seen.

I instantly realized that the being, hostile or not, was a formidable figure. He fairly emanated strength--hard, raw, brutal power. There was not an ounce of surplus flesh on him. His frame was massive, with heavy bones. His hairy skin rippled with muscles that looked iron-hard. Yet it was not altogether his body that spoke of dangerous power. His look, his carriage, his whole manner reflected a terrible physical might backed by a cruel and implacable mind. As I met the blaze of his bloodshot eyes, I felt a wave of corresponding anger. The stranger's attitude was arrogant and provocative beyond description. I felt my muscles tense and harden instinctively.

But for an instant my resentment was submerged by the amazement with which I heard him speak in perfect English!

"Thak! What manner of man are you?"

His voice was harsh, grating and insulting. There was nothing subdued or restrained about him. Here were the naked primitive instincts and manners, unmodified. Again I felt the old red fury rising in me, but I fought it down.

"I am Esau Cairn," I answered shortly, and halted, at a loss how to explain my presence on his planet.

His arrogant eyes roved contemptuously over my hairless limbs and smooth face, and when he spoke, it was with unbearable scorn.

"By Thak, are you a man or a woman?"

My answer was a smash of my clenched fist that sent him rolling on the sward.

The act was instinctive. Again my primitive wrath had betrayed me. But I had no time for self-reproach. With a scream of bestial rage my enemy sprang up and rushed at me, roaring and frothing. I met him breast to breast, as reckless in my wrath as he, and in an instant was fighting for my life.

I, who had always had to restrain and hold down my strength lest I injure my fellow men, for the first time in my life found myself in the clutches of a man stronger than myself. This I realized in the first instant of impact, and it was only by the most desperate efforts that I fought clear of his crushing embrace.

The fight was short and deadly. The only thing that saved me was the fact that my antagonist knew nothing of boxing. He could--and did-- strike powerful blows with his clenched fists, but they were clumsy, ill-timed and erratic. Thrice I mauled my way out of grapples that would have ended with the snapping of my spine. He had no knack of avoiding blows; no man on Earth could have survived the terrible battering I gave him. Yet he incessantly surged in on me, his mighty hands spread to drag me down. His nails were almost like talons, and I was quickly bleeding from a score of places where they had torn the skin.

Why he did not draw his dagger I could not understand, unless it was because he considered himself capable of crushing me with his bare hands--which proved to be the case. At last, half blinded by my smashes, blood gushing from his split ears and splintered teeth, he did reach for his weapon, and the move won the fight for me.

Breaking out of a half-clinch, he straightened out of his defensive crouch and drew his dagger. And as he did so, I hooked my left into his belly with all the might of my heavy shoulders and powerfully driving legs behind it. The breath went out of him in an explosive gasp, and my fist sank to the wrist in his belly. He swayed, his mouth flying open, and I smashed my right to his sagging jaw. The punch started at my hip, and carried every ounce of my weight and strength. He went down like a slaughtered ox and lay without twitching, blood spreading out over his beard. That last smash had torn his lip open from the corner of his mouth to the rim of his chin, and must surely have fractured his jawbone as well.

Panting from the fury of the bout, my muscles aching from his crushing grasp, I worked my raw, skinned knuckles, and stared down at my victim, wondering if I had sealed my doom. Surely, I could expect nothing now but hostility from the people of Almuric. Well, I thought, as well be hanged for a sheep as a goat. Stooping, I despoiled my adversary of his single garment, belt and weapon, and transferred them to my own frame. This done, I felt some slight renewal of confidence. At least I was partly clothed and armed.

I examined the dagger with much interest. A more murderous weapon I have never seen. The blade was perhaps nineteen inches in length, double-edged, and sharp as a razor. It was broad at the haft, tapering to a diamond point. The guard and pommel were of silver, the hilt covered with a substance somewhat like shagreen. The blade was indisputably steel, but of a quality I had never before encountered. The whole was a triumph of the weapon-maker's art, and seemed to indicate a high order of culture.

From my admiration of my newly acquired weapon, I turned again to my victim, who was beginning to show signs of returning consciousness. Instinct caused me to sweep the grasslands, and in the distance, to the south, I saw a group of figures moving toward me. They were surely men, and armed men. I caught the flash of the sunlight on steel. Perhaps they were of the tribe of my adversary. If they found me standing over their senseless comrade, wearing the spoils of conquest, their attitude toward me was not hard to visualize.

I cast my eyes about for some avenue of escape or refuge, and saw that the plain, some distance away, ran up into low green-clad foothills. Beyond these in turn, I saw larger hills, marching up and up in serried ranges. Another glance showed the distant figures to have vanished among the tall grass along one of the river courses, which they must cross before they reached the spot where I stood.

Waiting for no more, I turned and ran swiftly toward the hills. I did not lessen my pace until I reached the foot of the first foothills, where I ventured to look back, my breath coming in gasps, and my heart pounding suffocatingly from my exertions. I could see my antagonist, a small shape in the vastness of the plain. Further on, the group I was seeking to avoid had come into the open and were hastening toward him.

I hurried up the low slope, drenched with sweat and trembling with fatigue. At the crest I looked back once more, to see the figures clustered about my vanquished opponent. Then I went down the opposite slope quickly, and saw them no more.

An hour's journeying brought me into as rugged a country as I have ever seen. On all sides rose steep slopes, littered with loose boulders, which threatened to roll down upon the wayfarer. Bare stone cliffs, reddish in color, were much in evidence. There was little vegetation, except for low stunted trees, of which the spread of their branches was equal to the height of the trunk, and several varieties of thorny bushes, upon some of which grew nuts of peculiar shape and color. I broke open several of these, finding the kernel to be rich and meaty in appearance, but I dared not eat it, although I was feeling the bite of hunger.

My thirst bothered me more than my hunger, and this at least I was able to satisfy, although the satisfying nearly cost me my life. I clambered down a precipitous steep and entered a narrow valley, enclosed by lofty cliffs, at the foot of which the nut-bearing bushes grew in great abundance. In the middle of the valley lay a broad pool, apparently fed by a spring. In the center of the pool the water bubbled continuously, and a small stream led off down the valley.

I approached the pool eagerly, and lying on my belly at its lush-grown marge, plunged my muzzle into the crystal-clear water. It, too, might be lethal for an Earthman, for all I knew, but I was so maddened with thirst that I risked it. It had an unusual tang, a quality I have always found present in Almuric water, but it was deliciously cold and satisfying. So pleasant it was to my parched lips that after I had satisfied my thirst, I lay there enjoying the sensation of tranquility. That was a mistake. Eat quickly, drink quickly, sleep lightly, and linger not over anything--those are the first rules of the wild, and his life is not long who fails to observe them.

The warmth of the sun, the bubbling of the water, the sensuous feeling of relaxation and satiation after fatigue and thirst--these wrought on me like an opiate to lull me into semislumber. It must have been some subconscious instinct that warned me, when a faint swishing reached my ears that was not part of the rippling of the spring. Even before my mind translated the sound as the passing of a heavy body through the tall grass, I whirled on my side, snatching at my poniard.

Simultaneously my ears were stunned with a deafening roar, there was a rushing through the air, and a giant form crashed down where I had lain an instant before, so close to me that its outspread talons raked my thigh. I had no time to tell the nature of my attacker--I had only a dazed impression that it was huge, supple, and catlike. I rolled frantically aside as it spat and struck at me sidewise; then it was on me, and even as I felt its claws tear agonizingly into my flesh, the ice-cold water engulfed us both. A catlike yowl rose half strangled, as if the yowler had swallowed a large amount of water. There was a great splashing and thrashing about me; then as I rose to the surface, I saw a long, bedraggled shape disappearing around the bushes near the cliffs. What it was I could not say, but it looked more like a leopard than anything else, though it was bigger than any leopard I had ever seen.

Scanning the shore carefully, I saw no other enemy, and crawled out of the pool, shivering from my icy plunge. My poniard was still in its scabbard. I had had no time to draw it, which was just as well. If I had not rolled into the pool, just when I did, dragging my attacker with me, it would have been my finish. Evidently the beast had a true catlike distaste for water.

I found that I had a deep gash in my thigh and four lesser abrasions on my shoulder, where a great talon-armed paw had closed. The gash in my leg was pouring blood, and I thrust the limb deep into the icy pool, swearing at the excruciating sting of the cold water on the raw flesh. My leg was nearly numb when the bleeding ceased.

I now found myself in a quandary. I was hungry, night was coming on, there was no telling when the leopard-beast might return, or another predatory animal attack me; more than that, I was wounded. Civilized man is soft and easily disabled. I had a wound such as would be considered, among civilized people, ample reason for weeks of an invalid's existence. Strong and rugged as I was, according to Earth standards, I despaired when I surveyed the wound, and wondered how I was to treat it. The matter was quickly taken out of my hands.

I had started across the valley toward the cliffs, hoping I might find a cave there, for the nip of the air warned me that the night would not be as warm as the day, when a hellish clamor up near the mouth of the valley caused me to wheel and glare in that direction. Over the ridge came what I thought to be a pack of hyenas, except for their noise, which was more infernal than an Earthly hyena, even, could produce. I had no illusions as to their purpose. It was I they were after.

Necessity recognizes few limitations. An instant before I had been limping painfully and slowly. Now I set out on a mad race for the cliff as if I were fresh and unwounded. With every step a spasm of agony shot along my thigh, and the wound, bleeding afresh, spurted red, but I gritted my teeth and increased my efforts.

My pursuers gave tongue and raced after me with such appalling speed that I had almost given up hope of reaching the trees beneath the cliffs before they pulled me down. They were snapping at my heels when I lurched into the low stunted growths, and swarmed up the spreading branches with a gasp of relief. But to my horror the hyenas climbed after me! A desperate downward glance showed me that they were not true hyenas; they differed from the breed I had known just as everything on Almuric differed subtly from its nearest counterpart on Earth. These beasts had curving catlike claws, and their bodily structure was catlike enough to allow them to climb as well as a lynx.

Despairingly, I was about to turn at bay, when I saw a ledge on the cliff above my head. There the cliff was deeply weathered, and the branches pressed against it. A desperate scramble up the perilous slant, and I had dragged my scratched and bruised body up on the ledge and lay glaring down at my pursuers, who loaded the topmost branches and howled up at me like lost souls. Evidently their climbing ability did not include cliffs, because after one attempt, in which one sprang up toward the ledge, clawed frantically for an instant on the sloping stone wall, and then fell off with an awful shriek, they made no effort to reach me.

Neither did they abandon their post. Stars came out, strange unfamiliar constellations, that blazed whitely in the dark velvet skies, and a broad golden moon rose above the cliffs, and flooded the hills with weird light; but still my sentinels sat on the branches below me and howled up at me their hatred and belly-hunger.

The air was icy, and frost formed on the bare stone where I lay. My limbs became stiff and numb. I had knotted my girdle about my leg for a tourniquet; the run had apparently ruptured some small veins laid bare by the wound, because the blood flowed from it in an alarming manner.

I never spent a more miserable night. I lay on the frosty stone ledge, shaking with cold. Below me the eyes of my hunters burned up at me. Throughout the shadowy hills sounded the roaring and bellowing of unknown monsters. Howls, screams and yapping cut the night. And there I lay, naked, wounded, freezing, hungry, terrified, just as one of my remote ancestors might have lain in the Paleolithic Age of my own planet.

I can understand why our heathen ancestors worshipped the sun. When at last the cold moon sank and the sun of Almuric pushed its golden rim above the distant cliffs, I could have wept for sheer joy. Below me the hyenas snarled and stretched themselves, bayed up at me briefly, and loped away in search of easier prey. Slowly the warmth of the sun stole through my cramped, numbed limbs, and I rose stiffly up to greet the day, just as that forgotten forbear of mine might have stood up in the youthdawn of the Earth.

After a while I descended, and fell upon the nuts clustered in the bushes near by. I was faint from hunger, and decided that I had as soon die from poisoning as from starvation. I broke open the thick shells and munched the meaty kernels eagerly, and I cannot recall any Earthly meal, howsoever elaborate, that tasted half as good. No ill effects followed; the nuts were good and nutritious. I was beginning to overcome my surroundings, at least so far as food was concerned. I had surmounted one obstacle of life on Almuric.

It is needless for me to narrate the details of the following months. I dwelt among the hills in such suffering and peril as no man on Earth has experienced for thousands of years. I make bold to say that only a man of extraordinary strength and ruggedness could have survived as I did. I did more than survive. I came at last to thrive on the existence.

At first I dared not leave the valley, where I was sure of food and water. I built a sort of nest of branches and leaves on the ledge, and slept there at night. Slept? The word is misleading. I crouched there, trying to keep from freezing, grimly lasting out the night. In the daytime I snatched naps, learning to sleep anywhere, or at any time, and so lightly that the slightest unusual noise would awaken me. The rest of the time I explored my valley and the hills about, and picked and ate nuts. Nor were my humble explorations uneventful. Time and again I raced for the cliffs or the trees, winning sometimes by shuddering hairbreadths. The hills swarmed with beasts, and all seemed predatory.

It was that fact which held me to my valley, where I at least had a bit of safety. What drove me forth at last was the same reason that has always driven forth the human race, from the first apeman down to the last European colonist--the search for food. My supply of nuts became exhausted. The trees were stripped. This was not altogether on my account, although I developed a most ravenous hunger, what of my constant exertions; but others came to eat the nuts--huge shaggy bearlike creatures, and things that looked like fur-clad baboons. These animals ate nuts, but they were omnivorous, to judge by the attention they accorded me. The bears were comparatively easy to avoid; they were mountains of flesh and muscle, but they could not climb, and their eyes were none too good. It was the baboons I learned to fear and hate. They pursued me on sight, they could both run and climb, and they were not balked by the cliff.

One pursued me to my eyrie, and swarmed up onto the ledge with me. At least such was his intention, but man is always most dangerous when cornered. I was weary of being hunted. As the frothing apish monstrosity hauled himself up over my ledge, manlike, I drove my poniard down between his shoulders with such fury that I literally pinned him to the ledge; the keen point sinking a full inch into the solid stone beneath him.

The incident showed me both the temper of my steel, and the growing quality of my own muscles. I who had been among the strongest on my own planet, found myself a weakling on primordial Almuric. Yet the potentiality of mastery was in my brain and my thews, and I was beginning to find myself.

Since survival was dependent on toughening, I toughened. My skin, burnt brown by the sun and hardened by the elements, became more impervious to both heat and cold than I had deemed possible. Muscles I had not known I possessed became evident. Such strength and suppleness became mine as Earthmen have not known for ages.

A short time before I had been transported from my native planet, a noted physical culture expert had pronounced me the most perfectly developed man on Earth. As I hardened with my fierce life on Almuric, I realized that the expert honestly had not known what physical development was. Nor had I. Had it been possible to divide my being and set opposite each other the man that expert praised, and the man I had become, the former would have seemed ridiculously soft, sluggish and clumsy in comparison to the brown, sinewy giant opposed to him.

I no longer turned blue with the cold at night, nor did the rockiest way bruise my naked feet. I could swarm up an almost sheer cliff with the ease of a monkey, I could run for hours without exhaustion; in short dashes it would have taken a racehorse to outfoot me. My wounds, untended except for washing in cold water, healed of themselves, as Nature is prone to heal the hurts of such as live close to her.

All this I narrate in order that it may be seen what sort of a man was formed in the savage mold. Had it not been for the fierce forging that made me steel and rawhide, I could not have survived the grim bloody episodes through which I was to pass on that wild planet.

With new realization of power came confidence. I stood on my feet and stared at my bestial neighbors with defiance. I no longer fled from a frothing, champing baboon. With them, at least, I declared feud, growing to hate the abominable beasts as I might have hated human enemies. Besides, they ate the nuts I wished for myself.

They soon learned not to follow me to my eyrie, and the day came when I dared to meet one on even terms, I will never forget the sight of him frothing and roaring as he charged out of a clump of bushes, and the awful glare in his manlike eyes. My resolution wavered, but it was too late to retreat, and I met him squarely, skewering him through the heart as he closed in with his long clutching arms.

But there were other beasts which frequented the valley, and which I did not attempt to meet on any terms: the hyenas, the sabertooth leopards, longer and heavier than an Earthly tiger and more ferocious; giant mooselike creatures, carnivorous, with alligator-like tusks; the monstrous bears; gigantic boars, with bristly hair which looked impervious to a swordcut. There were other monsters, which appeared only at night, and the details of which I was not able to make out. These mysterious beasts moved mostly in silence, though some emitted high-pitched weird wails, or low Earth-shaking rumbles. As the unknown is most menacing, I had a feeling that these nighted monsters were even more terrible than the familiar horrors which harried my day-life.

I remember one occasion on which I awoke suddenly and found myself lying tensely on my ledge, my ears strained to a night suddenly and breathlessly silent. The moon had set and the valley was veiled in darkness. Not a chattering baboon, not a yelping hyena disturbed the sinister stillness. *Something* was moving through the valley; I heard the faint rhythmic swishing of the grass that marked the passing of some huge body, but in the darkness I made out only a dim gigantic shape, which somehow seemed infinitely longer than it was broad--out of natural proportion, somehow. It passed away up the valley, and with its going, it was as if the night audibly expelled a gusty sigh of relief. The nocturnal noises started up again, and I lay back to sleep once more with a vague feeling that some grisly horror had passed me in the night.

I have said that I strove with the baboons over the possession of the life-giving nuts. What of my own appetite and those of the beasts, there came a time when I was forced to leave my valley and seek far afield in search of nutriment. My explorations had become broader and broader, until I had exhausted the resources of the country close about. So I set forth at random through the hills in a southerly and easterly direction. Of my wanderings I will deal briefly. For many weeks I roamed through the hills, starving, feasting, threatened by savage beasts sleeping in trees or perilously on tall rocks when night fell. I fled, I fought, I slew, I suffered wounds. Oh, I can tell you my life was neither dull nor uneventful.

I was living the life of the most primitive savage; I had neither companionship, books, clothing, nor any of the things which go to make up civilization. According to the cultured viewpoint, I should have been most miserable. I was not. I revelled in my existence. My being grew and expanded. I tell you, the natural life of mankind is a grim battle for existence against the forces of nature, and any other form of life is artificial and without realistic meaning.

My life was not empty; it was crowded with adventures calling on every ounce of intelligence and physical power. When I swung down from my chosen eyrie at dawn, I knew that I would see the sun set only through my personal craft and strength and speed. I came to read the meaning of every waving grass tuft, each masking bush, each towering boulder. On every hand lurked Death in a thousand forms. My vigilance could not be relaxed, even in sleep. When I closed my eyes at night it was with no assurance that I would open them at dawn. I was fully alive. That phrase has more meaning than appears on the surface. The average civilized man is never fully alive; he is burdened with masses of atrophied tissue and useless matter. Life flickers feebly in him; his senses are dull and torpid. In developing his intellect he has sacrificed far more than he realizes.

I realized that I, too, had been partly dead on my native planet. But now I was alive in every sense of the word; I tingled and burned and stung with life to the finger tips and the ends of my toes. Every sinew, vein, and springy bone was vibrant with the dynamic flood of singing, pulsing, humming life. My time was too much occupied with food-getting and preserving my skin to allow the developing of the morbid and intricate complexes and inhibitions which torment the civilized individual. To those highly complex persons who would complain that the psychology of such a life is over-simple, I can but reply that in my life at that time, violent and continual action and the necessity of action crowded out most of the gropings and soul-searchings common to those whose safety and daily meals are assured them by the toil of others. My life *was* primitively simple; I dwelt altogether in the present. My life on Earth already seemed like a dream, dim and far away.

All my life I had held down my instincts, had chained and enthralled my over-abundant vitalities. Now I was free to hurl all my mental and physical powers into the untamed struggle for existence, and I knew such zest and freedom as I had never dreamed of.

In all my wanderings--and since leaving the valley I had covered an enormous distance--I had seen no sign of humanity, or anything remotely resembling humanity.

It was the day I glimpsed a vista of rolling grassland beyond the peaks, that I suddenly encountered a human being. The meeting was unexpected. As I strode along an upland plateau, thickly grown with bushes and littered with boulders, I came abruptly on a scene striking in its primordial significance.

Ahead of me the Earth sloped down to form a shallow bowl, the floor of which was thickly grown with tall grass, indicating the presence of a spring. In the midst of this bowl a figure similar to the one I had encountered on my arrival on Almuric was waging an unequal battle with a sabertooth leopard. I stared in amazement, for I had not supposed that any human could stand before the great cat and live.

Always the glittering wheel of a sword shimmered between the monster and its prey, and blood on the spotted hide showed that the blade had been fleshed more than once. But it could not last; at any instant I expected to see the swordsman go down beneath the giant body.

Even with the thought, I was running fleetly down the shallow slope. I owed nothing to the unknown man, but his valiant battle stirred newly plumbed depths in my soul. I did not shout but rushed in silently and murderously, my poniard gleaming in my hand. Even as I reached them, the great cat sprang, the sword went spinning from the wielder's hand, and he went down beneath the hurtling bulk. And almost simultaneously I disembowled the sabertooth with one tremendous ripping stroke.

With a scream it lurched off its victim, slashing murderously as I leaped back, and then it began rolling and tumbling over the grass, roaring hideously and ripping up the Earth with its frantic talons, in a ghastly welter of blood and streaming entrails.

It was a sight to sicken the hardiest, and I was glad when the mangled beast stiffened convulsively and lay still.

I turned to the man, but with little hope of finding life in him. I had seen the terrible saberlike fangs of the giant carnivore tear into his throat as he went down.

He was lying in a wide pool of blood, his throat horribly mangled. I could see the pulsing of the great jugular vein which had been laid bare, though not severed. One of the huge taloned paws had raked down his side from arm-pit to hip, and his thigh had been laid open in a frightful manner; I could see the naked bone, and from the ruptured veins blood was gushing. Yet to my amazement the man was not only living, but conscious. Yet even as I looked, his eyes glazed and the light faded in them.

I tore a strip from his loincloth and made a tourniquet about his thigh which somewhat slackened the flow of blood; then I looked down at him helplessly. He was apparently dying, though I knew something of the stamina and vitality of the wild and its people. And such evidently this man was; he was as savage and hairy in appearance, though not quite so bulky, as the man I had fought during my first day on Almuric.

As I stood there helplessly, something whistled venomously past my ear and thudded into the slope behind me. I saw a long arrow quivering there, and a fierce shout reached my ears. Glaring about, I saw half a dozen hairy men running fleetly toward me, fitting shafts to their bows as they came.

With an instinctive snarl I bounded up the short slope, the whistle of the missiles about my head lending wings to my heels. I did not stop, once I had gained the cover of the bushes surrounding the bowl, but went straight on, wrathful and disgusted. Evidently men as well as beasts were hostile on Almuric, and I would do well to avoid them in the future.

Then I found my anger submerged in a fantastic problem. I had understood some of the shouts of the men as they rushed toward me. The words had been in English, just as the antagonist of my first encounter had spoken and understood that language. In vain I cudgeled my mind for a solution. I had found that while animate and inanimate objects on Almuric often closely copied things on Earth, yet there was almost a striking difference somewhere, in substance, quality, shape or mode of action. It was preposterous that certain conditions on the separate planets could run such a perfect parallel as to produce an identical language. Yet I could not doubt the evidence of my ears. With a curse I abandoned the problem as too fantastic to waste time on.

Perhaps it was this incident, perhaps the glimpse of the distant savannas, which filled me with a restlessness and distaste for the barren hill country where I had fared so hardily. The sight of men, strange and alien as they were, stirred in my breast a desire for human companionship, and this frustrated longing became in turn a sudden feeling of repulsion for my surroundings. I did not hope to meet friendly humans on the plains; but I determined to try my chances upon them, nevertheless, though what perils I might meet there I could not know. Before I left the hills some whim caused me to scrape from my face my heavy growth and trim my shaggy hair with my poniard, which had lost none of its razor edge. Why I did this I cannot say, unless it was the natural instinct of a man setting forth into new country to look his "best."

The next morning I descended into the grassy plains, which swept eastward and southward as far as sight could reach. I continued eastward and covered many miles that day, without any unusual incident. I encountered several small winding rivers, along whose margins the grass stood taller than my head. Among this grass I heard the snorting and thrashing of heavy animals of some sort, and gave them a wide berth--for which caution I was later thankful.

The rivers were thronged in many cases with gaily colored birds of many shapes and hues, some silent, others continually giving forth strident cries as they wheeled above the waters or dipped down to snatch their prey from its depths.

Further out on the plain I came upon herds of grazing animals--small deerlike creatures, and a curious animal that looked like a pot-bellied pig with abnormally long hind legs, and that progressed in enormous bounds, after the fashion of a kangaroo. It was a most ludicrous sight, and I laughed until my belly ached. Later I reflected that it was the first time I had laughed--outside of a few short barks of savage satisfaction at the discomfiture of an enemy--since I had set foot on Almuric.

That night I slept in the tall grass not far from a water course, and might have been made the prey of any wandering meat-eater. But fortune was with me that night. All across the plains sounded the thunderous roaring of stalking monsters, but none came near my frail retreat. The night was warm and pleasant, strikingly in contrast with the nights in the chill grim hills.

The next day a momentous thing occurred. I had had no meat on Almuric, except when ravenous hunger had driven me to eat raw flesh. I had searched in vain for some stone that would strike a spark. The rocks were of a peculiar nature, unknown to Earth. But that morning on the plains, I found a bit of greenish-looking stone lying in the grass, and experiments showed that it had some of the qualities of flint. Patient effort, in which I clinked my poniard against the stone, rewarded me with a spark of fire in the dry grass, which I soon fanned to a blaze--and had some difficulty in extinguishing.

That night I surrounded myself with a ring of fire which I fed with dry grass and stalked plants which burned slowly and I felt comparatively safe, though huge forms moved about me in the darkness, and I caught the stealthy pad of great paws, and the glimmer of wicked eyes.

On my journey across the plains I subsisted on fruit I found growing on green stalks, which I saw the birds eating. It was pleasant to the taste, though lacking in the nutritive qualities of the nuts in the hills. I looked longingly at the scampering deerlike animals, now that I had the means of cooking their flesh, but saw no way of securing them.

And so for days I wandered aimlessly across those vast plains, until I came in sight of a massive walled city.

I sighted it just at nightfall, and eager though I was to investigate it further, I made my camp and waited for morning. I wondered if my fire would be seen by the inhabitants, and if they would send out a party to discover my nature and purpose.

With the fall of night I could no longer make it out, but the last waning light had shown it plainly, rising stark and somber against the eastern sky. At that distance no evidence of life was visible, but I had a dim impression of huge walls and massive towers, all of a greenish tint.

I lay within my circle of fire, while great sinuous bodies rustled through the grass and fierce eyes glared at me, and my imagination was at work as I strove to visualize the possible inhabitants of that mysterious city. Would they be of the same race as the hairy ferocious troglodytes I had encountered? I doubted it, for it hardly seemed possible that these primitive creatures would be capable of rearing such a structure. Perhaps there I would find a highly developed type of cultured man. Perhaps--here imaginings too dark and shadowy for description whispered at the back of my consciousness.

Then the moon rose behind the city, etching its massive outlines in the weird golden glow. It looked black and somber in the moonlight; there was something distinctly brutish and forbidding about its contours. As I sank into slumber I reflected that if apemen could build a city, it would surely resemble that colossus in the moon.

Chapter 02

Dawn Found Me on my way across the plain. It may seem like the height of folly to have gone striding openly toward the city, which might be full of hostile beings, but I had learned to take desperate chances, and I was consumed with curiosity; weary at last of my lonely life.

The nearer I approached, the more rugged the details stood out. There was more of the fortress than the city about the walls, which, with the tower that loomed behind and above them, seemed to have been built of huge blocks of greenish stone, very roughly cut. There was no apparent attempt at smoothing, polishing, or otherwise adorning this stone. The whole appearance was rude and savage, suggesting a wild fierce people heaping up rocks as a defense against enemies.

As yet I had seen nothing of the inhabitants. The city might have been empty of human life. But a broad road leading to the massive gate was beaten bare of grass, as if by the constant impact of many feet. There were no fields or gardens about the city; the grass waved to the foot of the walls. All during that long march across the plain to the gates, I saw nothing resembling a human being. But as I came under the shadow of the great gate, which was flanked on either hand by a massive tower, I caught a glimpse of tousled black heads moving along the squat battlements. I halted and threw back my head to hail them. The sun had just topped the towers and its glare was full in my eyes. Even as I opened my lips, there was a cracking report like a rifle shot, a jet of white smoke spurted from a tower, and a terrific impact against my head dashed me into unconsciousness.

When I came to my senses it was not slowly, but quickly and clear-headedly, what with my immense recuperative powers. I was lying on a bare stone floor in a large chamber, the walls, ceiling and floor of which were composed of huge blocks of green stone. From a barred window high up in one wall sunlight poured to illuminate the room, which was without furnishing, except for a bench, crudely and massively built.

A heavy chain was looped about my waist and made fast with a strange, heavy lock. The other end of the chain was fastened to a thick ring set in the wall. Everything about the fantastic city seemed massive.

Lifting a hand to my head, I found it was bandaged with something that felt like silk. My head throbbed. Evidently whatever missile it was that had been fired at me from the wall, had only grazed my head, inflicting a scalp wound and knocking me senseless. I felt for my poniard, but naturally it was gone.

I cursed heartily. When I had found myself on Almuric I had been appalled by my prospects; but then at least I had been free. Now I was in the hands of God only knew what manner of beings. All I knew was that they were hostile. But my inordinate self-confidence would not down, and I felt no great fear. I did feel a rush of panic, common to all wild things, at being confined and shackled, but I fought down this feeling and it was succeeded by one of red unreasoning rage. Springing to my feet, which movement the chain was long enough to allow, I began jerking and tearing at my shackle.

It was while engaged in this fruitless exhibition of primitive resentment that a slight noise caused me to wheel, snarling, my muscles tensed for attack or defense. What I saw froze me in my tracks.

Just within the doorway stood a girl. Except in her garments she differed little from the type of girls I had known on Earth, except that her slim figure exhibited a suppleness superior to theirs. Her hair was intensely black, her skin white as alabaster. Her lissome limbs were barely concealed by a light, tuniclike garment, sleeveless, low-necked, revealing the greater part of her ivory breasts. This garment was girdled at her lithe waist, and came to within a few inches above her knees. Soft sandals encased her slender feet. She was standing in an attitude of awed fascination, her dark eyes wide, her crimson lips parted. As I wheeled and glared at her, she gave back with a quick gasp of surprise or fear, and fled lightly from the chamber.

I stared after her. If she were typical of the people of the city, then surely the effect produced by the brutish masonry was an illusion, for she seemed the product of some gentle and refined civilization, allowing for a certain barbaric suggestion about her costume.

While so musing, I heard the tramp of feet, harsh voices were lifted in argument, and the next instant a group of men strode into the chamber, halting as they saw me conscious and on my feet. Still thinking of the girl, I glared at them in surprise. They were of the same type as the others I had seen, huge, hairy, ferocious, with the same apelike forward-thrust heads and formidable faces. Some, I noticed, were darker than others, but all were dark and fierce, and the whole effect was one of somber and ferocious savagery. They were instinct with ferocity; it blazed in their icy-gray eyes, reflected in the snarling lift of their bristling lips, rumbled in their rough voices.

All were armed, and their hands seemed instinctively to seek their hilts as they stood glaring at me, their shaggy heads thrust forward in their apelike manner.

"Thak!" one exclaimed, or rather roared--all their voices were as gusty as a sea wind--"he's conscious!"

"Do you suppose he can speak or understand human language?" rumbled another.

All this while I had stood glaring back at them, wondering anew at their speech. Now I realized that they were not speaking English.

The thing was so unnatural that it gave me a shock. They were not speaking any Earthly language, and I realized it, yet I understood them, except for various words which apparently had no counterpart on Earth. I made no attempt to understand this seemingly impossible phenomenon, but answered the last speaker.

"I can speak and understand." I grunted. "Who are you? What city is this? Why did you attack me? Why am I in chains?"

They rumbled in amazement, with much tugging of mustaches, shaking of heads, and uncouth profanity.

"He talks, by Thak!" said one. "I tell you, he is from beyond the Girdle!"

"From beyond my hip!" broke in another rudely. "He is a freak, a damned, smooth-skinned degenerate misfit which should not have been born, or allowed to exist."

"Ask him how he came by the Bonecrusher's poniard," requested yet another.

"Did you steal this from Logar?" he demanded.

"I stole nothing!" I snapped, feeling like a wild beast being prodded through the bars of a cage by unfeeling and critical spectators. My rages, like all the emotions on that wild planet, were without restraint.

"I took that poniard from the man who carried it, and I took it in a fair fight," I added.

"Did you slay him?" they demanded unbelievingly.

"No," I growled. "We fought with our bare hands, until he tried to knife me. Then I knocked him senseless."

A roar greeted my words. I thought at first they were clamoring with rage; then I made out that they were arguing among themselves.

"I tell you he lies!" one bull's bellow rose above the tumult. "We all know that Logar the Bonecrusher is not the man to be thrashed and stripped by a smooth-skinned hairless brown man like this. Ghor the Bear might be a match for Logar. No one else."

"Well, there's the poniard," someone pointed out.

The clamor rose again, and in an instant the disputants were yelling and cursing, and brandishing their hairy fists in one another's faces, hands fumbled at sword hilts, and challenges and defiances were exchanged freely.

I looked to see a general throat-cutting, but presently one who seemed in some authority drew his sword and began banging the hilt on the rude bench, at the same time drowning out the voices of the others with his bull-like bellowing.

"Shut up! Shut up! Let another man open his mouth and I'll split his head!" As the clamor subsided and the disputants glared venomously at him, he continued in a voice as calm as if nothing had occurred. "It's neither here nor there about the poniard. He might have caught Logar sleeping and brained him, or he might have stolen it, or found it. Are we Logar's brothers, that we should seek after his welfare?"

A general snarl answered this. Evidently the man called Logar was not popular among them.

"The question is, what shall we do with this creature? We've got to hold a council and decide. He's evidently uneatable." He grinned as he said this, which was apparently meant as a bit of grim humor.

"His hide would make good leather." suggested another in a tone that did not sound as though he was joking.

"Too soft," protested another.

"He didn't feel soft while we were carrying him in," returned the first speaker. "He was hard as steel springs."

"Tush," deprecated the other. "I'll show you how tender his flesh is. Watch me slice off a few strips." He drew his dagger and approached me while the others watched with interest.

All this time my rage had been growing until the chamber seemed to swim in a red mist. Now, as I realized that the fellow really intended trying the edge of his steel on my skin I went berserk. Wheeling, I gripped the chain with both hands, wrapping it around my wrists for more leverage. Then, bracing my feet against the floor and walls I began to strain with all my strength. All over my body the great muscles coiled and knotted; sweat broke out on my skin, and then with a shattering crash the stone gave way, the iron ring was torn out bodily, and I was catapulted on my back onto the floor, at the feet of my captors who roared with amazement and fell on me *en masse*.

I answered their bellows with one strident yell of blood-thirsty gratification, and heaving up through the melee, began swinging my heavy fists like caulking mallets. Oh, that was a rough-house while it lasted! They made no attempt to knife me, striving to swamp me with numbers. We rolled from one side of the chamber to the other, a gasping, thrashing, cursing, hammering mass, while with the yells, howls, earnest profanity, and impact of heavy bodies, it was a perfect bedlam. Once I seemed to catch a fleeting glimpse of the door thronged with the heads of women similar to the one I had seen, but I could not be sure; my teeth were set in a hairy ear, my eyes were full of sweat and stars from a vicious punch on the nose, and what with a gang of heavy forms romping all over me my sight was none too good.

Yet, I gave a good account of myself. Ears split, noses crumpled and teeth splintered under the crushing impact of my iron-hard fists, and the yells of the wounded were music to my battered ears. But that damnable chain about my waist kept tripping me and coiling about my legs, and pretty soon the bandage was ripped from my head, my scalp wound opened anew and deluged me with blood. Blinded by this I floundered and stumbled, and gasping and panting they bore me down and bound my arms and legs.

The survivors then fell away from me and lay or sat in positions of pain and exhaustion while I, finding my voice, cursed them luridly. I derived ferocious satisfaction at the sight of all the bloody noses, black eyes, torn ears and smashed teeth which were in evidence, and barked in vicious laughter when one announced with many curses that his arm was broken. One of them was out cold, and had to be revived, which they did by dumping over him a vessel of cold water that was fetched by someone I could not see from where I lay. I had no idea that it was a woman who came in answer to a harsh roar of command.

"His wound is open again," said one, pointing at me. "He'll bleed to death."

"I hope he does," snarled another, lying doubled up on the floor. "He's burst my belly. I'm dying. Get me some wine."

"If you're dying you don't need wine," brutally answered the one who seemed a chief, as he spat out bits of splintered teeth. "Tie up his wound, Akra."

Akra limped over to me with no great enthusiasm and bent down.

"Hold your damnable head still," he growled.

"Keep off!" I snarled. "I'll have nothing from you. Touch me at your peril."

He exasperatedly grabbed my face in his broad hand and shoved me violently down. That was a mistake. My jaws locked on his thumb, evoking an ear-splitting howl, and it was only with the aid of his comrades that he extricated the mangled member. Maddened by the pain, he howled wordlessly, then suddenly gave me a terrific kick in the temple, driving my wounded head with great violence back against the massive bench leg. Once again I lost consciousness.

When I came to myself again I was once more bandaged, shackled by the wrists and ankles, and made fast to a fresh ring, newly set in the stone, and apparently more firmly fixed than the other had been. It was night. Through the window I glimpsed the star-dotted sky. A torch which burned with a peculiar white flame was thrust into a niche in the wall, and a man sat on the bench, elbows on knees and chin on fists, regarding me intently. On the bench near him stood a huge gold vessel.

"I doubted if you'd come to after that last crack," he said at last.

"It would take more than that to finish me," I snarled. "You are a pack of cursed weaklings. But for my wound and that infernal chain, I'd have bested the whole mob of you."

My insults seemed to interest rather than anger him. He absently fingered a large bump on his head on which blood was thickly clotted, and asked: "Who are you? Whence do you come?"

"None of your business," I snapped.

He shrugged his shoulders, and lifting the vessel in one hand drew his dagger with the other.

"In Koth none goes hungry," he said, "I'm going to place this food near your hand and you can eat. But I warn you, if you try to strike or bite me, I'll stab you."

I merely snarled truculently, and he bent and set down the bowl, hastily withdrawing. I found the food to be a kind of stew, satisfying both thirst and hunger. Having eaten I felt in somewhat better mood, and my guard renewed his questions, I answered: "My name is Esau Cairn. I am an American, from the planet Earth."

He mulled over my statements for a space, then asked: "Are these places beyond the Girdle?"

"I don't understand you," I answered.

He shook his head. "Nor I you. But if you do not know of the Girdle, you cannot be from beyond it. Doubtless it is all fable, anyway. But whence did you come when we saw you approaching across the plain? Was that your fire we glimpsed from the towers last night?"

"I suppose so," I replied. "For many months I have lived in the hills to the west. It was only a few weeks ago that I descended into the plains."

He stared and stared at me.

"In the hills? Alone, and with only a poniard?"

"Well, what about it?" I demanded.

He shook his head as if in doubt or wonder. "A few hours ago I would have called you a liar. Now I am not sure."

"What is the name of this city?" I asked.

"Koth, of the Kothan tribe. Our chief is Khossuth Skull-splitter. I am Thab the Swift. I am detailed to guard you while the warriors hold council."

"What's the nature of their council?" I inquired.

"They discuss what shall be done with you; and they have been arguing since sunset, and are no nearer a solution than before."

"What is their disagreement?"

"Well," he answered. "Some want to hang you, and some want to shoot you."

"I don't suppose it's occurred to them that they might let me go," I suggested with some bitterness.

He gave me a cold look. "Don't be a fool," he said reprovingly.

At that moment a light step sounded outside, and the girl I had seen before tiptoed into the chamber. Thab eyed her disapprovingly.

"What are you doing here, Altha?" he demanded.

"I came to look again at the stranger," she answered in a soft musical voice. "I never saw a man like him. His skin is nearly as smooth as mine, and he has no hair on his countenance. How strange are his eyes! Whence does he come?"

"From the hills, he says," grunted Thab. Her eyes widened. "Why, none dwells in the hills, except wild beasts! Can it be that he is some sort of animal? They say he speaks and understands speech."

"So he does," growled Thab, fingering his bruises. "He also knocks out men's brains with his naked fists, which are harder and heavier than maces. Get away from there.

"He's a rampaging devil. If he gets his hands on you he won't leave enough of you for the vultures to pick."

"I won't get near him," she assured him. "But, Thab, he does not look so terrible. See, there is no anger in the gaze he fixes on me. What will be done with him?"

"The tribe will decide," he answered. "Probably let him fight a sabertooth leopard bare-handed."

She clasped her own hands with more human feeling than I had yet seen shown on Almuric.

"Oh, Thab, why? He has done no harm; he came alone and with empty hands. The warriors shot him down without warning--and now--"

He glanced at her in irritation. "If I told your father you were pleading for a captive--"

Evidently the threat carried weight. She visibly wilted.

"Don't tell him," she pleaded. Then she flared up again. "Whatever you say, it's beastly! If my father whips me until the blood runs over my heels, I'll still say so!"

And so saying, she ran quickly out of the chamber.

"Who is that girl?" I asked.

"Altha, the daughter of Zal the Thrower."

"Who is he?"

"One of those you battled so viciously a short time ago."

"You mean to tell me a girl like that is the daughter of a man like--" Words failed me.

"What's wrong with her?" he demanded. "She differs none from the rest of our women."

"You mean all the women look like her, and all the men look like you?"

"Certainly--allowing for their individual characteristics. Is it otherwise among your people? That is, if you are not a solitary freak."

"Well, I'll be--" I began in bewilderment, when another warrior appeared in the door, saying.

"I'm to relieve you, Thab. The warriors have decide to leave the matter to Khossuth when he returns on the morrow."

Thab departed and the other seated himself on the bench. I made no attempt to talk to him. My head was swimming with the contradictory phenomena I had heard and observed, and I felt the need of sleep. I soon sank into dreamless slumber.

Doubtless my wits were still addled from the battering I had received. Otherwise I would have snapped awake when I felt something touch my hair. As it was, I woke only partly. From under drooping lids I glimpsed, as in a dream, a girlish face bent close to mine, dark eyes wide with frightened fascination, red lips parted. The fragrance of her foamy black hair was in my nostrils. She timidly touched my face, then drew back with a quick soft intake of breath, as if frightened by her action. The guard snored on the bench. The torch had burned to a stub that cast a weird dull glow over the chamber. Outside, the moon had set. This much I vaguely realized before I sank back into slumber again, to be haunted by a dim beautiful face that shimmered through my dreams.

Chapter 03

I Awoke Again in the cold gray light of dawn, at a time when the condemned meet their executioners. A group of men stood over me, and one I knew was Khossuth the Skullsplitter.

He was taller than most, and leaner--almost gaunt in comparison to the others. This circumstance made his broad shoulders seem abnormally huge. His face and body were seamed with old scars. He was very dark, and apparently old; an impressive and terrible image of somber savagery.

He stood looking down at me, fingering the hilt of his great sword. His gaze was gloomy and detached.

"They say you claim to have beaten Logar of Thurga in open fight," he said at last, and his voice was cavernous and ghostly in a manner I cannot describe.

I did not reply, but lay staring up at him, partly in fascination at his strange and menacing appearance, partly in the anger that seemed generally to be with me during those times.

"Why do you not answer?" he rumbled.

"Because I'm weary of being called a liar," I snarled.

"Why did you come to Koth?"

"Because I was tired of living alone among wild beasts. I was a fool. I thought I would find human beings whose company was preferable to the leopards and baboons. I find I was wrong."

He tugged his bristling mustaches.

"Men say you fight like a mad leopard. Thab says that you did not come to the gates as an enemy comes. I love brave men. But what can we do? If we free you, you will hate us because of what has passed, and your hate is not lightly to be loosed."

"Why not take me into the tribe?" I remarked, at random.

He shook his head. "We are not Yagas, to keep slaves."

"Nor am I a slave," I grunted. "Let me live among you as an equal. I will hunt and fight with you. I am as good a man as any of your warriors."

At this another pushed past Khossuth. This fellow was bigger than any I had yet seen in Koth--not taller, but broader, more massive. His hair was thicker on his limbs, and of a peculiar rusty cast instead of black.

"That you must prove!" he roared, with an oath. "Loose him, Khossuth! The warriors have been praising his power until my belly revolts! Loose him and let us have a grapple!"

"The man is wounded, Ghor," answered Khossuth.

"Then let him be cared for until his wound is healed," urged the warrior eagerly, spreading his arms in a curious grappling gesture.

"His fists are like hammers," warned another.

"Thak's devils!" roared Ghor, his eyes glaring, his hairy arms brandished. "Admit him into the tribe, Khossuth! Let him endure the test! If he survives--well, by Thak, he'll be worthy even to be called a man of Koth!"

"I will go and think upon the matter," answered Khossuth after a long deliberation.

That settled the matter for the time being. All trooped out after him. Thab was last, and at the door he turned and made a gesture which I took to be one of encouragement. These strange people seemed not entirely without feelings of pity and friendship.

The day passed uneventfully. Thab did not return. Other warriors brought me food and drink, and I allowed them to bandage my scalp. With more human treatment the wild-beast fury in me had been subordinated to my human reason. But that fury lurked close to the surface of my soul, ready to blaze into ferocious life at the slightest encroachment.

I did not see the girl Altha, though I heard light footsteps outside the chamber several times, whether hers or another's I could not know.

About nightfall a group of warriors came into the room and announced that I was to be taken to the council, where Khossuth would listen to all arguments and decide my fate. I was surprised to learn that arguments would be presented on my behalf. They got my promise not to attack them, and loosed me from the chain that bound me to the wall, but they did not remove the shackles on my wrists and ankles.

I was escorted out of the chamber into a vast hall, lighted by white fire torches. There were no hangings or furnishings, nor any sort of ornamentation--just an almost oppressive sense of massive architecture.

We traversed several halls, all equally huge and windy, with rugged walls and lofty ceilings, and came at last into a vast circular space, roofed with a dome. Against the back wall a stone throne stood on a block-like dais, and on the throne sat old Khossuth in gloomy majesty, clad in a spotted leopardskin. Before him in a vast three-quarters circle sat the tribe, the men cross-legged on skins spread on the stone floor, and behind them the women and children seated on fur-covered benches.

It was a strange concourse. The contrast was startling between the hairy males and the slender, white-skinned, dainty women. The men were clad in loincloths and high-strapped sandals; some had thrown pantherskins over their massive shoulders. The women were dressed similar to the girl Altha, whom I saw sitting with the others. They wore soft sandals or none, and scanty tunics girdled about their waists. That was all. The difference of the sexes was carried out down to the smallest babies. The girl children were quiet, dainty and pretty. The young males looked even more like monkeys than did their elders.

I was told to take my seat on a block of stone in front and somewhat to the side of the dais. Sitting among the warriors I saw Ghor, squirming impatiently as he unconsciously flexed his thick biceps.

As soon as I had taken my seat, the proceedings went forward. Khossuth simply announced that he would hear the arguments, and pointed out a man to represent me, at which I was again surprised, but this apparently was a regular custom among these people. The man chosen was the lesser chief who had commanded the warriors I had battled in the cell, and they called him Gutchluk Tigerwrath. He eyed me venemously as he limped forward with no great enthusiasm, bearing the marks of our encounter.

He laid his sword and dagger on the dais, and the foremost warriors did likewise. Then he glared at the rest truculently, and Khossuth called for arguments to show why Esau Cairn--he made a marvelous jumble of the pronunciation--should not be taken into the tribe.

Apparently the reasons were legion. Half a dozen warriors sprang up and began shouting at the top of their voice, while Gutchluk dutifully strove to answer them. I felt already doomed. But the game was not played out, or even well begun. At first Gutchluk went at it only half-heartedly, but opposition heated him to his talk. His eyes blazed, his jaw jutted, and he began to roar and bellow with the best of them. From the arguments he presented, or rather thundered, one would have thought he and I were lifelong friends.

No particular person was designated to protest against me. Everybody who wished took a hand. And if Gutchluk won over anyone, that person joined his voice to Gutchluk's. Already there were men on my side. Thab's shout and Ghor's bellow vied with my attorney's roar, and soon others took up my defense.

That debate is impossible for an Earthman to conceive of, without having witnessed it. It was sheer bedlam, with from three voices to five hundred voices clamoring at once. How Khossuth sifted any sense out of it, I cannot even guess. But he brooded somberly above the tumult, like a grim god over the paltry aspirations of mankind.

There was wisdom in the discarding of weapons. Dispute frequently became biting, and criticisms of ancestors and personal habits entered into it. Hands clutched at empty belts and mustaches bristled belligerently. Occasionally Khossuth lifted his weird voice across the clamor and restored a semblance of order.

My attempts to follow the arguments were vain. My opponents went into matters seemingly utterly irrelevant, and were met by rebuttals just as illogical. Authorities of antiquity were dragged out, to be refuted by records equally musty.

To further complicate matters, disputants frequently snared themselves in their own arguments, or forgot which side they were on, and found themselves raging frenziedly on the other. There seemed no end to the debate, and no limit to the endurance of the debaters. At midnight they were still yelling as loudly, and shaking their fists in one another's beards as violently as ever.

The women took no part in the arguments.

They began to glide away about midnight, with the children. Finally only one small figure was left among the benches. It was Altha, who was following--or trying to follow--the proceedings with a surprising interest.

I had long since given up the attempt. Gutchluk was holding the floor valiantly, his veins swelling and his hair and beard bristling with his exertions. Ghor was actually weeping with rage and begging Khossuth to let him break a few necks. Oh, that he had lived to see the men of Koth become adders and snakes, with the hearts of buzzards and the guts of toads! he bawled, brandishing his huge arms to high heaven.

It was all a senseless madhouse to me. Finally, in spite of the clamor, and the fact that my life was being weighed in the balance, I fell asleep on my block and snored peacefully while the men of Koth raged and pounded their hairy breasts and bellowed, and the strange planet of Almuric whirled on its way under the stars that neither knew nor cared for men, Earthly or otherwise.

It was dawn when Thab shook me awake and shouted in my ear: "We have won! You enter the tribe, if you'll wrestle Ghor!"

"I'll break his back!" I grunted, and went back to sleep again.

Chapter 04

So began my life as a man among men on Almuric. I who had begun my new life as a naked savage, now took the next step on the ladder of evolution and became a barbarian. For the men of Koth were barbarians, for all their silks and steel and stone towers. Their counterpart is not on Earth today, nor has it ever been. But of that later. Let me tell first of my battle with Ghor the Bear.

My chains were removed and I was taken to a stone tower on the wall, there to dwell until my wounds had healed. I was still a prisoner. Food and drink were brought me regularly by the tribesmen, who also tended carefully to my wounds, which were unimportant, considering the hurts I had had from wild beasts, and had recovered from unaided. But they wished me to be in prime condition for the wrestling, which was to decide whether I should be admitted to the tribe of Koth, or--well, from what they said of Ghor, if I lost there would be no problem as to my disposition. The wolves and vultures would take care of that.

Their manner toward me was noncommittal, with the exception of Thab the Swift, who was frankly cordial to me. I saw neither Khossuth, Ghor nor Gutchluk during the time I was imprisoned in the tower, nor did I see the girl Altha.

I do not remember a more tedious and wearisome time. I was not nervous because of any fear of Ghor; I frankly doubted my ability to beat him, but I had risked my life so often and against such fearful odds, that personal fear had been stamped out of my soul. But for months I had lived like a mountain panther, and now to be caged up in a stone tower, where my movements were limited, bounded and restricted--it was intolerable, and if I had been forced to put up with it a day longer, I would have lost control of myself, and either fought my way to freedom or perished in the attempt. As it was, all the constrained energy in me was pent up almost to the snapping point, giving me a terrific store of nervous power which stood me in good stead in my battle.

There is no man on Earth equal in sheer strength to any man of Koth. They lived barbaric lives, filled with continuous peril and warfare against foes human and bestial. But after all, they lived the lives of men, and I had been living the life of a wild beast.

As I paced my tower chamber, I thought of a certain great wrestling champion of Europe with whom I had once contested in a friendly private bout, and who pronounced me the strongest man he had ever encountered. Could he have seen me now, in the tower of Koth! I am certain that I could have torn out his biceps like rotten cloth, broken his spine across my knee, or caved in his breastbone with my clenched fist; and as for speed, the most finely trained Earth athlete would have seemed awkward and sluggish in comparison to the tigerish quickness lurking in my rippling sinews.

Yet for all that, I knew that I would be strained to the uttermost even to hold my own with the giant they called Ghor the Bear. He did, indeed, resemble a shaggy rusty-hued cave-bear.

Thab the Swift narrated some of his triumphs to me, and such a record of personal mayhem I never heard; the man's progress through life was marked by broken limbs, backs and necks. No man had yet stood before him in barehanded battle, though some swore Logar the Bonecrusher was his equal.

Logar, I learned, was chief of Thugra, a city hostile to Koth. All cities on Almuric seemed to be hostile to each other, the people of the planet being divided into many small tribes, incessantly at war. The chief of Thugra was called the Bonecrusher because of his terrible strength. The poniard I had taken from him had been his favorite weapon, a famous blade, forged, Thab said, by a supernatural smith. Thab called this being a *gorka*, and I found in tales concerning the creature an analogy to the dwarfish metalworkers of the ancient Germanic myths of my own world.

Thab told me much concerning his people and his planet, but of these things I will deal later. At last Khossuth came, found my wounds completely cured, eyed my bronzed sinews with a shadow of respect in his cold brooding eyes, and pronounced me fit for battle.

Night had fallen when I was led into the streets of Koth. I looked with wonder at the giant walls towering above me, dwarfing their human inhabitants. Everything in Koth was built on a heroic scale. Neither the walls nor the edifices were unusually high, in comparison to their bulk, but they were so massive. My guides led me to a sort of amphitheater near the outer wall. It was an oval space surrounded by huge stone blocks, rising tier upon tier, and forming seats for the spectators. The open space in the center was hard ground, covered with short grass. A sort of bulwark was formed about it out of woven leather thongs, apparently to keep the contestants from dashing their heads against the surrounding stones. Torches lighted the scene.

The spectators were already there, the men occupying the lower blocks, the women and children the upper. My gaze roved over the sea of faces, hairy or smooth, until it rested on one I recognized, and I felt a strange throb of pleasure at the sight of Altha sitting there watching me with her intent dark eyes.

Thab indicated for me to enter the arena, and I did so, thinking of the old-time bare-knuckled bouts of my own planet, which were fought in crude rings pitched, like this, on the naked turf. Thab and the other warriors who had escorted me remained outside. Above us brooded old Khossuth on a carven stone elevated above the first tier, and covered with leopard-skins.

I glanced beyond him to that dusky star-filled sky whose strange beauty never failed to fascinate me, and I laughed at the fantasy of it all--where I, Esau Cairn, was to earn by sweat and blood my right to exist on this alien world, the existence of which was undreamed by the people of my own planet.

I saw a group of warriors approaching from the other side, a giant form looming among them. Ghor the Bear glared at me across the ring, his hairy paws grasping the thongs, then with a roar he vaulted over them and stood before me, an image of truculence incarnate--angry because I had chanced to reach the ring before him.

On his rude throne above us, old Khossuth lifted a spear and cast it earthward. Our eyes followed its flight, and as it sheathed its shining blade in the turf outside the ring, we hurled ourselves at each other, iron masses of bone and thew, vibrant with fierce life and the lust to destroy.

We were each naked except for a sort of leather loin-clout, which was more brace than garment. The rules of the match were simple, we were not to strike with our fists or open hands, knees or elbows, kick, bite or gouge. Outside of that, anything went.

At the first impact of his hairy body against mine, I realized that Ghor was stronger than Logar. Without my best natural weapons--my fists--Ghor had the advantage.

He was a hairy mountain of iron muscle, and he moved with the quickness of a huge cat. Accustomed to such fighting, he knew tricks of which I was ignorant. Lastly, his bullet head was set so squarely on his shoulders that it was practically impossible to strangle that thick squat neck of his.

What saved me was the wild life I had lived which had toughened me as no man, living as a man, can be toughened. Mine was the superior quickness, and ultimately, the superior endurance.

There is little to be said of that fight. Time ceased to be composed of intervals of change, and merged into a blind mist of tearing, snarling eternity. There was no sound except our panting gasps, the guttering of the torches in the light wind, and the impact of our feet on the turf, of our hard bodies against each other. We were too evenly matched for either to gain a quick advantage. There was no pinning of shoulders, as in an Earthly wrestling match. The fight would continue until one or both of the contestants were dead or senseless.

When I think of our endurance and stamina, I stand appalled. At midnight we were still rending and tearing at each other. The whole world was swimming red when I broke free out of a murderous grapple. My whole frame was a throb of wrenched, twisted agony. Some of my muscles were numbed and useless. Blood poured from my nose and mouth. I was half blind and dizzy from the impact of my head against the hard earth. My legs trembled and my breath came in great gulps. But I saw that Ghor was in no better case. He too bled at the nose and mouth, and more, blood trickled from his ears. He reeled as he faced me, and his hairy chest heaved spasmodically. He spat out a mouthful of blood, and with a roar that was more a gasp, he hurled himself at me again. And steeling my ebbing strength for one last effort, I caught his outstretched wrist, wheeled, ducking low and bringing his arm over my shoulder, and heaved with all my last ounce of power.

The impetus of his rush helped my throw. He whirled headlong over my back and crashed to the turf on his neck and shoulder, slumped over and lay still. An instant I stood swaying above him, while a sudden deep-throated roar rose from the people of Koth, and then a rush of darkness blotted out the stars and the flickering torches, and I fell senseless across the still body of my antagonist.

Later they told me that they thought both Ghor and I were dead. They worked over us for hours. How our hearts resisted the terrible strain of our exertions is a matter of wonder to me. Men said it was by far the longest fight ever waged in the arena.

Ghor was badly hurt, even for a Kothan. That last fall had broken his shoulder bone and fractured his skull, to say nothing of the minor injuries he had received before the climax. Three of my ribs were broken, and my joints, limbs and muscles so twisted and wrenched that for days I was unable even to rise from my couch. The men of Koth treated our wounds and bruises with all their skill, which far transcends that of the Earth; but in the main it was our remarkable primitive vitality that put us back on our feet. When a creature of the wild is wounded, he generally either dies quickly or recovers quickly.

I asked Thab if Ghor would hate me for his defeat, and Thab was at a loss; Ghor had never been defeated before.

But my mind was soon put to rest on this score. Seven brawny warriors entered the chamber in which I had been placed, bearing a litter on which lay my late foe, wrapped in so many bandages he was scarcely recognizable. But his bellowing voice was familiar. He had forced his friends to bring him to see me as soon as he was able to stir on his couch. He held no malice. In his great, simple, primitive heart there was only admiration for the man who had given him his first defeat. He recounted our Homeric struggle with a gusto that made the roof reverberate, and roared his impatient eagerness for us to fare forth and do battle together against the foes of Koth.

He was borne back to his own chamber, still bellowing his admiration and gory plans for the future, and I experienced a warm glow in my heart for this great-hearted child of nature, who was far more of a man than many sophisticated scions of civilization that I had met.

And so I, Esau Cairn, took the step from savagery to barbarism. In the vast domed council hall before the assembled tribesmen, as soon as I was able, I stood before the throne of Khossuth Skullsplitter, and he cut the mysterious symbol of Koth above my head with his sword. Then with his own hands he buckled on me the harness of a warrior--the broad leather belt with the iron buckle, supporting my poniard and a long straight sword with a broad silver guard. Then the warriors filed past me, and each chief placed his palm against mine, and spoke his name, and I repeated it, and he repeated the name they had given me: Ironhand. That part was most wearisome for there were some four thousand warriors, and four hundred of these were chiefs of various rank. But it was part of the ritual of initiation, and when it was over I was as much a Kothan as if I had been born into the tribe.

In the tower chamber, pacing like a caged tiger while Thab talked, and later as a member of the tribe, I learned all that the people of Koth knew of their strange planet.

They and their kind, they said, were the only true humans on Almuric, though there was a mysterious race of beings dwelling far to the south called Yagas. The Kothans called themselves Guras, which applied to all cast in their mold, and meant no more than "man" does on Earth. There were many tribes of Guras, each dwelling in its separate city, each of which was a counterpart of Koth. No tribe numbered more than four or five thousand fighting-men, with the appropriate number of women and children.

No man of Koth had ever circled the globe, but they ranged far in their hunts and raids, and legends had been handed down concerning their world--which, naturally, they called by a name simply corresponding to the word "Earth"; though after a while some of them took up my habit of speaking of the planet as Almuric. Far to the north there was a land of ice and snow, uninhabited by human beings, though men spoke of weird cries shuddering by night from the ice crags, and of shadows falling across the snow. A lesser distance to the south rose a barrier no man had ever passed--a gigantic wall of rock which legend said girdled the planet; it was called, therefore, the Girdle. What lay beyond that Girdle, none knew. Some believed it was the rim of the world, and beyond it lay only empty space. Others maintained that another hemisphere lay beyond it. They believed, as seemed to me most logical, that the Girdle separated the northern and southern halves of the world, and that the southern hemisphere was inhabited by men and animals, though the exponents of their theory could give no proof, and were generally scoffed at as over-imaginative romanticists.

At any rate, the cities of the Guras dotted the vast expanse that lay between the Girdle and the land of ice. The northern hemisphere possessed no great body of water. There were rivers, great plains, a few scattered lakes, occasional stretches of dark, thick forests, long ranges of barren hills, and a few mountains. The larger rivers ran southward, to plunge into chasms in the Girdle.

The cities of the Guras were invariably built on the open plains, and always far apart. Their architecture was the result of the peculiar evolution of their builders--they were, basically, fortresses of rocks heaped up for defense. They reflected the nature of their builders, being rude, stalwart, massive, despising gaudy show and ornamentation, and knowing nothing of the arts.

In many ways the Guras are like the men of Earth, in other ways bafflingly different. Some of the lines on which they have evolved are so alien to Earthly evolution that I find it difficult to explain their ways and their development.

Specifically, Koth--and what is said of Koth can be said of every other Gura city:--the men of Koth are, skilled in war, the hunt, and weapon-making. The latter science is taught to each male child, but now seldom used. It is seldom found necessary to manufacture new arms, because of the durability of the material used. Weapons are handed down from generation to generation, or captured from enemies.

Metal is used only for weapons, in building, and for clasps and buckles on garments. No ornaments are worn, either by men or women, and there are no such things as coins. There is no medium of exchange. No trade between cities exists, and such "business" as goes on within the city is a matter of barter. The only cloth worn is a kind of silk, made from the fiber of a curious plant grown within the city walls. Other plants furnish wine, fruit, and seasonings. Fresh meat, the principal food of the Guras, is furnished by hunting, a pastime at once a sport and an occupation.

The folk of Koth, then, are highly skilled in metal-working, in silk-weaving, and in their peculiar form of agriculture. They have a written language, a simple hieroglyphic form, scrawled on leaves like papyrus, with a daggerlike pen dipped in the crimson juice of a curious blossom, but few except the chiefs can read or write. Literature they have none; they know nothing of painting, sculpturing, or the "higher" learning. They have evolved to the point of culture needful for the necessities of life, and they progress no further. Seemingly defying laws we on Earth have come to regard as immutable, they remain stationary, neither advancing nor retrogressing.

Like most barbaric people, they have a form of rude poetry, dealing almost exclusively with battle, mayhem and rapine. They have no bards or minstrels, but every man of the tribe knows the popular ballads of his clan, and after a few jacks of ale is prone to bellow them forth in a voice fit to burst one's eardrums.

These songs are never written down, and there is no written history. As a result, events of antiquity are hazy, and mixed with improbable legends.

No one knows how old is the city of Koth. Its gigantic stones are impervious to the elements, and might have stood there ten years or ten thousand years. I am of the opinion that the city is at least fifteen thousand years old. The Guras are an ancient race, in spite of their exuberant barbarism which gives them the atmosphere of a new young people. Of the evolution of the race from whatever beast was their common ancestor, of their racial splittings off and tribal drifts, of their development to their present condition, nothing whatever is known. The Guras themselves have no idea of evolution. They suppose that, like eternity, their race is without beginning and without end, that they have always been exactly as they are now. They have no legends to explain their creation.

I have devoted most of my remarks to the men of Koth. The women of Koth are no less worthy of detailed comment. I found the difference in the appearance of the sexes not so inexplicable after all. It is simply the result of natural evolution, and its roots lie in a fierce tenderness on the part of the Gura males for their women. It was to protect their women that they first, I am certain, built those brutish heaps of stone and dwelt among them; for the innate nature of the Gura male is definitely nomadic.

The woman, carefully guarded and shielded both from danger and from the hard work that is the natural portion of the women of Earthly barbarians, evolved by natural process into the type I have described. The men, on the other hand, lead incredibly active and strenuous lives. Their existence has been a savage battle for survival, ever since the first ape stood upright on Almuric. And they have evolved into a special type to fit their needs. Their peculiar appearance is not a result of degeneration or underdevelopment. They are, indeed, a highly specialized type, finely adapted to the wild life they follow.

As the men assume all risks and responsibility, they naturally assume all authority. The Gura woman has no say whatever in the government of the city and tribe, and her mate's authority over her is absolute, with the exception that she has the right to appeal to the council and chief in case of oppression. Her scope is narrow; few women ever set foot outside the city in which they are born, unless they are carried off in a raid.

Yet her lot is not so unhappy as it might seem. I have said that one of the characteristics of the Gura male is a savage tenderness for his women. Mistreatment of a woman is very rare, not tolerated by the tribe.

Monogamy is the rule. The Guras are not given to hand-kissing and pretty compliments, and the other superficial adjuncts of chivalry, but there is justice and a rough kindness in their dealing with women, somewhat similar to the attitude of the American frontiersman.

The duties of the Gura women are few, concerned mainly with child-bearing and child-rearing. They do no work heavier than the manufacturing of silk from the silk plants. They are musically inclined, and play on a small, stringed affair, resembling a lute, and they sing. They are quicker-witted, and of much more sensitive mind than the men. They are witty, merry, affectionate, playful and docile. They have their own amusements, and time does not seem to drag for them. The average woman could not be persuaded to set foot outside the city walls. They well know the perils that hem the cities in, and they are content in the protection of their ferocious mates and masters.

The men are, as I have said, in many ways like barbaric peoples on Earth. In some respects they resemble, I imagine, the ancient Vikings. They are honest, scorning theft and deceit. They delight in war and the hunt, but are not wantonly cruel, except when maddened by rage or bloodlust. Then they can be screaming fiends. They are blunt in speech, rough in their manners, easily angered, but as easily pacified, except when confronted by an hereditary enemy. They have a definite, though crude, sense of humor, a ferocious love for tribe and city, and a passion for personal freedom.

Their weapons consist of swords, daggers, spears, and a firearm something like a carbine--a single-shot, breech-loading weapon of no great range. The combustible material is not powder, as we know it. Its counterpart is not found on Earth. It possesses both percussion and explosive qualities. The bullet is of a substance much like lead. These weapons were used mainly in war with men; for hunting, bows and arrows were most often used.

Hunting parties are always going forth, so that the full force of warriors is seldom in the city at once. Hunters are often gone for weeks or months. But there are always a thousand fighting men in the city to repel possible attack, though it is not often that the Guras lay siege to a hostile city. Those cities are difficult to storm, and it is impossible to starve out the inhabitants, since they produce so much of their food supply within the walls, and in each city is an unfailing spring of pure water. The hunters frequently sought their prey in the hills which I had haunted, and which were reputed to contain more and varied forms of ferocious bestial life than any other section of the globe. The boldest hunters went in strong parties to the ills, and seldom roamed there more than a few days. The fact that I had lived among the hills alone for months won me even more respect and admiration among those wild fighting men than had my fight with Ghor.

Oh, I learned much of Almuric. As this is a chronicle and not an essay, I can scarcely skim the surface of customs, ways and traditions. I learned all they could tell me, and I learned much more. The Guras were not first on Almuric, though they considered themselves to be. They told me of ancient ruins, never built by Guras, relics of vanished races, who, they supposed, were contemporary with their distant ancestors, but which, as I came to learn, had risen and vanished awfully before the first Gura began to heap up stones to build his primordial city. And how I learned what no Gura knew is part of this strange narrative.

But they spoke of strange unhuman beings or survivals. They told me of the Yagas, a terrible race of winged black men, dwelling far to the south, within sight of the Girdle, in the grim city of Yugga, on the rock Yuthla, by the River Yogh, in the land of Yagg, where living man had never set foot. The Yagas, the Guras said, were not true men, but devils in a human form. From Yugga they swooped periodically, bearing the sword of slaughter and the torch of destruction, to carry young Gura girls into a slavery the manner of which none knew, because none had ever escaped from the land of Yagg. Some men thought that they were fed to a monster worshiped by the Yagas as a god, though some swore that the fiends worshiped

nothing except themselves. This was known: their ruler was a black queen, named Yasmeena, and for more than a thousand years she had reigned on the grim rock of Yuthla, her shadow falling across the world to make men shudder.

The Guras told me other things, things weird and terrible: of dog-headed monstrosities skulking beneath the ruins of nameless cities; of earth-shaking colossals stalking through the night; of fires flitting like flaming bats through the shadowy skies; of things that haunted midnight forests, crawling, squamous things that were never seen, but which tracked men down in the dank depths. They told me of great bats whose laughter drove men mad, and of gaunt shapes shambling hideously through the dusk of the hills. They told me of such things as do not even haunt the dreams of men on my native planet. For Life has taken strange shapes on Almuric, and natural Life is not the only Life there.

But the nightmares told to me and the nightmares seen by me unfold in their place, and I have already lingered too long in my narrative. Be patient a little, because events move swiftly on Almuric, and my chronicle moves no less swiftly when well under way.

For months I dwelt in Koth, fitting into the life of hunting, feasting, ale-guzzling, and brawling, as if I had been born into it. There life was not restrained and bound down, as it is on Earth. As yet no tribal war had tested my powers, but there was fighting enough in the city with naked hands, in friendly bouts, and drunken brawls, when the fighting-men dashed down their foaming jacks and bellowed their challenges across the ale-stained boards. I revelled in my new existence. Here, as in the hills, I threw my full powers unleashed into life; and here, unlike as in the hills, I had human companionship, of a sort that suited my particular make-up. I felt no need of art, literature or intellectuality; I hunted, I gorged, I guzzled, I fought; I spread my massive arms and clutched at life like a glutton. And in my brawling and revelling I all but forgot the slender figure which had sat so patiently in the council chamber beneath the great dome.

Chapter 05

I had wandered far in my hunting. Alone I had spent several nights on the plains. Now I was returning leisurely, but I was still many miles from Koth, whose massive towers I could not yet glimpse across the waving savannas. I cannot say what my thoughts were as I swung along, my carbine in the crook of my arm, but they were likely concerned with spoors in the water's edge, crushed-down grass marking the passing of some large animal, or the scents borne on the light wind.

Whatever my thoughts may have been, they were interrupted by a shrill cry. Wheeling, I saw a slim white figure racing across the grassy level toward me. Behind her, gaining with every stride, came one of those giant carnivorous birds which are among the most dangerous of all the grisly denizens of the grasslands. They tower ten feet in height and somewhat resemble an ostrich except for the beak, which is a huge curving weapon, three feet in length, pointed and edged like a scimitar. A stroke of that beak can slash a man asunder, and the great taloned feet of the monster can tear a human limb from limb.

This mountain of destruction was hurtling along behind the flying girl at appalling speed, and I knew it would overtake her long before I could hope to reach them. Cursing the necessity for depending on my none too accurate marksmanship, I lifted my carbine and took as steady an aim as possible. The girl was directly in line with the brute, and I could not risk a shot at the huge body, lest I hit her instead. I had to chance a shot at the great head that bobbed bafflingly on the long arching neck.

It was more luck than skill that sent my bullet home. At the crack of the shot the giant head jerked backward as if the monster had run into an unseen wall. The stumpy wings thrashed thunderously, and staggering erratically, the brute pitched to the earth.

The girl fell at the same instant, as if the same bullet had brought them both down. Running forward to bend over her, I was surprised to see Altha, daughter of Zal, looking up at me with her dark enigmatic eyes. Quickly satisfying myself that she was not injured, outside of fright and exhaustion, I turned to the thunderbird and found it quite dead, its few brains oozing out of a hole in its narrow skull.

Turning back to Altha, I scowled down at her.

"What are you doing outside the city?" I demanded. "Are you quite mad, to venture so far into the wilderness alone?"

She made no reply, but I sensed a hurt in her dark eyes, and I repented the roughness of my speech. I dropped down on one knee beside her.

"You are a strange girl, Altha," I said. "You are not like the other women of Koth. Folk say you are wilful and rebellious, without reason. I do not understand you. Why should you risk your life like this?"

"What will you do now?" she demanded.

"Why, take you back to the city, of course."

Her eyes smoldered with a curious sullenness.

"You will take me back, and my father will whip me. But I will run away again--and again--and again!"

"But why should you run away?" I asked in bewilderment. "There is nowhere for you to go. Some beast will devour you."

"So!" she answered. "Perhaps it is my wish to be devoured."

"Then why did you run from the thunderbird?"

"The instinct to live is hard to conquer," she admitted.

"But why should you wish to die?" I expostulated. "The women of Koth are happy, and you have as much as any."

She looked away from me, out across the broad plains.

"To eat, drink and sleep is not all," she answered in a strange voice. "The beasts do that."

I ran my fingers through my thick hair in perplexity. I had hard similar sentiments voiced in many different ways on Earth, but it was the first time I had ever heard them from the lips of an inhabitant on Almuric. Altha continued in a low detached voice, almost as if she were speaking to herself rather than to me:

"Life is too hard for me. I do not fit, somehow, as the others do. I bruise myself on its rough edges. I look for something that is not and never was."

Uneasy at her strange words, I caught her heavy locks in my hands and forced back her head to look into her face. Her enigmatic eyes met mine with a strange glimmer in them such as I had never seen.

"It was hard before you came," she said. "It is harder now."

Startled, I released her, and she turned her head away.

"Why should I make it harder?" I asked bewilderedly.

"What constitutes life?" she countered. "Is the life we live all there is? Is there nothing outside and beyond our material aspirations?"

I scratched my head in added perplexity.

"Why," I said, "on Earth I met many people who were always following some nebulous dream or ideal, but I never observed that they were happy. On my planet there is much grasping and groping for unseen things, but I never knew there was such full content as I have known on Almuric."

"I thought you different," she said, still looking away from me. "When I saw you lying wounded and in chains, with your smooth skin and strange eyes, I thought you were more gentle than other men. But you are as rough and fierce as the rest. You spend your days and nights in slaying beasts, fighting men, and in riotous wassail."

"But they all do," I protested.

She nodded. "And so I do not fit in life, and were better dead."

I felt unreasonably ashamed. It had occurred to me that an Earthwoman would find life on Almuric intolerably crude and narrow, but it seemed beyond reason that a native woman would have such feelings. If the other women I had seen desired more superficial gentleness on the part of their men, they had not made it known. They seemed content with shelter and protection, and cheerfully resigned to the rough manners of the males. I sought for words but found none, unskilled as I was in polite discourse. I suddenly felt my roughness, crudity and raw barbarism, and stood abashed.

"I'll take you back to Koth," I said helplessly.

She shrugged her shapely shoulders. "And you can watch my father whip me, if you will."

At that I found my tongue.

"He won't whip you," I retorted angrily. "Let him lay a hand on you, and I'll break his back."

She looked up at me quickly, with eyes widened in sudden interest. My arm had found its way about her slim form, and I was glaring into her eyes, with my face very close to hers. Her lips parted, and had that breathless instant lasted a little longer, I know not what would have happened. But suddenly the color went from her face, and from her parted lips rang a terrible scream. Her gaze was fixed on something beyond and above me, and the thrash of wings suddenly filled the air.

I wheeled on one knee, to see the air above me thronged with dark shapes. The Yagas! The winged men of Almuric! I had half believed them a myth; yet here they were in all their mysterious terror.

I had but a glance as I reared up, clubbing my empty carbine. I saw that they were tall and rangy in build, sinewy and powerful, with ebon skins. They seemed made like ordinary men, except for the great leathery batlike wings which grew from their shoulders. They were naked except for loincloths, and were armed with short curved blades.

I rose on my toes as the first swooped in, scimitar lifted, and met him with a swing of my carbine that broke off the stock and crushed his narrow skull like an eggshell. The next instant they were whirling and thrashing about me, their curved blades licking at me like jets of lightning from all sides, the very number of their broad wings hampering them.

Whirling the carbine barrel in a wheel about me, I broke and beat back the flickering blades, and in a furious exchange of strokes, caught another a glancing blow on the head that stretched him senseless at my feet. Then a wild despairing cry rang out behind me, and abruptly the rush slackened.

The whole pack was in the air, racing southward, and I stood frozen. In the arms of one of them writhed and shrieked a slender white figure, stretching out imploring arms to me. Altha! They had snatched her up from behind my back, and were carrying her away to whatever doom awaited her in that black citadel of mystery far to the south. The terrific velocity with which the Yagas raced through the sky was already taking them out of my sight.

As I stood there baffled, I felt a movement at my feet. Looking down I saw one of my victims sit up and feel his head dazedly. I vengefully lifted my carbine barrel to dash out his brains; then a sudden thought struck me, inspired by the ease with which Altha's captor had carried both his weight and hers in the air.

Drawing my poniard, I dragged my captive to his feet. Standing erect he was taller than I, with shoulders equally broad, though his limbs were lean and wiry rather than massive. His dark eyes, which slanted slightly, regarded me with the unblinking stare of a venomous serpent.

The Guras had told me the Yagas spoke a tongue similar to their own.

"You are going to carry me through the air in pursuit of your companions," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders and spoke in a peculiarly harsh voice.

"I cannot carry your weight."

"Then that's too bad for you," I answered grimly, and whirling him about, I leaped upon his back, locking my legs about his waist. My left arm was hooked about his neck, the poniard in my right hand pricked his side. He had kept his feet under the impact of my bulk, spreading his great wings.

"Take the air!" I snarled in his ear, sinking the dagger point into his flesh. "Fly, damn you, or I'll cut your heart out!"

His wings began to thrash the air, and we rose slowly from the earth. It was a most sensational experience, but one to which I gave scant thought at the time, being so engrossed in my fury at the abduction of Altha.

When we had risen to a height of about a thousand feet, I looked for the abductors, and saw them far away, a mere group of black dots in the southern sky. After them I steered my reluctant steed.

In spite of my threats and urging for greater speed the flying dots soon vanished. Still I kept on due southward, feeling that even if I failed to overtake them, I would eventually come to the great dusky rock where legend placed their habitation.

Inspired by my poniard, my bearer made good time, considering the burden he was carrying. For hours we sped over the savannas, and by the middle of the afternoon, the landscape changed. We were flying over a forest, the first I had seen on Almuric. The trees seemed to tower to a vast height.

It was near sundown when I saw the farther limits of the forest, and in the grasslands beyond, the ruins of a city. From among these ruins smoke curled upward, and I asked my steed if his companions were cooking their evening meal there. His only answer was a snarl.

We were flying low over the forest, when a sudden uproar caused me to look down. We were just passing over a narrow glade, and in it a terrific battle was taking place. A pack of hyenas had attacked a giant unicornlike beast, as big as a bison. Half a dozen mangled, trampled bodies attested the fury of the beast's defense, and even as I peered down, he caught the single survivor on his swordlike ivory horn, and cast it a score of feet in the air, broken and torn.

In the brief fascination of the sight, I must have involuntarily loosened my grasp on my captive. For at that instant, with a convulsive bucking heave and twist, he wrenched free and hurled me sideways. Caught off guard, I clutched vainly at empty air, and rushing earthward, crashed with a stunning impact on the loamy leaf-carpeted earth, directly in front of the maddened unicorn!

I had a dazed brief glimpse of his mountainous bulk looming over me, as his massive lowered head drove his horn at my breast. Then I lurched up on one knee, simultaneously grasping that ivory sword with my left hand and seeking to deflect it, while my right hand drove my poniard up toward the great jugular. Then there came a terrific impact against my skull, and consciousness was blotted out in darkness.

Chapter 06

I could have been senseless only a few minutes. When I regained consciousness my first sensation was that of a crushing weight upon my limbs and body. Struggling weakly, I found that I was lying beneath the lifeless body of a unicorn. At the instant my poniard had torn open his great jugular vein, the base of his horn must have struck my head, while the vast body collapsed upon me. Only the soft spongy ground beneath me had saved me from being crushed to a pulp. Working myself out from under that bulk was a herculean task, but eventually I accomplished it, and stood up, bruised and breathless, with the half-dried blood of the monster clotted in my hair and smearing my limbs. I was a grisly sight to look at, but I wasted no time on my appearance. My erstwhile steed was nowhere in evidence, and the circling trees limited my view of the sky.

Selecting the tallest of these trees, I climbed it as swiftly as possible, and on the topmost branches, looked out over the forest. The sun was setting. I saw that perhaps an hour's swift walk to the south, the forest thinned out and ceased. Smoke still drifted thinly up from the deserted city. And I saw my former captive just dropping down among the ruins. He must have lingered, after he had overthrown me, possibly to see if I showed any signs of life, probably to rest his wings after that long grind.

I cursed; there went my chance of stealing up on them unsuspected. Then I got a surprise. No sooner had the Yaga vanished than he reappeared, shooting up out of the city like a rocket. Without hesitation he raced off southward, speeding through the sky at a rate that left me gaping. What was the reason for his flight? If it had been his companions who were among the ruins, why had he not alighted? Perhaps he had found them gone, and was merely following them. Yet his actions seemed strange, considering the leisurely way he had approached the ruins. His flight had the earmarks of panic.

Shaking my head in puzzlement, I descended the tree and set out for the ruins as swiftly as I could make my way through the dense growth, paying no heed to the rustling in the leaves about me, and the muttering of rousing life, that grew as the shadows deepened.

Night had fallen when I emerged from the forest, but the moon was rising, casting a weird unreal glow over the plains. The ruins glimmered ghostily in the near distance. The walls were not of the rough greenish material used by the Guras. As I approached I saw they were of marble, and that fact caused a vague uneasiness to stir in my mind. I remembered legends told by the Kothans of ruined marble cities haunted by ghoulish beings. Such ruins were found in certain uninhabited places, and none knew their origin.

A brooding silence lay over the broken walls and columns as I entered the ruins. Between the gleaming white tusks and surfaces deep black shadow floated, almost liquid in its quality. From one dusky pool to the other I glided silently, sword in hand, expecting anything from an ambush by the Yagas to an attack by some lurking beast of prey. Utter silence reigned, as I had never encountered it anywhere on Almuric before. Not a distant lion roared, not a night fowl voiced its weird cry. I might have been the last survivor on a dead world.

In silence I came to a great open space, flanked by a circle of broken pillars, which must have been a plaza. Here I halted, motionless, my skin crawling.

In the midst of the plaza smoldered the dying coals of a fire over which, on spits planted in the earth, were roasting pieces of meat. The Yagas had evidently built that fire and--prepared to sup; but they had not eaten of their meal. They lay strewn about the plaza in a way to appall the hardiest.

I had never gazed on such a scene of organic devastation. Hands, feet, grinning heads, bits of flesh, entrails, clots of blood littered the whole plaza. The heads were like balls of blackness, rolled out of the shadows against the snowy marble; their teeth grinned, their eyes glimmered palely in the moonlight. *Something* had come upon the winged men as they sat about their fire and had torn them limb from limb. On the remnants of flesh were the marks of fangs, and some of the bones had been broken, apparently to get the marrow.

A cold ripple went up and down my spine. What animal but man breaks bones in that fashion? But the scattering of the bloody remnants seemed not the work of beasts; it seemed too vindictive, as if it were the work of vengeance, fury or bestial blood-thirstiness.

Where, then, was Altha? Her remains were not among those of her captors. Glancing at the flesh on the spit, the configuration of the pieces set me to shuddering. Shaken with horror, I saw that my dark suspicions were correct. It was parts of a human body the accursed Yagas had been roasting for their meal. Sick with revulsion and dread, I examined the pitiful remnants more closely, and breathed a deep sigh of relief to see the thick muscular limbs of a man, and not the slender parts of a woman. But after that I looked unmoved at the torn bloody bits that had been Yagas.

But where was the girl? Had she escaped the slaughter and hidden herself, or had she been taken by the slayers? Looking about at the towers and fallen blocks and pillars, bathed in the weird moonlight, I was aware of a distinct aura of evil, of lurking menace. I felt the glare of hidden eyes.

But I began casting about the plaza, and came upon a trail of blood drops, lying blackly in the moon, leading through a maze of drunken pillars, and for want of better occupation, I followed it. At least it might lead me to the slayers of the winged men.

I passed under the shadows of leaning pillars which dwarfed my human frame with their brute massiveness, and came into a crumbling edifice, overgrown with lichen. Through the broken roof and the gaping windows the moon poured a fungus-white light that served to make the shadows blacker. But a square of moonlight fell across the entrance of a corridor, and leading into it, I saw the sprinkle of dark clotted drops on the cracked vine-grown marble. Into the corridor I groped, and almost broke my neck on the stairs that lay within. Down them I went, and striking a level, hesitated and was about to retrace my steps when I was electrified by a sound that stopped my heart, and then sent the blood pounding madly through my veins. Through the darkness, faint and far away, sounded the call: "Esau! Esau Cairn!"

Altha! Who else could it be? Why should an icy shuddering pass over me, and the short hairs bristle at the back of my neck? I started to answer; then caution clutched my tongue. She could not know I was within hearing, surely. Perhaps she was calling as a frightened child will cry for someone far out of hearing. I went as swiftly down the black tunnel as I dared, in the direction I had heard the cry. And was gagged by a tendency toward nausea.

My groping hand encountered a doorway and I halted, sensing, as a wild thing does; a living presence of some sort near me. Straining my eyes in the pitch dark, I spoke Altha's name in a low urgent voice. Instantly two lights burned in the darkness, yellowish glows at which I stared for an instant before I realized that they were two eyes. They were broad as my hand, round and of a scintillance I cannot describe. Behind them I got a vague impression of a huge shapeless bulk. Simultaneously such a wave of instinctive fear swept over me, that I withdrew quickly into the tunnel and hastened along it in the direction I had been going. Back in the cell I heard a faint movement, like the shifting of some great pulpy mass, mingled with a soft rasping sound, as of bristles scraping against stone.

A few score paces more and I halted. The tunnel seemed endless, and besides, judging from the feel, other tunnels branched off from it in the darkness, and I had no way of knowing which was the right one. As I stood there I again heard the call: "Esau! Esau Cairn!"

Steeling myself against something, I knew not what, I set off once more in the direction of the ghostly voice. How far I went I do not know, until I stopped once more baffled. Then from nearby the voice rang out again: "Esau! Esau CairNNNN!" It rose to a high-pitched note, trailing off into an awful burst of inhuman laughter that froze the blood in my veins.

That was not Altha's voice. I had known all the time that it was not--that it could not be. Yet the alternative was so inexplicable that I had refused to heed what my intuition affirmed and my reason denied.

Now from every direction, on every hand rose a medley of shrill demoniac voices, all shrieking my name with the mockery of devils. The tunnels that had been so silent now rang and re-echoed with strident clamor. I stood bewildered and terrified, as the damned must stand in the clamorous halls of hell. I passed through the stages of icy terror, bewildered horror, desperation, berserk fury. With a maddened roar I plunged blindly at the sounds that seemed nearest, only to collide with a solid wall, while a thousand inhuman voices rose in hideous mirth. Wheeling like a wounded bull, I charged again, this time into the mouth of another tunnel. Racing down this, mad to come to grips with my tormenters, I burst into a vast shadowy space, into which a beam of moonlight cast a ghostly shaft. And again I heard my name called, but in human tones of fear and anguish:

"Esau! Oh, Esau!"

Even as I answered the piteous cry with a savage bellow, I saw her. Altha, etched in the dim moonlight. She was stretched out on the floor, her hands and feet in the shadow. But I saw that at each outstretched member squatted a dim misshapen figure.

With a blood-thirsty yell I charged, and the darkness sprang into nauseous life, flooding my knees with tangible shapes. Sharp fangs gashed me, apish hands clawed at me. They could not halt me. Swinging my sword in great arcs that cut a path through solid masses of writhing shapes, I forged toward the girl that twisted and screamed on the floor in that square of moonlight.

I waded through a rolling, surging mire of squirming biting things that washed about me waist-high, but they could not drag me down. I reached the moonlit square, and the creatures that held Altha gave back before the whistling menace of my sword edge, and the girl sprang up and clung to me. Even as the shadowy horde rolled in to drag us down I saw a crumbling stair leading up, and I thrust her upon it, wheeling to cover her retreat.

It was dark on the stairs, though they led up into a chamber flooded with light through a broken roof. That battle was fought in utter darkness, with only my senses of feeling and hearing to guide my strokes. And it was fought in silence, too, except for my panting, and the whir and crunch of my blade.

Up that drunken stair I backed, battling every inch of the way, the skin between my shoulders crawling with the expectancy of an attack from the rear. If they had come upon us from above, we had been lost, but evidently all were below me. What manner of creatures I was fighting I did not know, except that they were taloned and fanged. Otherwise, from the feel of them, they were stunted and misshapen, furry and apish.

When I came out into the chamber above the tunnels I could see little more. The moonlight streaming through the broken roof made only a white shaft in the darkness. I could only make out vague forms in the dimness about me--a heaving, writhing and lashing of shadows, that surged up against me, clawing and tearing, and fell back beneath my lashing sword.

Thrusting Altha behind me, I backed across that shadowy chamber toward a wide rift that showed in the crumbling wall, reeling and stumbling in the whirlpool of battle that swirled and eddied about me. As I reached the rift through which Altha had already slipped, there was a concerted rush to drag me down. Panic swept over me at the thought of being pulled down in that shadowy room by that dim horde. A blasting burst of fury, a gasping, straining plunge, and I catapulted through the rift, carrying half a dozen attackers with me.

Reeling up, I shook the clinging horrors from my shoulders as a bear might shake off wolves, and bracing my feet slashed right and left. Now for the first time I saw the nature of my foes.

The bodies were like those of deformed apes, covered with sparse dirty white fur. Their heads were doglike, with small close-set ears. But their eyes were those of serpents--the same venomous steady lidless stare.

Of all the forms of life I had encountered on that strange planet, none filled me with as much loathing as these dwarfish monstrosities. I backed away from the mangled heap on the earth, as a nauseous flood poured through the rift in the wall.

The effect of those vermin emerging from that broken wall was almost intolerably sickening; the suggestion was that of maggots squirming out of a cracked and bleached skull.

Turning, I caught Altha up in one arm and raced across the open space. They followed fleetingly, running now on all fours, and now upright like a man. And suddenly they broke out into their hellish laughter again, and I saw we were trapped. Ahead of me were more emerging from some other subterranean entrance. We were cut off.

A giant pedestal, from which the column had been broken, stood before us. With a bound I reached it, set the girl on the jagged pinnacle, and wheeled on the lower base to take such toll of our pursuers as I might. Blood streaming from a score of gashes trickled down the pedestal on which I stood, and I shook my head violently to rid my eyes of blinding sweat.

They ringed me in a wide semicircle, deliberate now that their prey seemed certain, and I cannot recall a time when I was more revolted by horror and disgust, than when I stood with my back to that marble pillar and faced those verminous monsters of the lower world.

Then my attention was caught by a movement in the shadows under the wall through which we had just come. Something was emerging from the rift--something huge and black and bulky. I caught the glitter of a yellowish spark. Fascinated, I watched, even while the furred devils were closing in. Now the thing had emerged entirely from the rift. I saw it crouching in the shadow of the wall, a squat mass of blackness from which glimmered a pair of yellowish lights. With a start I recognized the eyes I had seen in the subterranean cell.

With a clamor of fiendish yells the furry devils rushed in, and at the same instant the unknown creature ran out into the moonlight with surprising speed and agility. I saw it plainly then--a gigantic spider, bigger than an ox. Moving with the swiftness characteristic of its breed, it was among the dog-heads before the first had felt my lifted sword. An awful scream rose from its first victim, and the rest, turning, broke and fled shrieking in all directions. The monster raged among them with appalling quickness and ferocity. Its huge jaws crunched their skulls, its dripping mandibles skewered them, it crushed their bodies by its sheer weight. In an instant the place was a shambles, inhabited only by the dead and dying. Crouching among its victims, the great black hairy thing fixed its horribly intelligent eyes on me.

I was the one it was trailing. I had awakened it underground, and it had followed the scent of the dried blood on my sandals. It had slaughtered the others simply because they stood in its way.

As it crouched on its eight bent legs, I saw that it differed from Earthly spiders not only in size, but in the number of its eyes and the shape of its jaws. Now Altha screamed as it ran swiftly toward me.

But where the fangs and claws of a thousand beast-things were futile against the venom dripping from those black mandibles, the brain and thews of a single man prevailed. Catching up a heavy block of masonry, I poised it for an instant, and then hurled it straight into the onrushing bulk. Full among those branching hairy legs it crushed, and a jet of nauseous green stuff gushed into the air from the torn torso. The monster, halted in his rush, writhed under the pinning stone, cast it aside and staggered toward me again, dragging broken legs, its eyes glittering hellishly. I tore another missile from the crumbling stone, and another and another, raining huge chunks of marble on the writhing horror until it lay still in a ghastly mess of squirming hairy black legs, entrails and blood.

Then catching Altha in my arms, I raced away through the shadows of monolith and tower and pillar, nor did I halt until the city of silence and mystery lay behind us, and we saw the moon setting across the broad waving grasslands.

No word had passed between us since I had first come upon the girl in that ghoulish tunnel. Now when I looked down to speak to her I saw her dark head drooping against my arm; her white face was upturned, her eyes shut. A quick throb of fear went through me, but a swift examination showed me that she had merely fainted. That fact showed the horror of what she had been through. The women of Koth do not faint easily.

I laid her at full length on the turf, and gazed at her helplessly, noting, as if for the first time, the white firmness of her slender limbs, the exquisite molding of her supple figure. Her dark hair fell in thick glossy clusters about her alabaster shoulders, a strap of her tunic, slipped down, revealed her firm, pink-tipped young breasts. I was aware of a vague unrest that was almost a pain.

Altha opened her eyes and looked up at me. Then her dark eyes flared with terror, and she cried out and clutched at me frantically. My arms closed about her instinctively, and within their iron-thewed clasp I felt the pulsating of her lithe body, the wild fluttering of her heart.

"Don't be afraid." My voice sounded strange, scarcely articulate. "Nothing is going to harm you."

I could feel her heart resuming its normal beat, so closely she clung to me, before her quick pants of fright ceased. But for a while she lay in my arms, looking up at me without speaking, until, embarrassed, I released her and lifted her to a sitting position on the grass.

"As soon as you feel fit," I said, "we'll put more distance between us and--that." I jerked my head in the direction of the distant ruins.

"You are hurt," she exclaimed suddenly, tears filling her eyes. "You are bleeding! Oh, I am to blame. If I had not run away--" She was weeping now in earnest, like any Earthly girl.

"Don't worry about these scratches," I answered, though privately I was wondering if the fangs of the vermin were venomous. "They are only flesh wounds. Stop crying, will you?"

She obediently stifled her sobs, and naively dried her eyes with her skirt. I did not wish to remind her of her horrible experience, but I was curious on one point.

"Why did the Yagas halt at the ruins?" I asked. "Surely they knew of the things that haunt such cities."

"They were hungry," she answered with a shudder. "They had captured a youth--they dismembered him alive, but never a cry for mercy they got, only curses. Then they roasted--" She gagged, smitten with nausea.

"So the Yagas are cannibals." I muttered.

"No. They are devils. While they sat about the fire the dog-heads fell upon them. I did not see them until they were on us. They swarmed over the Yagas like jackals over deer. Then they dragged me into the darkness. What they meant to do, Thak only knows. I have heard--but it is too obscene to repeat."

"But why did they shriek my name?" I marveled.

"I cried it aloud in my terror," she answered. "They heard and mimicked me. When you came, they knew you. Do not ask me how. They too are devils."

"This planet is infested with devils," I muttered. "But why did you call on me, in your fright, instead of your father?"

She colored slightly, and instead of answering, began pulling her tunic straps in place.

Seeing that one of her sandals had slipped off, I replaced it on her small foot, and while I was so occupied she asked unexpectedly: "Why do they call you Ironhand? Your fingers are hard, but their touch is as gentle as a woman's. I never had men's fingers touch me so lightly before. More often they have hurt me."

I clenched my fist and regarded it moodily--a knotted iron mallet of a fist. She touched it timidly.

"It's the feeling behind the hand." I answered. "No man I ever fought complained that my fists were gentle. But it is my enemies I wish to hurt, not you."

Her eyes lighted. "You would not hurt me? Why?"

The absurdity of the question left me speechless.

Chapter 07

It was past sunrise when we started back on the long trek toward Koth, swinging far to the west to avoid the devil city from which we had escaped. The sun came up unusually hot. The air was breathless, the light morning wind blew fitfully, and then died down entirely. The always cloudless sky had a faint copperish tint. Altha eyed that sky apprehensively, and in answer to my question said she feared a storm. I had supposed the weather to be always clear and calm and hot on the plains, clear and windy and cold in the hills. Storms had not entered into my calculation.

The beasts we saw shared her uneasiness. We skirted the edge of the forest, for Altha refused to traverse it until the storm had passed. Like most plains-dwellers, she had an instinctive distrust of thick woods. As we strode over the grassy undulations, we saw the herds of grazers milling confusedly. A drove of jumping pigs passed us, covering the ground with gargantuan bounds of thirty and forty feet. A lion started up in front of us with a roar, but dropped his massive head and slunk hurriedly away through the tall grass.

I kept looking for clouds, but saw none. Only the copperish tint about the horizons grew, discoloring the whole sky. It turned from light color to dull bronze, and from bronze to black. The sun smoldered for a little like a veiled torch, veining the dusky dome with fire, then it was blotted out. A tangible darkness seemed to hover an instant in the sky, then rush down, cloaking the world in utter blackness, through which shone neither sun, moon, nor stars. I had never guessed how impenetrable darkness could be. I might have been a blind, disembodied spirit wandering through unlighted space, but for the swish of the grasses under my feet, and the soft warm contact of Altha's body against mine. I began to fear we might fall into a river, or blunder against some equally blind beast of prey.

I had been making for a mass of broken boulders, such a formation as occasionally occurs on the plains. Darkness fell before we reached them, but groping on, I stumbled upon a sizable rock, and placing my back to it, drew Altha against it and stood sheltering her with my body as well as I could. Out on the dark plains breathless silence alternated with the sounds of varied and widespread movement--rustling of grass, shuffle of padded hoofs, weird lowing and low-pitched roaring. Once a vast herd of some sort swept by us, and I was thankful for the protection of the boulders that kept us from being trampled. Again all sounds ceased and the silence was as complete as the darkness. Then from somewhere came a weird howling.

"What's that?" I asked uneasily, unable to classify it.

"The wind!" she shivered, snuggling closer to me.

It did not blow with a steady blast; here and there it swept in mad fitful gusts. Like lost souls it wailed and moaned. It ripped the grasses near us, and finally a puff of it struck us squarely, knocking us off our feet and bruising us against the boulder behind us. Just that one abrupt blast, like a buffet from an unseen giant's fist.

As we regained our feet I froze. Something was passing near our refuge--something mountain-huge, beneath whose tread the earth trembled. Altha caught me in a desperate clutch, and I felt the pounding of her heart. My hair prickled with nameless fear. The *thing* was even with us. It halted, as if sensing our presence. There was a curious leathery sound, as of the movement of great limbs. Something waved in the air above us; then I felt a touch on my elbow. The same object touched Altha's bare arm, and she screamed, her taut nerves snapping.

Instantly our ears were deafened by an awful bellow above us, and something swept down through the darkness with a clashing of gigantic teeth. Blindly I lashed out and upward, feeling my sword-edge meet tangible substance. A warm liquid spurted along my arm, and with another terrible roar, this time more of pain than rage, the invisible monster shambled away, shaking the earth with its tread, dimming the shrieking wind with its bellowing.

"What was it, in God's name?" I panted.

"It was one of the Blind Ones," she whispered. "No man has ever seen them; they dwell in the darkness of the storm. Whence they come, whither they go, none knows. But look, the darkness melts."

"Melts" was the right word. It seemed to shred out, to tear in long streamers. The sun came out, the sky showed blue from horizon to horizon. But the earth was barred fantastically with long strips of darkness, tangible shadows floating on the plain, with broad spaces of sunlight between. The scene might have been a dream landscape of an opium-eater. A hurrying deer flitted across a sunlight band and vanished abruptly in a broad streamer of black; as suddenly it flashed into light and sight again. There was no gradual shaking into darkness; the borders of the torn strips of blackness were as clear-cut and definite as ribbons of ebony on a background of gold and emerald. As far as I could see, the world was stripped and barred with those black ribbons. Sight could not pierce them, but they were thinning, dividing, vanishing.

Directly before one of the streamers of darkness ripped apart and disappeared, revealing the figure of a man--a hairy giant, who stood glaring at me, sword in hand, as surprised as I. Then several things happened all at once. Altha screamed: "A Thugran!" the stranger leaped and slashed, and his sword clanged on my lifted blade.

I have only a brief chaotic memory of the next few seconds. There was a whirl of strokes and parries, a brief clanging of steel; then my sword-point sank under his heart and stood out behind his back. I wrenched the blade free as he sank down, and stood glaring down at him bewilderedly. I had secretly wondered what the outcome would be when I was called upon to face a seasoned warrior with naked steel. Now it had occurred and was over with, and I was absolutely unable to remember how I had won. It had been too fast and furious for conscious thought; my fighting instincts had acted for me.

A clamor of angry cries burst on me, and wheeling I saw a score of hairy warriors swarming out from among the rocks. It was too late to flee. In an instant they were on me, and I was the center of a whirling, flashing, maelstrom of swords. How I parried them even for a few seconds I cannot say. But I did, and even had the satisfaction of feeling my blade grate around another, and sever the wielder's shoulder bone. A moment later one stooped beneath my thrust and drove the spear through the calf of my leg. Maddened by the pain, I dealt him a stroke that split his skull to the chin, and then a carbine stock descended on my head. I partially parried the blow, else it had smashed my skull. But even so, it beat down on my crown with thunderous and murderous impact, and the lights went out.

I came to with the impression that I was lying in a small boat which was rocking and tossing in a storm. Then I discovered that I was bound hand and foot, and being borne on a litter made of spear-shafts. Two huge warriors were bearing me between them, and they made no effort to make the traveling any easier for me. I could see only the sky, the hairy back of the warrior in front of me, and by drawing back my head the bearded face of the warrior behind. This person, seeing my eyes open, growled a word to his mate, and they promptly dropped the litter. The jolt set my damaged head to throbbing, and the wound in my leg to hurting abominably.

"Logar!" bawled one of them. "The dog is conscious. Make him walk, if you must bring him to Thugra. I've carried him far as I'm going to."

I heard footsteps, and then above me towered a giant form and a face that seemed familiar. It was a fierce, brutal face, and from the corner of the snarling mouth to the rim of the square jaw, ran a livid scar.

"Well, Esau Cairn," said this individual, "we meet again."

I made no reply to this obvious comment.

"What?" he sneered, "do you not remember Logar the Bonecrusher, you hairless dog?"

He punctuated his remarks by a savage kick in my ribs. Somewhere there rang out a feminine shriek of protest, the sound of a scuffle, and Altha broke through the ring of warriors and fell to her knees beside me.

"Beast!" she cried, her beautiful eyes blazing. "You kick him when he is helpless, when you would not dare face him in fair battle."

"Who let this Kothan cat loose?" roared Logar. "Thal, I told you to keep her away from this dog."

"She bit my hand," snarled the big warrior, striding forward, and shaking a drop of blood from his hairy paw. "I'd as soon try to hold a spitting wildcat."

"Well, haul him to his feet." directed Logar. "He walks the rest of the way."

"But he is wounded in the leg!" wailed Altha. "He cannot walk."

"Why don't you finish him here?" demanded one of the warriors.

"Because that would be too easy!" roared Logar, red lights flickering in his blood-shot eyes. "The thief struck me foully with a stone, from behind, and stole my poniard."--here I saw that he was wearing it once more at his girdle. "He shall go to Thugra, and there I'll take my time about killing him. Drag him up!"

They loosened my legs, none too gently, but the wounded one was so stiff I could hardly stand, much less walk. They encouraged me with blows, kicks, and prods from spears and swords, while Altha wept in helpless fury, and at last turned on Logar.

"You are both a liar and a coward!" she screamed. "He did not strike you with a stone--he beat you down with his naked fists, as all men know, though your slaves dare not acknowledge it--"

Logar's knotty fist crashed against her jaw, knocking her off her feet, to fall in a crumpled heap a dozen feet away. She lay without moving, blood trickling from her lips. Logar grunted in savage satisfaction, but his warriors were silent. Moderate corporal correction for women was not unknown among the Guras, but such excessive and wanton brutality was repugnant to any warrior of average decency. So Logar's braves looked glum, though they made no verbal protest.

As for me, I went momentarily blind with the red madness of fury that swept over me. With a blood-thirsty snarl I jerked convulsively, upsetting the two men who held me; so we all went down in a heap. The other Thugrans came and boosted us up, glad to vent their outraged feelings on my carcass, which they did lustily, with sandal heels and sword hilts. But I did not feel the blows that rained upon me. The whole world was swimming red to my sight, and speech had utterly failed me. I could only snarl bestially as I tore in vain at the thongs which bound me. When I lay exhausted, my captors hauled me up and began beating me to make me walk.

"You can beat me to death," I snarled, finding my voice at last, "but I won't move until some of you see to the girl."

"The slut's dead," growled Logar.

"You lie, you dog!" I spat. "You miserable weakling, you couldn't hit hard enough to kill a new-born babe!"

Logar bellowed in wordless fury, but one of the others, panting from his exertions of hammering me, stepped over to Altha, who was showing signs of life.

"Let her lie!" roared Logar.

"Go to the devil!" snarled his warrior. "I love her no more than you do, but if bringing her along will make that smooth-skinned devil walk of his own accord, I'll bring her, if I have to carry her all the way. He's not human; I've pummeled him till I'm ready to drop dead, and he's in better shape than I."

So Altha, wobbly on her legs and very groggy, accompanied us as we marched to Thugra.

We were on the road several days, during which time walking was agony to my wounded leg. Altha persuaded the warriors to let her bandage my wounds, and but for that I very probably should have died. I was marked in many places by the gashes received in the haunted ruins, battered and bruised from head to foot by the beating the Thugrans gave me. Just enough food and water was given me to keep me alive. And so, dazed, weary, harassed by thirst and hunger, crippled, stumbling along over those endless rolling plains, I was even glad at last to see the walls of Thugra looming in the distance, even though I knew they spelled my doom. Altha had not been badly treated on the march, but she had been prevented from giving me aid and comfort, beyond bandaging my wounds, and all through the nights, waking from the beastlike sleep of utter exhaustion, I heard her sobbing. Among the hazy, tortured impression of that dreary trek, that stands out most clearly--Altha sobbing in the night, terrible with loneliness and despair in the immensity of shadowed world and moaning darkness.

And so we came to Thugra. The city was almost exactly like Koth--the same huge tower-flanked gates, massive walls built of rugged green stone, and all. The people, too, differed none in the main essentials from the Kothans. But I found that their government was more like an absolute monarchy than was Koth's. Logar was a primitive despot, and his will was the last power. He was cruel, merciless, lustful and arrogant. I will say this for him: he upheld his rule by personal strength and courage. Thrice during my captivity in Thugra I saw him kill a rebellious warrior in hand-to-hand combat--once with his naked hands against the other's sword. Despite his faults, there was force in the man, a gusty, driving, dynamic power that beat down opposition with sheer brutality. He was like a roaring wind, bending or breaking all that stood before him.

Possessed of incredible vitality, he was intensely vain of his physical prowess--in which, I believe, his superiority of personality was rooted. That was why he hated me so terribly. That was why he lied to his people and told them that I struck him with a stone. That was why, too, he refused to put the matter to test. In his heart lurked fear--not of any bodily harm I might do him, but fear lest I overcome him again, and discredit him in the eyes of his subjects. It was his vanity that made a beast of Logar.

I was confined in a cell, chained to the wall. Logar came every day to curse and taunt me. It was evident that he wished to exhaust all mental forms of torment before he proceeded to physical torture. I did not know what had become of Altha. I had not seen her since first we entered the city. He swore that he had taken her to his palace and described to me with great detail the salacious indignities to which he swore he subjected her. I did not believe him, for I felt he would be more likely to bring her to my cell and torture her before me. But the fury into which his obscene narrations threw me could not have been much more violent if the scenes he described had been enacted before me.

It was easy to see that the Thugrans did not relish Logar's humor, for they were no worse than other Guras, and all Guras possess, as a race, an innate decency in regard to women. But Logar's power was too complete for any to venture a protest. At last, however, the warrior who brought me food told me that Altha had disappeared immediately after we reached the city, and that Logar was searching for her, but unable to find her. Apparently she had either escaped from Thugra, or was hiding somewhere in the city.

And so the slow days crawled by.

Chapter 08

It was midnight when I awoke suddenly. The torch in my cell was flickering and guttering. The guard was gone from my door. Outside, the night was full of noise. Curses, yells, and shots mingled with the clash of steel, and over all rose the screaming of women. This was accompanied by a curious thrashing sound in the air above. I tore at my bonds, mad to know what was happening. There was fighting in the city, beyond the shadow of a doubt, but whether civil war or alien invasion, I could not know.

Then quick light steps sounded outside, and Altha ran swiftly into my cell. Her hair was in wild disorder, her scanty garment torn, her eyes ablaze with terror.

"Esau!" she cried. "Doom from the sky has fallen on Thugra! The Yagas have descended on the city by the thousands! There is fighting in the streets and on the house tops--the gutters are running red, and the streets are strewn with corpses! Look! The city is burning!"

Through the high-set barred windows I saw a smoldering glow. Somewhere sounded the dry crackling of flames. Altha was sobbing as she fumbled vainly at my bonds. That day Logar had begun the physical torture, and had had me hauled upright and suspended from the roof by a rawhide thong bound about my wrists, my toes just touching a huge block of granite. But Logar had not been so wise. They had used a new thong of hide, and it had stretched, allowing my feet to rest on the block, in which position I had suffered no unbearable anguish, and had even fallen asleep, though naturally the attitude was not conducive to great comfort.

As Altha worked futilely to free me, I asked her where she had been, and she answered that she had slipped away from Logar when we had reached the city, and that kind women, pitying her, had hidden and fed her. She had been waiting for an opportunity to aid me in escaping. "And now," she wailed, wringing her hands, "I can do nothing! I cannot untie this wretched noose!"

"Go find a knife!" I directed. "Quick!"

Even as she turned, she cried out and shrank back, trembling, as a terrible figure lurched through the door.

It was Logar, his mane and beard matted and singed, the hair on his great breast crisped and blackened, blood streaming from his limbs. His blood-shot eyes glared madness as he reeled toward me, lifting the poniard I had taken from him so long before.

"Dog!" he croaked. "Thugra is doomed! The winged devils drop from the skies like vultures on a dead ox! I have slain until I die of weariness, yet still they come. But I remembered you. I could not rest easy in Hell, knowing you still lived. Before I go forth again to die, I'll send you before me!"

Altha shrieked and ran to shield me, but he was before her. Rising on his toes he caught at my girdle, lifting the poniard on high. And as he did so, I drove my knee with terrific force up against his jaw. The impact must have broken his bull-neck like a twig. His shaggy head shot back between his shoulders, his bearded chin pointing straight up. He went down like a slaughtered ox, his head crashing hard on the stone floor.

A low laugh sounded from the doorway. Etched in the opening stood a tall ebony shape, wings half lifted, a dripping scimitar in a crimsoned hand. Limned in the murky red glare behind him, the effect was that of a black-winged demon standing in the flame-lit door of Hell. The passionless eyes regarded me enigmatically, flitted across the crumpled form on the floor, then rested on Altha, cowering at my feet.

Calling something over his shoulder, the Yaga advanced into the room, followed by a score of his kind. Many of them bore wounds, and their swords were notched and dripping.

"Take them," the first comer indicated Altha and myself.

"Why the man?" demurred one.

"Who ever saw a white man with blue eyes before? He will interest Yasmeena. But be careful. He has the thews of a lion."

One of them grasped Altha's arm and dragged her away, struggling vainly and twisting her head to stare back at me with terrified eyes, and the others from a safe distance cast a silken net about my feet. While my limbs were so enmeshed, they seized me, bound me with silken cords that a lion could not have broken, and cut the thong by which I was suspended. Then two of them lifted me and bore me out of the cell. We emerged into a scene of frenzy in the streets.

The stone walls were of course immune to flame, but the woodwork of the buildings was ablaze. Smoke rolled up in great billowing clouds, shot and veined by tongues of flame, and against this murky background black shapes twisted and contorted like figments of nightmare. Through the black clouds shot what appeared to be blazing meteors, until I saw they were winged men bearing torches.

In the streets, among falling sparks and crashing walls, in the burning buildings, on the roofs, desperate scenes were being hideously enacted. The men of Thugra were fighting with the fury of dying panthers. Any one of them was more than a match for a single Yaga, but the winged devils far outnumbered them, and their fiendish agility in the air balanced the superior strength and courage of the apemen. Swooping down through the air, they slashed with their curved swords, soaring out of reach again before the victim could return the stroke. When three or four devils were striking thus at a single enemy, the butchery was certain and swift. The smoke did not seem to bother them as it did their human adversaries. Some, perched on points of vantage, bent bows and sent arrows singing down into the struggling masses in the streets.

The killing was not all on one side. Winged bodies as well as hairy shapes lay strewn in the blood-splashed streets. Carbines cracked and more than a few flying fiends crashed earthward in a frantic thrashing of wings. Madly lashing swords found their target, and when the desperate hands of a Gura closed on a Yaga, that Yaga died horribly.

But by far the greater slaughter was among the Thugrans. Blinded and half strangled, most of their bullets and arrows went wild. Outnumbered and bewildered by the hawklike tactics of their merciless foes, they fought vainly, were cut down or feathered with arrows.

The main object of the Yagas seemed to be women captives. Again and again I saw a winged man soar up through the whirling smoke, gripping a shrieking girl in his arms.

Oh, it was a sickening sight! I do not believe that the utter barbarism and demoniac cruelty of the scene could be duplicated on Earth, vicious as its inhabitants can be at times. It was not like humans fighting humans, but like members of two different forms of life at war, utterly without sympathy or any common plane of understanding.

But the massacre was not complete. The Yagas were quitting the city they had ruined, sweeping up into the skies laden with naked writhing captives. The survivors still held the streets, and fired blindly at the departing victors, evidently preferring to risk killing their captives rather than to let them be carried to the fate that awaited them.

I saw a knot of perhaps a hundred struggling fighters slashing and gasping on the highest roof in the city, the Yagas to tear away and escape, the Guras to drag them down. Smoke billowed about them, flames caught at their hair; then with a thunderous roar the roof fell in, bearing victors and vanquished alike to a fiery death. The deafening thunder of the devouring flames was in my ears as my captors whirled me through the air away from the reeking city of Thugra.

When my dazed faculties adjusted themselves sufficiently for me to take note of my surroundings, I found myself sailing through the sky at terrific speed, while below, above and about me sounded the steady beat of mighty wings. Two Yagas were bearing me with perfect ease, and I was in the midst of the band, which was flying southward in a wedge-shaped formation, like that of wild geese. There were fully ten thousand of them. They darkened the morning sky, and their gigantic shadow swept over the plain beneath them as the sun rose.

We were flying at an altitude of about a thousand feet. Many of the winged men bore girls and young women, and carried them with an ease that spoke of incredible wing-power. No match in sheer muscularity for the Guras, yet these winged devils have unbelievable powers of endurance in the air. They can fly for hours at top speed, and in the wedge formation, with unburdened leaders cleaving the air ahead of them, can carry weights almost equal their own at almost the same velocity.

We did not pause to rest or eat until nightfall, when our captors descended to the plain, where they built fires and spent the night. That night lives in my memory as one of the greatest horrors I have ever endured. We captives were given no food, but the Yagas ate. And their food was their miserable captives. Lying helpless, I shut my eyes to that butchery, wished that I were deaf that I might not hear the heart-rending cries. The butchery of men I can endure, in battle, even in red massacre. The wanton slaughter of helpless women who can only shriek for mercy until the knife silences their wails, that is more than I can stand. Nor did I know but that Altha was among those chosen for the grisly feast. With each hiss and crunch of the beheading blade I winced, seeing in fancy her lovely dark head roll on the blood-soaked ground. For what was going on at the other fires I could not know.

After it was over and the gorged demons lay about the fires in slumber, I lay sick at heart, listening to the roaring of the prowling lions, and reflecting how kinder and more gentle is any beast, than any thing molded in the form of man. And out of my sick horror grew a hate that steeled me for whatever might come, in the grim determination to ultimately repay these winged monsters for all the suffering they had inflicted.

Dawn was only a hint in the sky when we took the air again. There was no morning meal. I was to learn that the Yagas ate only at intervals, gorging themselves to capacity every few days. After several hours hurtling over the usual grasslands, we came suddenly in sight of a broad river spanning the savannas from horizon to horizon, fringed on the northern bank by a narrow belt of forest. The waters were of a curious purple, glimmering like watered silk. On the farther bank appeared a tall thin tower of a black shiny material that glittered like polished steel.

As we whirled over the river I saw that it was rushing with terrific velocity. Its roar came up to us, and I saw the seething of eddying whirlpools in its racing current. Crossing the stream at the point where the tower stood, reared numbers of huge stones, among which the waters foamed and thundered. Looking down at the tower, I saw half a dozen winged men on the battlemented roof, who tossed up their arms as if hailing our captors. From the river southward stretched desert-- bare, dusty, grayish, strewn occasionally with bleached bones here and there. Far away on the horizon I saw a giant black bulk growing in the sky.

It stood out boldly as we raced toward it. In a few hours we had reached it, and I was able to make out all its details. It was a gigantic block of black basaltlike rock rising sheer out of the desert, a broad river flowing about its feet, its summit crowned with black towers, minarets and castles. It was no myth, then, but a fantastic reality--Yugga, the Black City, the stronghold of the winged people.

The river, cutting through the naked desert, split on that great rock and passed about it on either side, forming a natural moat. On every side but one the waters lapped the sheer walls of the cliffs. But on one side a broad beach had been formed, and there stood another town. Its style of architecture was very different from that of the edifices on the rock. The houses were mere stone huts, squat, flat-roofed, and one-storied. Only one building had any pretensions--a black templelike edifice built against the cliff wall. This lower town was protected by a strong stone wall built about it at the water's edge, and connecting at each end with the cliff behind the town.

I saw the inhabitants, and saw that they were neither Yagas nor Guras. They were short and squat of build, and of a peculiar blue color. Their faces, while more like those of Earthly humans than were those of the Gura males, lacked the intelligence of the latter. The countenances were dull, stupid and vicious, the women being little more prepossessing than the men. I saw these curious people, not only in their town at the foot of the cliff, but at work in fields along the river.

I had little opportunity for observing them, however, since the Yagas swept straight up to the citadel, which towered five hundred feet above the river. I was bewildered by the array of battlements, pinnacles, minarets and roof gardens that met my gaze, but got the impression that the city on the rock was built like one huge palace, each part connected with the rest. Figures lounging on couches on the flat roofs lifted themselves on elbow, and from scores of casements the faces of women looked at us as we sank down on a broad flat roof that was something like a landing-field. There many of the winged men dispersed, leaving the captives guarded by three or four hundred warriors, who herded them through a gigantic door. There were about five hundred of these wretched girls, Altha among them. I was carried, still bound, along with them. By this time my whole body was numb from having circulation cut off so long, but my mind was intensely active.

We traversed a stairway down which half a dozen elephants could have stalked abreast, and came into a corridor of corresponding vastness. Walls, stair, ceiling and floor were all of the gleaming black stone, which I decided had been cut out of the rock on which Yugga was built, and highly polished. So far I had seen no carvings, tapestries, or any attempt at ornamentation; yet it could not be denied that the effect of those lofty walls and vaulted ceilings of polished ebony was distinctly one of splendor. There was an awe-inspiring majesty about the architecture which seemed incongruous, considering the beastliness of the builders. Yet the tall black figures did not seem out of place, moving somberly through those great ebony halls. The Black City--not alone because its walls were dusky hued did humans give it that sinister name.

As we passed through those lofty halls I saw many of the inhabitants of Yugga. Besides the winged men, I saw, for the first time, the women of the Yagas. Theirs was the same lithe build, the same glossy black skin, the same faintly hawklike cast of countenance. But the women were not winged. They were clad in short silken skirts held up with jewel-crusted girdles, and in filmy sashes bound about their breasts. But for the almost intangible cruelty of their faces, they were beautiful. Their dusky features were straight and clear-cut, their hair was not kinky.

I saw other women, hundreds of the black-haired, white-skinned daughters of the Guras. But there were others: small, dainty, yellow-skinned girls, and copper-colored women--all, apparently, slaves to the black people. These women were something new and unexpected. All the fantastic forms of life I had encountered so far had been mentioned in tales or legends of the Kothans. The dog-heads, the giant spider, the winged people with their black citadel and their blue-skinned slaves--all these had been named in legendry, at least. But no man or woman of Koth had ever spoken of women with yellow or copper skins. Were these exotic prisoners from another planet, just as I was from an alien world?

While meditating the matter I was carried through a great bronze portal at which stood a score of winged warriors on guard, and found myself with the captive girls in a vast chamber, octagonal in shape, the walls hung with dusky tapestries. It was carpeted with some sort of rich furlike stuff, and the air was heavy with perfumes and incense.

Toward the back of the chamber, broad steps of beaten gold led up to a fur-covered dais, on which lounged a young black woman. She alone, of all the Yaga women, was winged. She was dressed like the rest, wearing no ornaments except her gem-crusted girdle, from which jutted a jeweled dagger hilt. Her beauty was marvelous and disquieting, like the beauty of a soulless statue. I sensed that of all the inhuman denizens of Yugga, she was least human. Her brooding eyes spoke of dreams beyond the boundaries of human consciousness. Her face was the face of a goddess, knowing neither fear nor mercy.

Ranged about her couch in attitudes of humility and servitude were twenty naked girls, white-, yellow- and copper-skinned.

The leader of our captors advanced toward the royal dais, and bowing low, at the same time extending his hands, palms down and fingers spread wide, he said: "Oh, Yasmeena, Queen of the Night, we bring you the fruits of conquest."

She raised herself on her elbow, and as her terribly personal gaze passed over her cringing captives, a shudder swept across their ranks as a wind passes over rows of wheat. From earliest childhood Gura girls were taught, by tales and tradition, that the worst fate that could befall them was to be captured by the people of the Black City. Yugga was a misty land of horror, ruled by the archfiend Yasmeena. Now those trembling girls were face to face with the vampire herself. What wonder that many of them fainted outright?

But her eyes passed over them and rested on me, where I stood propped up between a couple of warriors. I saw interest grow in those dark luminous eyes, and she spoke to the chief:

"Who is that barbarian, whose skin is white, yet almost as hairless as ours, who is clad like a Gura, and yet unlike them?"

"We found him a captive among the Thugrans, oh mistress of Night," he answered. "Your majesty shall herself question him. And now, oh dark beauty, be pleased to designate the miserable wenches who shall serve your loveliness, that the rest may be apportioned among the warriors who made the raid."

Yasmeena nodded, her eyes still on me, and with a few waves of her hand she indicated a dozen or so of the handsomest girls, among these being Altha. They were drawn aside, and the rest were herded out.

Yasmeena eyed me a space without speaking, and then said to him who appeared to be her major-domo: "Gotrah, this man is weary and stained with travel and captivity, and there is an unhealed wound in his leg. The sight of him, as he now is, offends me. Take him away, let him bathe and eat and drink, and let his leg be bandaged. Then bring him to me again."

So my captors with a weary sigh, heaved me up again, and carried me from the royal chamber, down a winding corridor, along a flight of stairs, and halted finally in a chamber where a fountain bubbled in the floor. There they fastened gold chains to my wrists and ankles and then cut the cords that bound me. In the excruciating pain of the returning circulation, I scarcely noticed when they splashed me in the fountain, bathing the sweat, dirt and dried blood from my limbs and body, and clad me in a new loincloth of scarlet silk. They likewise dressed the wound in my calf, and then a copper-skinned slave-girl entered with gold vessels of food. I would not touch the meat, what with my grisly suspicions, but I ate ravenously of the fruits and nuts, and drank deeply of a green wine, which I found most delicious and refreshing.

After that I felt so drowsy that I sank down on a velvet couch and passed instantly into deep slumber, from which I was roused by someone shaking me. It was Gotrah bending over me with a short knife in his hand; and, all my wild instincts aroused, I did my best to brain him with my clenched fist, and failed only because of the chain on my wrist. He recoiled, cursing.

"I have not come to cut your throat, barbarian," he snapped, "though nothing would please me better. The Kothan girl has told Yasmeena that it is your habit to scrape the hair from your face, and it is the Queen's desire to see you thus. Here, take this knife and scrape yourself. It has no point, and I will be careful to stay out of your reach. Here is a mirror."

Still half asleep--by which I believe the green wine was drugged, though for what reason I cannot say--I propped the silver mirror up against the wall, and went to work on my beard, which had reached no mean proportions during my captivities. It was a dry shave, but my skin is as durable as tanned leather, and the knife had an edge keener than I ever found on an Earthly razor. When I had finished, Gotrah grunted at my changed appearance and demanded the knife again. As there was no point in retaining it, it being useless as a weapon, I threw it at him, and immediately fell asleep again.

The next time I awoke naturally, and rising, took in my surroundings more minutely. The chamber was unadorned, furnished only with the couch, a small ebony table, and a fur-covered bench. There was a single door, which was closed and doubtless bolted on the outside, and one window. My chains were fastened to a gold ring in the wall behind the couch, but the strand that linked me to it was long enough to allow me to take a few steps to the fountain, and to the window. This window was barred with gold, and I looked out over flat roofs, at towers and minarets which limited my view.

So far the Yagas had treated me well enough; I wondered how Altha was faring, and if the position of member of the Queen's retinue carried any special privileges or safety.

Then Gotrah entered again, with half a dozen warriors, and they unlocked my chain from the wall and escorted me down the corridor, up the winding stair. I was not taken back to the great throne chamber, but to a smaller room high up in a tower. This room was so littered with furs and cushions that it was almost stuffed. I was reminded of the soft, padded nest of a spider, and the black spider was there-- lounging on a velvet couch and staring at me with avid curiosity. This time she was not attended by slaves. The warriors chained me to the wall--every wall in that accursed palace seemed to have rings for captives--and left us alone.

I leaned back among the furs and pillows, finding their downy contact irksome to my iron-hard frame, unaccustomed to soft living of any kind, and for a wearisome time the Queen of Yugga surveyed me without speaking. Her eyes had a hypnotic quality; I distinctly felt their impact. But I felt too much like a chained beast on exhibition to be aware of any feeling but one of rising resentment. I fought it down. A burst of berserk fury might break the slender chains that held me, and rid the world of Yasmeena, but Altha and I would still be prisoners on that accursed rock from which legend said there was no escape save through the air.

"Who are you?" Yasmeena demanded abruptly. "I have seen men with skins smoother even than yours, but never a hairless white man before."

Before I could ask her where she had seen hairless men, if not among her own people, she continued: "Nor have I seen eyes like yours. They are like a deep cold lake, yet they blaze and smolder like the cold blue flame that dances forever above Xathar. What is your name? Whence come you? The girl Altha said you came out of the wilderness and dwelt in her city, defeating its mighty men in single combat. But she does not know from what land you came, she says. Speak, and do not lie."

"I'll speak but you'll think I lie," I grunted. "I am Esau Cairn, whom the men of Koth call Ironhand. I come from another world in another solar system. Chance, or the whim of a scientist whom you would call a magician, cast me on this planet. Chance again threw me among the Kothans. Chance carried me to Yugga. Now I have spoken. Believe me or not, as you will."

"I believe you," she answered. "Of old, men passed from star to star, There are beings now which traverse the cosmos. I would study you. You shall live--for a while, at least. But you must wear those chains, for I read the fury of the beast in your eyes, and know you would rend me if you could."

"What of Altha!" I asked.

"Well, what of her?" She seemed surprised at the question.

"What have you done with her?" I demanded.

"She will serve me with the rest, until she displeases me. Why do you speak of another woman, when you are talking to me? I am not pleased."

Her eyes began to glitter. I never saw eyes like Yasmeena's. They changed with every shift of mood and whim, and they mirrored passions and angers and desires beyond the maddest dreams of humanity.

"You do not blench," she said softly. "Man, do you know what it is for Yasmeena to be displeased? Then blood flows like water, Yugga rings with screams of agony, and the very gods hide their heads in horror."

The way she said it turned my blood cold, but the red anger of the primitive would not down. The feel of my strength came upon me, and I knew that I could tear that golden ring from the stone and rip out her life before she could leap from her couch, if it came to that. So I laughed, and my laughter thrummed with blood-lust. She started up and eyed me closely.

"Are you mad, to laugh?" she asked. "No, that was not mirth--it was the growl of a hunting leopard. It is in your mind to leap and kill me, but if you do, the girl Altha will suffer for your crime. Yet you interest me. No man has ever laughed at me before. You shall live--for a while." She clapped her hands and the warriors entered. "Take him back to his chamber," she directed. "Keep him chained there until I send for him again."

And so began my third captivity on Almuric, in the black citadel of Yugga, on the rock Yuthla, by the river of Yogh, in the land of Yagg.

Chapter 09

Much I learned of the ways of that terrible people, who have reigned over Almuric since ages beyond the memory of man. They might have been human once, long ago, but I doubt it. I believe they represented a separate branch on the tree of evolution, and that it is only an incredible freak of coincidence which cast them in a mold so similar to man, instead of the shapes of the abysmal, howling, blasphemous dwellers of Outer Darkness.

In many ways they seemed, superficially, human enough, but if one followed their lines of consciousness far enough, he would come upon phases inexplicable and alien to humanity. As far as pure intellect went, they were superior to the hairy Guras. But they lacked altogether the decency, honesty, courage, and general manliness of the apemen. The Guras were quick to wrath, savage and brutal in their anger; but there was a studied cruelty about the Yagas which made the others seem like mere rough children. The Yagas were merciless in their calmest moments; roused to anger, their excesses were horrible to behold.

They were a numerous horde, the warriors alone numbering some twenty thousand. There were more women than men, and with their slaves, of which each male and female Yaga possessed a goodly number, the city of Yugga was fully occupied. Indeed, I was surprised to learn of the multitudes of people who dwelt there, considering the comparative smallness of the rock Yuthla on which the city was built. But its space was greater vertically than horizontally. The castles and towers soared high into the air, and several tiers of chambers and corridors were sunk into the rock itself. When the Yagas felt themselves crowded for space, they simply butchered their slaves. I saw no children; losses in war were comparatively slight, and plagues and diseases unknown. Children were produced only at regular intervals, some three centuries apart. The last flock had come of age; the next brood was somewhere in the dim distance of the future.

The lords of Yugga did no sort of work, but passed their lives in sensual pleasures. Their knowledge and adeptness at debauchery would have shamed the most voluptuous libertine in later Rome. Their debauches were interrupted only by raids on the outer world in order to procure women slaves.

The town at the foot of the cliff was called Akka, the blue people Akki, or Akkas. They had been subject to the Yagas as far back as tradition extended. They were merely stupid work-animals, laboring in the irrigated fields of fruits and edible plants, and otherwise doing the will of their masters, whom they considered superior beings, if not veritable gods. They worshipped Yasmeena as a deity. Outside of continual toil, they were not mistreated. Their women were ugly and beastlike. The winged people had a keen asthetic sense, though their interest in the beauty of the lower orders was sadistic and altogether beastly. The Akkas never came into the upper city, except when there was work to be done there, too heavy for the women slaves. Then they ascended and descended by means of great silken ladders let down from the rock. There was no road leading up from below, since the Yagas needed none. The cliffs could not be scaled; so the winged people had no fear of an Akka uprising.

The Yaga women were likewise prisoners on the rock Yuthla. Their wings were carefully removed at birth. Only the infants destined to become queens of Yugga were spared. This was done in order to keep the male sex in supremacy, and indeed, I was never able to learn how, and at what distant date, the men of Yugga gained supremacy over their women; for, judging from Yasmeena, the winged women were superior to their mates in agility, endurance, courage and even in strength. Clipping their wings kept them from developing their full superiority.

Yasmeena was an example of what a winged woman could be. She was taller than the other Yaga females, who in turn were taller than the Gura women, and though voluptuously shaped, the steel thews of a wildcat lurked in her slender rounded limbs. She was young--all the women of Yugga looked young. The average life-span of the Yaga was nine hundred years. Yasmeena had reigned over Yugga for four hundred years. Three winged princesses of royal blood had contested with her for the right to rule, and she had slain each of them, fighting with naked hands in the regal octagonal chamber. As long as she could defend her crown against young claimants, she would rule.

The lot of the slaves in Yugga was hideous. None ever knew when she would be dismembered for the cooking-pot, and the lives of all were tormented by the cruel whims of their masters and mistresses. Yugga was as like Hell as any place could be. I do not know what went on in the palaces of the nobles and warriors, but I do know what took place daily in the

palace of the Queen. There was never a day or night that those dusky walls did not re-echo screams of agony and piteous wails for mercy, mingled with vindictive maledictions, or lascivious laughter.

I never became accustomed to it, hard as I was physically and mentally. I think the only thing that kept me from going mad was the feeling that I must keep my sanity in order to protect Altha if I could. That was precious little; I was chained in my chamber; where the Kothan girl was, I had not the slightest idea, except that she was somewhere in the palace of Yasmeena, where she was protected from the lust of the winged men, but not from the cruelty of her mistress.

In Yugga I heard sounds and saw sights not to be repeated--not even to be remembered in dreams. Men and women, the Yagas were open and candid in their evil. Their utter cynicism banished ordinary scruples of modesty and common decency. Their bestialities were naked, unhidden and shameless. They followed their desires with one another, and practised their tortures on their wretched slaves with no attempt at concealment. Deeming themselves gods, they considered themselves above the considerations that guide ordinary humans. The women were more vicious than the men, if such a thing were possible. The refinements of their cruelties toward their trembling slaves cannot be even hinted at. They were versed in every art of torture, both mental and physical. But enough. I can but hint at what is unrepeatable.

Those days of captivity seem like a dim nightmare. I was not badly treated, personally. Each day I was escorted on a sort of promenade about the palace--something on the order of giving a confined animal exercise. I was always accompanied by seven or eight warriors armed to the teeth, and always wore my chains. Several times on these promenades I saw Altha, going about her duties, but she always averted her gaze and hurried by. I understood and made no attempt to speak to her. I had placed her in jeopardy already by speaking of her to Yasmeena. Better let the queen forget about her, if possible. Slaves were safest when the Queen of Yagg remembered them least.

Somewhere, somehow, I found in me power to throttle my red rage and blind fury. When my very brain reeled with the lust to break my chains and explode into a holocaust of slaughter, I held myself with iron grasp. And the fury ate inward into my soul, crystallizing my hate. So the days passed, until the night that Yasmeena again sent for me.

Chapter 10

Yasmeena cupped her chin in her slim hands and fixed her great dark eyes on me. We were alone in a chamber I had never entered before. It was night. I sat on a divan opposite her, my limbs unshackled. She had offered me temporary freedom if I would promise not to harm her, and to go back into shackles when she bade me. I had promised. I was never a clever man, but my hate had sharpened my wits. I was playing a game of my own.

"What are you thinking of, Esau Ironhand?" she asked.

"I'm thirsty," I answered.

She indicated a crystal vessel near at hand. "Drink a little of the golden wine--not much, or it will make you drunk. It is the most powerful drink in the world. Not even I can quaff that vessel without lying senseless for hours. And you are unaccustomed to it."

I sipped a little of it. It was indeed heady liquor.

Yasmeena stretched her limbs out on her couch, and asked: "Why do you hate me? Have I not treated you well?"

"I have not said that I hated you," I countered. "You are very beautiful. But you are cruel."

She shrugged her winged shoulders. "Cruel? I am a goddess. What have I to do with either cruelty or mercy? Those qualities are for men. Humanity exists for my pleasure. Does not all life emanate from me?"

"Your stupid Akkas may believe that," I replied; "but I know otherwise, and so do you."

She laughed, not offended. "Well, I may not be able to create life, but I can destroy life at will. I may not be a goddess, but you would find it difficult to convince these foolish wenches who serve me that I am not all-powerful. No, Ironhand; gods are only another name for *Power*. I am Power on this planet; so I am a goddess. What do your hairy friends, the Guras, worship?"

"They worship Thak; at least they acknowledge Thak as the creator and preserver. They have no regular ritual of worship, no temples, altars or priests. Thak is the Hairy One, the god in the form of man. He bellows in the tempest, and thunders in the hills with the voice of the lion. He loves brave men, and hates weaklings, but he neither harms nor aids. When a male child is born, he blows into it courage and strength; when a warrior dies, he ascends to Thak's abode, which is a land of celestial plains, river and mountains, swarming with game, and inhabited by the spirits of departed warriors, who hunt, fight and revel forever as they did in life."

She laughed. "Stupid pigs. Death is oblivion. We Yagas worship only our own bodies. And to our bodies we make rich sacrifices with the bodies of the foolish little people."

"Your rule cannot last forever," I was moved to remark.

"It *has* lasted since beyond the gray dawn of Time's beginning. On the dark rock Yuthla my people have brooded through ages uncountable. Before the cities of the Guras dotted the plains, we dwelt in the land of Yagg. We were always masters. As we rule the Guras, so we ruled the mysterious race which possessed the land before the Guras evolved from the ape: the race which reared their cities of marble whose ruins now affright the moon, and which perished in the night.

"Tales! I could tell you tales to blast your reason! I could tell you of races which appeared from the mist of mystery, moved across the world in restless waves, and vanished in the midst of oblivion. We of Yugga have watched them come and go, each in turn bending beneath the yoke of our godship. We have endured, not centuries or millenniums, but cycles.

"Why should not our rule endure forever? How shall these Gura-fools overcome us? You have seen how it is when my hawks swoop from the air in the night on the cities of the apeman. How then shall they attack us in our eyrie? To reach the land of Yagg they must cross the Purple River, whose waters race too swiftly to be swum. Only at the Bridge of Rocks can it be crossed, and there keen-eyed guards watch night and day. Once, the Guras did try to attack us. The watchers brought word of their coming and the men of Yagg were prepared. In the midst of the desert they fell on the invaders and destroyed them by thirst and madness and arrows showering upon them from the skies.

"Suppose a horde should fight its way through the desert and reach the rock Yuthla? They have the river Yogh to cross, and when they have crossed it, in the teeth of the Akki spears, what then? They could not scale the cliffs. No; no foreign foe will ever set foot in Yugga. If, by the wildest whim of the gods, such a thing *should* come to pass"-- her beautiful features became even more cruel and sinister--"rather than submit to conquest I would loose the *Ultimate Horror*, and perish in the ruins of my city," she whispered, more to herself than to me.

"What do you say?" I asked, not understanding.

"There are secrets beneath the velvet coverings of the darkest secrets," she said. "Tread not where the very gods tremble. I said nothing--you heard nothing. Remember that!"

There was silence for a space, and then I asked a question I had long mulled over: "Whence come these red girls and yellow girls among your slaves?"

"You have looked southward from the highest towers on clear days, and seen a faint blue line rimming the sky far away? That is the Girdle that bands the world. Beyond that Girdle dwell the races from which come those alien slaves. We raid across the Girdle just as we raid the Guras, though less frequently."

I was about to ask more concerning these unknown races, when a timid tap came on the outer door. Yasmeena, frowning at the interruption, called a sharp question, and a frightened feminine voice informed her that the lord Gotrah desired audience. Yasmeena spat an oath at her, and bade her tell the lord Gotrah to go to the devil.

"No, I must see the fellow," she said rising. "Theta! Oh, Theta! Where has the little minx gone? I must do my own biddings, must I? Her buttocks shall smart for her insolence. Wait here, Ironhand. I'll see to Gotrah."

She crossed the cushion-strewn chamber with her lithe, long stride, and passed through the door. As it closed behind her, I was struck by what was nothing less than an inspiration. No especial reason occurred to me to urge me to feign drunkenness. It was intuition or blind chance that prompted me. Snatching up the crystal jug which contained the golden wine, I emptied it into a great golden vessel which stood half hidden beneath the fringe of a tapestry. I had drunk enough for the scent to be on my breath.

Then, as I heard footsteps and voices without, I extended myself quickly on a divan, the jug lying on its side near my outstretched hand. I heard the door open, and there was an instant's silence so intense as to be almost tangible. Then Yasmeena spat like an angry cat. "By the gods, he's emptied the jug? See how he lies in brutish slumber! Faugh! The noblest figure is abominable when besotted. Well, let us to our task. We need not fear to be overheard by him."

"Had I not better summon the guard and have him dragged to his cell?" came Gotrah's voice. "We cannot afford to take chances with this secret, which none has ever known except the Queen of Yugga and her major-domo."

I sensed that they came and stood over me, looking down. I moved vaguely and mumbled thickly, as if in drunken dreams.

Yasmeena laughed.

"No fear. He will know nothing before dawn. Yuthla could split and fall into Yogh without breaking his sottish dreams. The fool! This night he would have been lord of the world, for I would have made him lord of the Queen of the world--for one night. But the lion changes not his mane, nor the barbarian his brutishness."

"Why not put him to the torture?" grunted Gotrah.

"Because I want a man, not a broken travesty. Besides, his is a spirit not to be conquered by fire or steel. No. I am Yasmeena and I will make him love me before I feed him to the vultures. Have you placed the Kothan Altha among the Virgins of the Moon?"

"Aye, Queen of the dusky stars. A month and a half from this night she dances the dance of the Moon with the other wenches."

"Good. Keep them guarded day and night. If this tiger learns of our plans for his sweetheart, chains and bolts will not hold him."

"A hundred and fifty men guard the virgins," answered Gotrah. "Not even the Ironhand could prevail against them."

"It is well. Now to this other matter. Have you the parchment?"

"Aye."

"Then I will sign it. Give me the stylus."

I heard the crackle of papyrus and the scratch of a keen point, and then the Queen said:

"Take it now, and lay it on the altar in the usual place. As I promise in the writing, I will appear in the flesh tomorrow night to my faithful subjects and worshippers, the blue pigs of Akka. Ha! ha! ha! I never fail to be amused at the animal-like awe on their stupid countenances when I emerge from the shadows of the golden screen, and spread my arms above them in blessing. What fools they are, not in all these ages, to have discovered the secret door and the shaft that leads from their temple to this chamber."

"Not so strange," grunted Gotrah. "None but the priest ever comes into the temple except by special summons, and he is far too superstitious to go meddling behind the screen. Anyway, there is no sign to mark the secret door from without."

"Very well," answered Yasmeena. "Go."

I heard Gotrah fumbling at something, then a slight grating sound. Consumed by curiosity, I dared open one eye a slit, in time to glimpse Gotrah disappearing through a black opening that gaped in the middle of the stone floor, and which closed after him. I quickly shut my eye again and lay still, listening to Yasmeena's quick pantherish tread back and forth across the floor.

Once she came and stood over me. I felt her burning gaze and heard her curse beneath her breath. Then she struck me viciously across the face with some kind of jeweled ornament that tore my skin and started a trickle of blood. But I lay without twitching a muscle, and presently she turned and left the chamber, muttering.

As the door closed behind her I rose quickly, scanning the floor for some sign of the opening through which Gotrah had gone. A furry rug had been drawn aside from the center of the floor, but in the polished black stone I searched in vain for a crevice to denote the hidden trap. I momentarily expected the return of Yasmeena, and my heart pounded within me.

Suddenly, under my very hand, a section of the floor detached itself and began to move upward. A pantherish bound carried me behind a tapestried couch, where I crouched, watching the trap rise upward. The narrow head of Gotrah appeared, then his winged shoulders and body.

He climbed up into the chamber, and as he turned to lower the lifted trap, I left the floor with a catlike leap that carried me over the couch and full on his shoulders.

He went down under my weight, and my gripping fingers crushed the yell in his throat. With a convulsive heave he twisted under me, and stark horror flooded his face as he glared up at me. He was down on the cushioned stone, pinned under my iron bulk. He clawed for the dagger at his girdle, but my knee pinned it down. And crouching on him, I gutted my mad hate for his cursed race. I strangled him slowly, gloatingly, avidly watching his features contort and his eyes glaze. He must have been dead for some minutes before I loosed my hold.

Rising, I gazed through the open trap. The light from the torches of the chamber shone down a narrow shaft, into which was cut a series of narrow steps, that evidently led down into the bowels of the rock Yuthla. From the conversation I had heard, it must lead to the temple of the Akkas, in the town below. Surely I would find Akka no harder to escape from than Yugga. Yet I hesitated, my heart torn at the thought of leaving Altha alone in Yugga. But there was no other way. I did not know in what part of that devil-city she was imprisoned, and I remembered what Gotrah had said of the great band of warriors guarding her and the other virgins.

Virgins of the Moon! Cold sweat broke out on me as the full significance of the phrase became apparent. Just what the festival of the Moon was I did not fully know, but I had heard hints and scattered comments among the Yaga women, and I knew it was a beastly saturnalia, in which the full frenzy of erotic ecstasy was reached in the dying gasps of the wretches sacrificed to the only god the winged people recognized--their own inhuman lust.

The thought of Altha being subjected to such a fate drove me into a berserk frenzy, and steeled my resolution. There was but one chance-- to escape myself, and try to reach Koth and bring back enough men to attempt a rescue. My heart sank as I contemplated the difficulties in the way, but there was nothing else to be done.

Lifting Gotrah's limp body I dragged it out of the chamber through a door different from that through which Yasmeena had gone; and traversing a corridor without meeting anyone, I concealed the corpse behind some tapestries. I was certain that it would be found, but perhaps not until I had a good start. Perhaps its presence in another room than the chamber of the trap might divert suspicion from my actual means of escape, and lead Yasmeena to think that I was merely hiding somewhere in Yugga.

But I was crowding my luck. I could not long hope to avoid detection if I lingered. Returning to the chamber, I entered the shaft, lowering the trap above me. It was pitch-dark, then, but my groping fingers found the catch that worked the trap, and I felt that I could return if I found my way blocked below. Down those inky stairs I groped, with an uneasy feeling that I might fall into some pit or meet with some grisly denizen of the underworld. But nothing occurred, and at last the steps ceased and I groped my way along a short corridor that ended at a blank wall. My fingers encountered a metal catch, and I shot the bolt, feeling a section of the wall revolving under my hands. I was dazzled by a dim yet lurid light, and blinking, gazed out with some trepidation.

I was looking into a lofty chamber that was undoubtedly a shrine. My view was limited by a large screen of carved gold directly in front of me, the edges of which flamed dully in the weird light.

Gliding from the secret door, I peered around the screen. I saw a broad room, made with the same stern simplicity and awesome massiveness that characterized Almuric architecture. The ceiling was lost in the brooding shadows; the walls were black, dully gleaming, and unadorned. The shrine was empty except for a block of ebon stone, evidently an altar, on which blazed the lurid flame I had noted, and which seemed to emanate from a great somber jewel set upon the altar. I noticed darkly stained channels on the sides of that altar, and on the dusky stone lay a roll of white parchment--Yasmeena's word to her worshippers. I had stumbled into the Akka holy of holies--uncovered the very root and base on which the whole structure of Akka theology was based: the supernatural appearances of revelations from the goddess, and the appearance of the goddess herself in the temple. Strange that a whole religion should be based on the ignorance of the devotees concerning a subterranean stair! Stranger still, to an Earthly mind, that only the lowest form of humanity on Almuric should possess a systematic and ritualistic religion, which Earth people regard as sure token of the highest races!

But the cult of the Akkas was dark and weird. The whole atmosphere of the shrine was one of mystery and brooding horror. I could imagine the awe of the blue worshippers to see the winged goddess emerging from behind the golden screen, like a deity incarnated from cosmic emptiness.

Closing the door behind me, I glided stealthily across the temple. Just within the door a stocky blue man in a fantastic robe lay snoring lustily on the naked stone. Presumably he had slept tranquilly through Gotrah's ghostly visit. I stepped over him as gingerly as a cat treading wet earth, Gotrah's dagger in my hand, but he did not awaken. An instant later I stood outside, breathing deep of the river-laden night air.

The temple lay in the shadow of the great cliffs. There was no moon, only the myriad millions of stars that glimmer in the skies of Almuric. I saw no lights anywhere in the village, no movement. The sluggish Akkas slept soundly.

Stealthily as a phantom I stole through the narrow streets, hugging close to the sides of the squat stone huts. I saw no human until I reached the wall. The drawbridge that spanned the river was drawn up, and just within the gate sat a blue man, nodding over his spear. The senses of the Akkas were dull as those of any beasts of burden. I could have knifed the drowsy watchman where he sat, but I saw no need of useless murder. He did not hear me, though I passed within forty feet of him. Silently I glided over the wall, and silently I slipped into the water.

Striking out strongly, I forged across the easy current, and reached the farther bank. There I paused only long enough to drink deep of the cold river water; then I struck out across the shadowed desert at a swinging trot that eats up miles--the gait with which the Apaches of my native Southwest can wear out a horse.

In the darkness before dawn I came to the banks of the Purple River, skirting wide to avoid the watchtower which jutted dimly against the star-flecked sky. As I crouched on the steep bank and gazed down into the rushing swirling current, my heart sank. I knew that, in my fatigued condition, it was madness to plunge into the maelstrom. The strongest swimmer that either Earth or Almuric ever bred had been helpless among those eddies and whirlpools. There was but one thing to be done--try to reach the Bridge of Rocks before dawn broke, and take the desperate chance of slipping across under the eyes of the watchers. That, too, was madness, but I had no choice.

But dawn began to whiten the desert before I was within a thousand yards of the Bridge. And looking at the tower, which seemed to swim slowly into clearer outline, etched against the dim sky, I saw a shape soar up from the turrets and wing its way toward me. I had been discovered. Instantly, a desperate plan occurred to me. I began to stagger erratically, ran a few paces, and sank down in the sand near the river bank. I heard the beat of wings above me as the suspicious harpy circled; then I knew he was dropping earthward. He must have been on solitary sentry duty, and had come to investigate the matter of a lone wanderer, without waking his mates.

Watching through slitted lids, I saw him strike the earth near by, and walk about me suspiciously, scimitar in hand. At last he pushed me with his foot, as if to find if I lived. Instantly my arm hooked about his legs, bringing him down on top of me. A single cry burst from his lips, half-stifled as my fingers found his throat; then in a great heaving and fluttering of wings and lashing of limbs, I heaved him over and under me. His scimitar was useless at such close quarters. I twisted his arm until his numbed fingers slipped from the hilt; then I choked him into submission. Before he regained his full faculties, I bound his wrists in front of him with his girdle, dragged him to his feet, and perched myself astride his back, my legs locked about his torso. My left arm was hooked about his neck, my right hand pricked his hide with Gotrah's dagger.

In a few low words I told him what he must do, if he wished to live. It was not the nature of a Yaga to sacrifice himself, even for the welfare of his race. Through the rose-pink glow of dawn we soared into the sky, swept over the rushing Purple River, and vanished from the sight of the land of Yagg, into the blue mazes of the northwest.

Chapter 11

I drove that winged devil unmercifully. Not until sunset did I allow him to drop earthward. Then I bound his feet and wings so he could not escape, and gathered fruit and nuts for our meal. I fed him as well as I fed myself. He needed strength for the flight. That night the beasts of prey roared perilously close to us, and my captive turned ashy with fright, for we had no way of making a protecting fire, but none attacked us. We had left the forest of the Purple River far, far behind, and were among the grasslands. I was taking the most direct route to Koth, led by the unerring instinct of the wild. I continually scanned the skies behind me for some sign of pursuit, but no winged shapes darkened the southern horizon.

It was on the fourth day that I spied a dark moving mass in the plains below, which I believed was an army of men marching. I ordered the Yaga to fly over them. I knew that I had reached the vicinity of the wide territory dominated by the city of Koth, and there was a chance that these might be men of Koth. If so, they were in force, for as we approached I saw there were several thousand men, marching in some order.

So intense was my interest that it almost proved my undoing. During the day I left the Yaga's legs unbound, as he swore that he could not fly otherwise, but I kept his wrists bound. In my engrossment I did not notice him furtively gnawing at the thong. My dagger was in its sheath, since he had shown no recent sign of rebellion. My first intimation of revolt was when he wheeled suddenly sidewise, so that I lurched and almost lost my grip on him. His long arm curled about my torso and tore at my girdle, and the next instant my own dagger gleamed in his hand.

There ensued one of the most desperate struggles in which I have ever participated. My near fall had swung me around, so that instead of being on his back, I was in front of him, maintaining my position only by one hand clutching his hair, and one knee crooked about his leg. My other hand was locked on his dagger wrist, and there we tore and twisted, a thousand feet in the air, he to break away and let me fall to my death, or to drive home the dagger in my breast, I to maintain my grip and fend off the gleaming blade.

On the ground my superior weight and strength would quickly have settled the issue, but in the air he had the advantage. His free hand beat and tore at my face, while his unimprisoned knee drove viciously again and again for my groin. I hung grimly on, taking the punishment without flinching, seeing that our struggles were dragging us lower and lower toward the earth.

Realizing this, he made a final desperate effort. Shifting the dagger to his free hand, he stabbed furiously at my throat. At the same instant I gave his head a terrific downward wrench. The impetus of both our exertions whirled us down and over, and his stroke, thrown out of line by our erratic convulsion, missed its mark and sheathed the dagger in his own thigh. A terrible cry burst from his lips, his grasp went limp as he half fainted from the pain and shock, and we rushed plummetlike earthward. I strove to turn him beneath me, and even as I did, we struck the earth with a terrific concussion.

From that impact I reeled up dizzily. The Yaga did not move; his body had cushioned mine, and half the bones in his frame must have been splintered.

A clamor of voices rang on my ears, and turning, I saw a horde of hairy figures rushing toward me. I heard my own name bellowed by a thousand tongues. I had found the men of Koth.

A hairy giant was alternately pumping my hand and beating me on the back with blows that would have staggered a horse, while bellowing: "Ironhand! By Thak's jawbones, *Ironhand*! Grip my hand, old war-dog! Hell's thunders, I've known no such joyful hour since the day I broke old Khush of Tanga's back!"

There was old Khossuth Skullsplitter, somber as ever, Thab the Swift, Gutchluk Tigerwrath--nearly all the mighty men of Koth. And the way they smote my back and roared their welcome warmed my heart as it was never warmed on Earth, for I knew there was no room for insincerity in their great simple hearts.

"Where have you been, Ironhand?" exclaimed Thab the Swift. "We found your broken carbine out on the plains, and a Yaga lying near it with his skull smashed; so we concluded that you had been done away with by those winged devils. But we never found your body--and now you come tumbling through the skies locked in combat with another flying fiend! Say, have you been to Yugga?" He laughed as a man laughs when he speaks a jest.

"Aye to Yugga, on the rock Yuthla, by the river Yogh, in the land of Yagg," I answered. "Where is Zal the Thrower?"

"He guards the city with the thousand we left behind," answered Khossuth.

"His daughter languishes in the Black City," I said. "On the night of the full moon, Altha, Zal's daughter, dies with five hundred other girls of the Guras--unless we prevent it."

A murmur of wrath and horror swept along the ranks. I glanced over the savage array. There were a good four thousand of them; no bows were in evidence, but each man bore his carbine. That meant war, and their numbers proved it was no minor raid.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"The men of Khor move against us, five thousand strong," answered Khossuth. "It is the death grapple of the tribes. We march to meet them afar off from our walls, and spare our women the horrors of the war."

"Forget the men of Khor!" I cried passionately. "You would spare the feelings of your women--yet thousands of your women suffer the tortures of the damned on the ebon rock of Yuthla! Follow me! I will lead you to the stronghold of the devils who have harried Almuric for a thousand ages!"

"How many warriors?" asked Khossuth uncertainly.

"Twenty thousand."

A groan rose from the listeners.

"What could our handful do against that horde?"

"I'll show you!" I exclaimed. "I'll lead you into the heart of their citadel!"

"Hai!" roared Ghor the Bear, brandishing his broadsword, always quick to take fire from my suggestions. "That's the word! Come on, sir brothers! Follow Ironhand! He'll show us the way!"

"But what of the men of Khor?" expostulated Khossuth. "They are marching to attack us. We must meet them."

Ghor grunted explosively as the truth of this assertion came home to him and all eyes turned toward me.

"Leave them to me," I proposed desperately. "Let me talk with them--"

"They'll hack off your head before you can open your mouth," grunted Khossuth.

"That's right," admitted Ghor. "We've been fighting the men of Khor for fifty thousand years. Don't trust them, comrade."

"I'll take the chance," I answered.

"The chance you shall have, then," said Gutchluk grimly. "For there they come!" In the distance we saw a dark moving mass.

"Carbines ready!" barked old Khossuth, his cold eyes gleaming. "Loosen your blades, and follow me."

"Will you join battle tonight?" I asked. He glanced at the sun. "No. We'll march to meet them, and pitch camp just out of gunshot. Then with dawn we'll rush them and cut their throats."

"They'll have the same idea," explained Thab. "Oh, it will be great fun!"

"And while you revel in senseless bloodshed," I answered bitterly, "your daughters and theirs will be screaming vainly under the tortures of the winged people over the river Yogh. Fools! Oh, you fools!"

"But what can we do?" expostulated Gutchluk.

"Follow me!" I yelled passionately. "We'll march to meet them, and I'll go on to them alone."

I wheeled and strode across the plain, and the hairy men of Koth fell in behind me, with many headshakes and mutterings. I saw the oncoming mass, first as a mingled blur; then the details stood out-- hairy bodies, fierce faces, gleaming weapons--but I swung on heedlessly. I knew neither fear nor caution; my whole being seemed on fire with the urgency of my need and desire.

Several hundred yards separated the two hosts when I dashed down my single weapon--the Yaga dagger--and shaking off Ghor's protesting hands, advanced alone and unarmed, my hands in the air; palms toward the enemy.

These had halted, drawn up ready for action. The unusualness of my actions and appearance puzzled them. I momentarily expected the crack of a carbine, but nothing happened until I was within a few yards of the foremost group, the mightiest men clustered about a tall figure that was their chief--old Bragi, Khossuth had told me. I had heard of him, a hard, cruel man, moody and fanatical in his hatreds.

"Stand!" he shouted, lifting his sword. "What trick is this? Who are you who comes with empty hands in the teeth of war?"

"I am Esau Ironhand, of the tribe of Koth," I answered. "I would parley with you."

"What madman is this?" growled Bragi. "Than--a bullet through his head."

But the man called Than, who had been staring eagerly at me, gave a shout instead and threw down his carbine.

"Not if I live!" he exclaimed, advancing toward me his arms outstretched. "By Thak, it is he! Do you not remember me, Than Swordswinger, whose life you saved in the hills?"

He lifted his chin to display a great scar on his corded neck.

"You are he who fought the sabertooth! I had not dreamed you survived those awful wounds."

"We men of Khor are hard to kill!" he laughed joyously, throwing his arms about me in a bearlike embrace. "What are you doing among the dogs of Koth? You should be fighting with us!"

"If I have my way there will be no fighting," I answered. "I wish only to talk with your chiefs and warriors. There is nothing out of the way about that."

"True!" agreed Than Swordswinger. "Bragi, you will not refuse him this?"

Bragi growled in his beard, glaring at me.

"Let your warriors advance to that spot." I indicated the place I meant. "Khossuth's men will come up on the other side. There both hordes will listen to what I have to say. Then, if no agreement can be reached, each side shall withdraw five hundred yards and after that follow its own initiative."

"You are mad!" Old Bragi jerked his beard with a shaking hand of rage. "It is treachery. Back to your kennel, dog!"

"I am your hostage," I answered. "I am unarmed. I will not move out of your sword reach. If there is treachery, strike me down on the spot."

"But why?"

"I have been captive among the Yagas!" I exclaimed. "I have come to tell the Guras what things occur in the land of Yagg!"

"The Yagas took my daughter!" exclaimed a warrior, pushing through the ranks. "Did you see her in Yagg?"

"They took my sister!"--"And my young bride"--"And my niece!" shouts rose in chorus, as men swarmed about me, forgetful of their enemies, shaking me in the intensity of their feeling.

"Back, you fools!" roared Bragi, smiting with the flat of his sword. "Will you break your ranks and let the Kothans cut you down? Do you not see it is a trick?"

"It is no trick!" I cried. "Only listen to me, in God's name!"

They swept away Bragi's protests. There was a milling and stamping, during which only a kindly Providence kept the nerve-taut Kothans from pouring a volley into the surging mass of their enemies, and presently a sort of order was evolved. A shouted conference finally resulted in approximately the position I had asked for--a semicircle of Khorans over against a similar formation composed of Kothans. The close proximity almost caused the tribal wrath to boil over. Jaws jutted, eyes blazed, hairy hands clutched convulsively at carbine stocks. Like wild dogs those wild men glared at each other, and I hastened to begin my say.

I was never much of a talker, and as I strode between those hostile hordes I felt my fire die out in cold ague of helplessness. A million ages of traditional war and feud rose up to confound me. One man against the accumulated ideas, inhibitions, and customs of a whole world, built up through countless millenniums--the thought crushed and paralyzed me. Then blind rage swept me at the memory of the horrors of Yugga, and the fire blazed up again and enveloped the world and made it small, and on the wings of that conflagration I was borne to heights of which I had never dreamed.

No need for fiery oratory to tell the tale I had to tell. I told it in the plainest, bluntest language possible, and the knowledge and feeling that lay behind the telling made those naked words pulse, and burn like acid.

I told of the hell that was Yugga. I told of young girls dying beneath the excesses of black demons--of women lashed to gory ribbons, mangled on the wheel, sundered on the rack, flayed alive, dismembered alive--of the torments that left the body unharmed, but sucked the mind empty of reason and left the victim a blind, mewing imbecile. I told them--oh God, I cannot repeat all I told them, at the memory of which I am even now sickened almost unto death.

Before I had finished, men were bellowing and beating their breasts with their clenched fists, and weeping in agony of grief and fury.

I lashed them with a last whip of scorpions. "These are your women, your own flesh and blood, who scream on the racks of Yugga! You call yourselves men--you strut and boast and swagger, while these winged devils mock you. Men! Ha!" I laughed as a wolf barks, from the depths of my bitter rage, and agony. "Men! Go home and don the skirts of women!"

A terrible yell arose. Clenched fists were brandished, bloodshot eyes flamed at me, hairy throats bayed their anguished fury. "You lie, you dog! Damn you, you lie! We *are* men! Lead us against these devils or we will rend you!"

"If you follow me," I yelled, "few of you will return. You will suffer and you will die in hordes. But if you had seen what I have seen, you would not wish to live. Soon approaches the time when the Yagas will clean their house. They are weary of their slaves. They will destroy those they have, and fare forth into the world for more. I have told you of the destruction of Thugra. So it will be with Khor; so it will be with Koth--when winged devils swoop out of the night. Follow me to Yugga--I will show you the way. If you are men, follow me!"

Blood burst from my lips in the intensity of my appeal, and as I reeled back, in a state of complete collapse from overwrought nerves and strain, Ghor caught me in his mighty arms.

Khossuth rose like a gaunt ghost. His ghostly voice soared out across the tumult.

"I will follow Esau Ironhand to Yugga, if the men of Khor will agree to a truce until our return. What is your answer, Bragi?"

"No!" roared Bragi. "There can be no peace between Khor and Koth. The women in Yugga are lost. Who can war against demons? Up, men, back to your place! No man can twist me with mad words to forget old hates."

He lifted his sword, and Than Swordswinger, tears of grief and fury running down his face, jerked out his poniard and drove it to the hilt in the heart of his king. Wheeling to the bewildered horde, brandishing the bloody dagger, his body shaken with sobs of frenzy, he yelled:

"So die all who would make us traitors to our own women! Draw your swords, all men of Khor who will follow me to Yugga!"

Five thousand swords flamed in the sun, and a deep-throated thunderous roar shook the very sky. Then wheeling to me, his eyes coals of madness:

"Lead us to Yugga, Esau Ironhand!" cried Than Swordswinger. "Lead us to Yagg, or lead us to Hell! We will stain the waters of Yogh with blood, and the Yagas will speak of us with shudders for ten thousand times a thousand years!"

Again the clangor of swords and the roar of frenzied men maddened the sky.

Chapter 12

Runners were sent to the cities, to give word of what went forward. Southward we marched, four thousand men of Koth, five thousand of Khor. We moved in separate columns, for I deemed it wise to keep the tribes apart until the sight of their oppressors should again drown tribal feelings.

Our pace was much swifter than that of an equal body of Earth soldiers. We had no supply trains. We lived off the land through which we passed. Each man bore his own armament--carbine, sword, dagger, canteen, and ammunition pouch. But I chafed at every mile. Sailing through the air on the back of a captive Yaga had spoiled me for marching. It took us days to cover ground the flying men had passed over in hours. Yet we progressed, and some three weeks from the time we began the march, we entered the forest beyond which lay the Purple River and the desert that borders the land of Yagg.

We had seen no Yagas, but we went cautiously now. Leaving the bulk of our force encamped deep in the forest, I went forward with thirty men, timing our march so that we reached the bank of the Purple River a short time after midnight, just before the setting of the Moon. My purpose was to find a way to prevent the tower guard from carrying the news of our coming to Yugga, so that we might cross the desert without being attacked in the open, where the numbers and tactics of the Yagas would weigh most heavily against us.

Khossuth suggested that we lie in wait among the trees along the bank, and pick the watchers off at long range at dawn, but this I knew to be impossible. There was no cover along the water's edge, and the river lay between. The men in the tower were out of our range. We might creep near enough to pick off one or two, but it was imperative that all should perish, since the escape of one would be enough to ruin our plans.

So we stole through the woods until we reached a point a mile upstream, opposite a jutting tongue of rock, toward which, I believed, a current set in from the center of the stream. There we placed in the water a heavy, strong catamaran we had constructed, with a long powerful rope. I got upon the craft with four of the best marksmen of the combined horde--Thab the Swift, Skel the Hawk, and two warriors of Khor. Each of us bore two carbines, strapped to our backs.

We bent to work with crude oars, though our efforts seemed ludicrously futile in the teeth of that flood. But the raft was long enough and heavy enough not to be spun by every whirlpool we crossed, and by dint of herculean effort we worked out toward the middle of the stream. The men on shore paid out the rope, and it acted as a sort of brace, swinging us around in a wide arc that would have eventually brought us back to the bank we had left, had not the current we hoped for suddenly caught us and hurled us at dizzy speed toward the projecting tongue of rock. The raft reeled and pitched, driving its nose under repeatedly, until sometimes we were fully submerged. But our ammunition was waterproof, and we had lashed ourselves to the logs; so we hung on like drowned rats, until our craft was dashed against the rocky point.

It hung there for a breathless instant, in which time it was touch and go. We slashed ourselves loose, jumped into the water which swirled arm-pit deep about us, and fought our way along the point, clinging tooth and nail to every niche or projection, while the foaming current threatened momentarily to tear us away and send us after our raft which had slid off the ledge and was dancing away down the river.

We did make it, though, and hauled ourselves upon the shore at last, half dead from buffeting and exhaustion But we could not stop to rest, for the most delicate part of our scheme was before us. It was necessary that we should not be discovered before dawn gave us light enough to see the sights of our carbines, for the best marksman in the world is erratic by starlight. But I trusted to the chance that the Yagas would be watching the river, and paying scant heed to the desert behind them.

So in the darkness that precedes dawn, we stole around in a wide circle, and the first hint of light found us lying in a depression we had scraped in the sand not over four hundred yards to the south of the tower.

It was tense waiting, while the dawn lifted slowly over the land, and objects became more and more distinct. The roar of the water over the Bridge of Rocks reached us plainly, and at last we were aware of another sound. The clash of steel reached us faintly through the water tumult. Ghor and others were advancing to the river bank, according to my instructions. We could not see any Yagas on the tower; only hints of movement along the turrets. But suddenly one whirled up into the morning sky and started south at headlong speed. Skel's carbine cracked and the winged man, with a loud cry, pitched sideways and tumbled to earth.

There followed an instant of silence; then five winged shapes darted into the air, soaring high. The Yagas sensed what was occurring, and were chancing all on a desperate rush, hoping that at least one might get through. We all fired, but I scored a complete miss, and Thab only slightly wounded his man. But the others brought down the man I had missed, while Thab's second shot dropped the wounded Yaga. We reloaded hastily, but no more came from the tower. Six men watched there, Yasmeena had said. She had spoken the truth.

We cast the bodies into the river. I crossed the Bridge of Rocks, leaping from boulder to boulder, and told Ghor to take his men back into the forest, and to bring up the host. They were to camp just within the fringe of woods, out of sight from the sky. I did not intend to start across the desert until nightfall.

Then I returned to the tower and attempted to gain entrance, but found no doors, only a few small barred windows. The Yagas had entered it from the top. It was too tall and smooth to be climbed, so we did the only thing left to do. We dug pits in the sand and covered them with branches, over which we scattered dust. In these pits we concealed our best marksmen, who lay all day, patiently scanning the sky. Only one Yaga came winging across the desert. No human was in sight, and he was not suspicious until he poised directly over the tower. Then, when he saw no watchmen, he became alarmed, but before he could race away, the reports of half a dozen carbines brought him tumbling to the earth in a whirl of limbs and wings.

As the sun sank, we brought the warriors across the Bridge of Rocks, an accomplishment which required some time. But at last they all stood on the Yaga side of the river, and with our canteens well filled, we started at quick pace across the narrow desert. Before dawn we were within striking distance of the river.

Having crossed the desert under cover of darkness, I was not surprised that we were able to approach the river without being discovered. If any had been watching from the citadel, alert for anything suspicious, they would have discerned our dark mass moving across the sands under the dim starlight. But I knew that in Yugga no such watch was ever kept, secure as the winged people felt in the protection of the Purple River, of the watchmen in the tower, and of the fact that for centuries no Gura raid had dared the bloody doom of former invaders. Nights were spent in frenzied debauchery, followed by sodden sleep. As for the men of Akka, these slow-witted drudges were too habitually drowsy to constitute much menace against our approach, though I knew that once roused they would fight like animals.

So three hundred yards from the river we halted, and eight thousand men under Khossuth took cover in the irrigation ditches that traversed the fields of fruit. The waving fronds of the squat trees likewise aided in their concealment. This was done in almost complete silence. Far above us towered the somber rock Yuthla. A faint breeze sprang up, forerunner of dawn. I led the remaining thousand warriors toward the river bank. Halting them a short distance from it, I wriggled forward on my belly until my hands were at the water's edge. I thanked the Fates that had given me such men to lead. Where civilized men would have floundered and blundered, the Guras moved as easily and noiselessly as stalking panthers.

Across from me rose the wall, sheer from the steep bank, that guarded Akka. It would be hard to climb in the teeth of spears. At the first crack of dawn, the bridge, which towered gauntly against the stars, would be lowered so that Akkas might go into the fields to work. But before then the rising light would betray our forces.

With a word to Ghor, who lay at my side, I slid into the water and struck out for the farther shore, he following. Reaching a point directly below the bridge, we hung in the water, clutching the slippery wall, and looked about for some way of climbing it. There the water, near the bank, was almost as deep as in midstream. At last Ghor found a crevice in the masonry, wide enough to give him a grip for his hands. Then bracing himself, he held fast while I clambered on his shoulders. Standing thus I managed to reach the lower part of the lifted bridge, and an instant later I drew myself up. The erected bridge closed the gap in the wall. I had to clamber over the barrier. One leg was across, when a figure sprang out of the shadows, yelling a warning. The watchman had not been as drowsy as I had expected.

He leaped at me, the starlight glinting on his spear. With a desperate twist of my body, I avoided the whistling blade, though the effort almost toppled me from the wall. My out-thrown hand gripped his lank hair as he fell against the coping with the fury of his wasted thrust, and jerking myself back into balance, I dealt him a crushing buffet on the ear with my clenched fist. He crumpled, and the next instant I was over the wall.

Ghor was bellowing like a bull in the river, mad to know what was taking place above him, and in the dim light the Akkas were swarming like bees out of their stony hives. Leaning over the barrier I stretched Ghor the shaft of the watchman's spear, and he came heaving and scrambling up beside me. The Akkas had stared stupidly for an instant; then realizing they were being invaded, they rushed, howling madly.

As Ghor sprang to meet them, I leaped to the great windlass that controlled the bridge. I heard the Bear's thunderous war cry boom above the squalling of the Akkas, the strident clash of steel and the crunch of splintered bone. But I had no time to look; it was taking all my strength to work the windlass. I had seen five Akkas toiling together at it; yet in the stress of the moment I accomplished its lowering single-handed, though sweat burst out on my forehead and my muscles trembled with the effort. But down it came, and the farther end touched the other bank in time to accommodate the feet of the warriors who sprang up and rushed for it.

I wheeled to aid Ghor, whose panting gasps I still heard amidst the clamor of the melee. I knew the din in the lower town would soon rouse the Yagas and it was imperative that we gain a foothold in Akka before the shafts of the winged men began to rain among us.

Ghor was hard pressed when I turned from the bridge-head. Half a dozen corpses lay under his feet, and he wielded his great sword with a berserk lustiness that sheared through flesh and bone like butter, but he was streaming blood, and the Akkas were closing in on him.

I had no weapon but Gotrah's dagger, but I sprang into the fray and ripped a sword from the sinking hand of one whose heart my slim blade found. It was a crude weapon, such as the Akkas forge, but it had edge and weight, and swinging it like a club, I wrought havoc among the swarming blue men. Ghor greeted my arrival with a gasping roar of pleasure, and redoubled the fury of his tremendous strokes, so that the dazed Akkas momentarily gave back.

And in that fleeting interval, the first of the Guras swarmed across the bridge. In an instant fifty men had joined us. But there the matter was deadlocked. Swarm after swarm of blue men rushed from their huts to fall on us with reckless fury. One Gura was a match for three or four Akkas, but they swamped us by numbers. They crushed us back into the bridge mouth, and strive as we could, we could not advance enough to clear the way for the hundreds of warriors behind us who yelled and struggled to come to sword-strokes with the enemy. The Akkas pressed in on us in a great crescent, almost crushing us against the men behind us. They lined the walls, yelling and screaming and brandishing their weapons. There were no bows or missiles among them; their winged masters were careful to keep such things out of their hands.

In the midst of the carnage dawn broke, and the struggling hordes saw their enemies. Above us, I knew, the Yagas would be stirring. Indeed I thought I could already hear the thrash of wings above the roar of battle, but I could not look up. Breast to breast we were locked with the heaving, grunting hordes, so closely there was no room for sword-strokes. Their teeth and filthy nails tore at us beastlike; their repulsive body odor was in our nostrils. In the crush we writhed and cursed, each man striving to free a hand to strike.

My flesh crawled in dread of the arrows I knew must soon be raining from above, and even with the thought the first volley came like a whistling sheet of sleet. At my side and behind me men cried out, clutching at the feathered ends protruding from their bodies. But then the men on the bridge and on the farther bank, who had held their fire for fear of hitting their comrades in the uncertain light, began loosing their carbines at the Akkas. At that range their fire was devastating. The first volley cleared the wall, and climbing on the bridge rails the carbineers poured a withering fusillade over our heads into the close-massed horde that barred our way. The result was appalling. Great gaps were torn in the struggling mob, and the whole horde staggered and tore apart. Unsupported by the mass behind, the front ranks caved in, and over their mangled bodies we rushed into the narrow streets of Akka.

Opposition was not at an end. The stocky blue men still fought back. Up and down the streets sounded the clash of steel, crack of shots, and yells of pain and fury. But our greatest peril was from above.

The winged men were swarming out of their citadel like hornets out of a nest. Several hundred of them dropped swiftly down into Akka, swords in their hands, while others lined the rim of the cliff and poured down showers of arrows. Now the warriors hidden in the shrub-masked ditches opened fire, and as that volley thundered, a rain of mangled forms fell on the flat roofs of Akka. The survivors wheeled and raced back to cover as swiftly as their wings could carry them.

But they were more deadly in defense than in attack. From every casement, tower and battlement above they rained their arrows; a hail of death showered Akka, striking down foe and serf alike. Guras and Akkas took refuge in the stone-roofed huts, where the battling continued in the low-ceilinged chambers until the gutters of Akka ran red. Four thousand Guras

battled four times their number of Akkas, but the size, ferocity and superior weapons of the apemen balanced the advantage of numbers.

Across the river Khossuth's carbineers kept up an incessant fire at the towers of Yugga, but with scant avail. The Yagas kept well covered, and their arrows, arching down from the sky, had a greater range and accuracy than the carbines of the Guras. But for their position among the ditches, Khossuth's men would have been wiped out in short order, and as it was, they suffered terribly. They could not join us in Akka; it would have been madness to try to cross the bridge in the teeth of that fire.

Meanwhile, I ran straight for the temple of Yasmeena, cutting down those who stood in my way. I had discarded the clumsy Akka sword for a fine blade dropped by a slain Gura, and with this in my hand I cut my way through a swarm of blue spearmen who made a determined stand before the temple. With me were Ghor, Thab the Swift, Than Swordswinger and a hundred other picked warriors.

As the last of our foes were trampled under foot, I sprang up the black stone steps to the massive door, where the bizarre figure of the Akka priest barred my way with shield and spear. I parried his spear and feinted a thrust at his thigh. He lowered the great gold-scrolled shield, and before he could lift it again I slashed off his head, which rolled grinning down the steps. I caught up the shield as I rushed into the temple.

I rushed across the temple and tore aside the golden screen. My men crowded in behind me, panting, blood-stained, their fierce faces lighted by the weird flame from the altar jewel. Fumbling in my haste, I found and worked the secret catch. The door began to give, reluctantly. It was this reluctance which fired my brain with sudden suspicion, as I remembered how easily it had opened before. Even with the thought I yelled, "Back!" and hurled myself backward as the door gaped suddenly.

Instantly my ears were deafened by an awful roar, my eyes blinded by a terrible flash. Something like a spurt of hell's fire passed so close by me it seared my hair in passing. Only my recoil, which carried me behind the opening door, saved me from the torrent of liquid fire which flooded the temple from the secret shaft.

There was a blind chaotic instant of frenzy, shot through with awful screams. Then through the din I heard Ghor loudly bellowing my name, and saw him stumbling blindly through the whirling smoke, his beard and bristling hair burned crisp. As the lurid murk cleared somewhat, I saw the remnants of my band--Ghor, Thab and a few others who by quickness or luck had escaped. Than Swordswinger had been directly behind me, and was knocked out of harm's way when I leaped back. But on the blackened floor of the temple lay three-score shriveled forms, burned and charred out of all human recognition. They had been directly in the path of that devouring sheet of flame as it rushed to dissipate itself in the outer air.

The shaft seemed empty now. Fool to think that Yasmeena would leave it unguarded, when she must have suspected that I escaped by that route. On the edges of the door and the jamb I found bits of stuff like wax. Some mysterious element had been sealed into the shaft which the opening of the door ignited, sending it toward the outer air in a rush of flame.

I knew the upper trap would be made fast. I shouted for Thab to find and light a torch, and for Ghor to procure a heavy beam for a ram. Then, telling Than to gather all the men he could find in the streets and follow, I raced up the stair in the blackness. As I thought, I found the upper trap fastened--bolted above, I suspected; and listening closely, I caught a confused mumbling above my head, and knew the chamber must be filled with Yagas.

An erratic flame bobbing below me drew my attention, and quickly Thab reached my side with a torch. He was followed by Ghor and a score of others, grunting under the weight of a heavy loglike beam, torn from some Akka hut. He reported that fighting was still going on in the streets and buildings, but that most of the Akka males had been put to the sword, and others, with their women and children, had leaped into the river and swum for the south shore. He said some five hundred swordsmen were thronging the temple.

"Then burst this trap above our heads," I exclaimed, "and follow me through. We must win our way into the heart of the hold, before the arrows of the Yagas on the tower overwhelm Khossuth."

It was difficult in that narrow shaft, where only one man could stand on each step, but gripping the heavy beam like a ram, we swung it and dashed it against the trap. The thunder of the blows filled the shaft deafeningly, the jarring impact stung our hands and quivered the wood, but the trap held. Again--and again--panting, grunting, thews cracking, we swung the beam--and with a final terrific drive of hard-braced knotty legs and iron shoulders, the trap gave with a splintering crash, and light flooded the shaft.

With a wordless yell I heaved up through the splinters of the trap, the gold shield held above my head. A score of swords descended on it, staggering me; but desperately keeping my feet, I heaved up through a veritable rain of shattering blades, and burst into the chamber of Yasmeena. With a yell the Yagas swarmed on me, and I cast the bent and shattered shield in their faces, and swung my sword in the wheel that flashed through breasts and throats like a mowing blade through corn. I should have died there, but from the opening behind me crashed a dozen carbines, and the winged men went down in heaps.

Then up into the chamber came Ghor the Bear, bellowing and terrible, and after him the killers of Khor and of Koth, thirsting for blood.

That chamber was full of Yagas, and so were the adjoining rooms and corridors. But in a compact circle, back to back, we held the shaft entrance, while scores of warriors swarmed up the stair to join us, widening and pushing out the rim of the circle. In that comparatively small chamber the din was deafening and terrifying--the clang of swords, the yelling, the butcher's sound of flesh and bones parting beneath the chopping edge.

We quickly cleared the chamber, and held the doors against attack. As more and more men came up from below, we advanced into the adjoining rooms, and after perhaps a half-hour of desperate fighting, we held a circle of chambers and corridors, like a wheel of which the chamber of the shaft was the axle, and more and more Yagas were leaving the turrets to take part in the hand-to-hand fighting. There were some three thousand of us in the upper chambers now, and no more came up the shaft. I sent Thab to tell Khossuth to bring his men across the river.

I believed that most of the Yagas had left the turrets. They were massed thick in the chambers and corridors ahead of us, and were fighting like demons. I have mentioned that their courage was not of the type of the Guras', but any race will fight when a foe has invaded its last stronghold, and these winged devils were no weaklings.

For a time the battle was at a gasping deadlock. We could advance no farther in any direction, nor could they thrust us back. The doorways through which we slashed and thrust were heaped high with bodies, both hairy and black. Our ammunition was exhausted, and the Yagas could use their bows to no advantage. It was hand to hand and sword to sword, men stumbling among the dead to come to hand grips.

Then, just when it seemed that flesh and blood could stand no more, a thunderous roar rose to the vaulted ceilings, and up through the shaft and out through the chambers poured streams of fresh, eager warriors to take our places. Old Khossuth and his men, maddened to frenzy by the arrows that had been showering upon them as they lay partly hidden in the ditches, foamed like rabid dogs to come to hand grips and glut their fury. Thab was not with them, and Khossuth said he had been struck down by an arrow in his leg, as he was following his king across the bridge in that dash from the ditches to the temple. There had been few losses in that reckless rush, however; as I had suspected, most of the Yagas had entered the chambers, leaving only a few archers on the towers.

Now began the most bloody and desperate melee I have ever witnessed. Under the impact of the fresh forces, the weary Yagas gave way, and the battle streamed out through the halls and rooms. The chiefs tried in vain to keep the maddened Guras together. Struggling groups split off the main body, men ran singly down twisting corridors. Throughout all the citadel thundered the rush of trampling feet, shouts, and din of steel.

Few shots were fired, few arrows winged. It was hand to hand with a vengeance. In the roofed chambers and halls, the Yagas could not spread their wings and dart down on their foes from above. They were forced to stand on their feet, meeting their ancient enemies on even terms. It was out on the rooftops and the open courts that our losses were greatest, for in the open the winged men could resort to their accustomed tactics.

But we avoided such places as much as possible, and man to man, the Guras were invincible. Oh, they died by scores, but under their lashing swords the Yagas died by hundreds. A thousand ages of cruelty and oppression were being repaid, and red was the payment. The sword was blind; Yaga women as well as men fell beneath it. But knowing the fiendishness of those sleek black females, I could not pity them.

I was looking for Altha.

Slaves there were, thousands of them, dazed by the battle, cowering in terror, too bewildered to realize its portent, or to recognize their rescuers. Yet several times I saw a woman cry out in sudden joy and run forward to throw her arms about the bull-neck of some hairy, panting swordsman, as she recognized a brother, husband, or father. In the midst of agony and travail there was joy and reuniting, and it warmed my heart to see it. Only the little yellow slaves and the red woman crouched in terror, as fearful of these roaring hairy giants as of their winged masters.

Hacking and slashing my way through the knots of struggling warriors, I sought for the chamber where were imprisoned the Virgins of the Moon. At last I caught the shoulder of a Gura girl, cowering on the floor to avoid chance blows of the men battling above her, and shouted a question in her ear. She understood and pointed, unable to make herself heard above the din. Catching her up under one arm, I slashed a path for us, and in a chamber beyond I set her down, and she ran swiftly down a corridor, crying for me to follow. I raced after her, down that corridor, up a winding stair, across a roof-garden where Guras and Yagas fought, and finally she halted in an open court. It was the highest point of the city, besides the minarets. In the midst rose the dome of the Moon, and at the foot of the dome she showed me a chamber. The door was locked, but I shattered it with blows of my sword, and glared in. In the semidarkness I saw the gleam of white limbs huddled close together against the opposite wall. As my eyes became accustomed to the dimness I saw that some hundred and fifty girls were cowering in terror against the wall. And as I called Altha's name, I heard a voice cry, "Esau! Oh, Esau!" and a slim white figure hurled itself across the chamber to throw white arms about my neck and rain passionate kisses on my bronzed features. For an instant I crushed her close, returning her kisses with hungry lips; then the roar of battle outside roused me. Turning I saw a swarm of Yagas, pressed close by five hundred swords, being forced out of a great doorway near by. Abandoning the fray suddenly they took to flight, their assailants flowing out into the court with yells of triumph.

And then before me I heard a light mocking laugh, and saw the lithe figure of Yasmeena, Queen of Yagg.

"So you have returned, Ironhand?" Her voice was like poisoned honey. "You have returned with your slayers to break the reign of the gods? Yet you have not conquered, oh fool."

Without a word I drove at her, silently and murderously, but she sprang lightly into the air, avoiding my thrust. Her laughter rose to an insane scream.

"Fool!" she shrieked. "You have not conquered! Did I not say I would perish in the ruins of my kingdom? Dogs, you are all dead men!"

Whirling in midair she rushed with appalling speed straight for the dome. The Yagas seemed to sense her intention, for they cried out in horror and protest, but she did not pause. Lighting on the smooth slope of the dome, keeping her perch by the use of her wings, she turned, shook a hand at us in mockery, and then, gripping some bolt or handle set in the dome, braced both her feet against the ivory slope and pulled with all her strength.

A section of the dome gave way, catapulting her into the air. The next instant a huge misshapen bulk came rushing from the opening. And as it rushed, the impact of its body against the edges of the door was like the crash of a thunderbolt. The dome split in a hundred places from base to pinnacle, and fell in with a thunderous roar. Through a cloud of dust and debris and falling stone the huge figure burst into the open. A yell went up from the watchers.

The thing that had emerged from the dome was bigger than an elephant, and in shape something like a gigantic slug, except that it had a fringe of tentacles all about its body. And from these writhing tentacles crackled sparks and flashes of blue flame. It spread its writhing arms, and at their touch stone walls crashed to ruin and masonry burst apart. It was brainless, sightless--elemental force incorporated in the lowest form of animation--power gone mad and run amuck in a senseless fury of destruction.

There was neither plan nor direction to its plunges. It rushed erratically, literally plowing through solid walls which buckled and gave way, falling on it in showers which did not seem to injure it. On all sides men fled aghast.

"Get back through the shaft, all who can!" I yelled. "Take the girls--get them out first!" I was dragging the dazed creatures from the prison chamber and thrusting them into the arms of the nearest warriors, who carried them away. On all sides of us the towers and minarets were crumbling and roaring down in ruin.

"Make ropes of the tapestries," I yelled. "Slide down the cliff! In God's name, hasten! This fiend will destroy the whole city before it is done!"

"I've found a bunch of rope ladders," shouted a warrior. "They'll reach to the water's edge, but--"

"Then fasten them and send the women down them," I shrieked. "Better take the chance of the river, then--here, Ghor, take Altha!"

I threw her into the arms of the bloodstained giant, and rushed toward the mountain of destruction which was crashing through the walls of Yugga.

Of that cataclysmic frenzy I have only a confused memory, an impression of crashing walls, howling humans, and that engine of doom roaring through all, with a ghastly aurora playing about it, as the electric power in its awful body blasted its way through solid stone.

How many Yagas, warriors and women slaves died in the falling castles is not to be known. Some hundreds had escaped down the shaft when falling roofs and walls blocked that way, crushing scores who were trying to reach it. Our warriors worked frenziedly, and the silken ladders were strung down the cliffs, some over the town of Akka, some in haste, over the river, and down these the warriors carried the slave-girls--Guras, red and yellow girls alike.

After I had seen Ghor carry Altha away I wheeled and ran straight toward that electric horror. It was not intelligent, and what I expected to accomplish I do not know. But through the reeling walls and among the rocking towers that spilled down showers of stone blocks I raced, until I stood before the rearing horror. Blind and brainless though it was, yet it possessed some form of sensibility, because instantly, as I hurled a heavy stone at it, its movements ceased to be erratic. It charged straight for me, casting splintered masonry right and left, as foam is thrown by the rush of an ox through a stream.

I ran fleetly from it, leading it away from the screaming masses of humanity that struggled and fled along the rim of the cliff, and suddenly found myself on a battlement on the edge of the cliff, with a sheer drop of five hundred feet beneath me to the river Yogh. Behind me came the monster. As I turned desperately, it reared up and plunged at me. In the middle of its gigantic slug-like body I saw a dark spot as big as my hand pulsing. I knew that this must be the center of the being's life, and I sprang at it like a wounded tiger, plunging my sword into that dark spot.

Whether I reached it or not, I did not know. Even as I leaped, the whole universe exploded in one burst of blinding white flame and thunder, followed instantly by the blackness of oblivion.

They say that at the instant my sword sank into the body of the fire-monster, both it and I were enveloped in a blinding blue flame. There was a deafening report, like a thunderclap, that tore the creature asunder, and hurled its mangled form, with my body, far out over the cliff, to fall five hundred feet into the deep blue waters of Yogh.

It was Thab who saved me from drowning, leaping into the river despite his crippled condition, to dive until he found and dragged my senseless body from the water.

You will say, perhaps, that it is impossible for a man to fall five hundred feet into water and live. My only reply is that I did it, and I live; though I doubt if there is any man on Earth who could do it.

For a long time I was senseless and for longer I lay in delirium; for longer again, I lay completely paralyzed, my disrupted and numbed nerves slowly coming back into life again.

I came to myself on a couch in Koth. I knew nothing of the long trek back through the forests and across the plains from the doomed city of Yugga. Of the nine thousand men who marched to Yagg, only five thousand returned, wounded, weary, bloodstained, but triumphant. With them came fifty thousand women, the freed slaves of the vanquished Yagas. Those who were neither Kothan nor Khoran were escorted to their own cities--a thing unique in the history of Almuric. The little yellow and red women were given the freedom of either city, and allowed to dwell there in full freedom.

As for me, I have Altha--and she has me. The glamor of her, akin to glory, dazzled me with its brilliance, when first I saw her bending over my couch after my return from Yagg. Her features seemed to glimmer and float above me; then they coalesced into a vision of transcendent loveliness, yet strangely familiar to me. Our love will last forever, for it has been annealed in the white-hot fires of a mutual experience--of a savage ordeal and a great suffering.

Now, for the first time, there is peace between the cities of Khor and Koth, which have sworn eternal friendship to each other; and the only warfare is the unremitting struggle waged against the ferocious wild beasts and weird forms of animal life that abound in much of the planet. And we two--I an Earthman born, and Altha, a daughter of Almuric who possesses the gentler instincts of an Earthwoman--we hope to instill some of the culture of my native planet into this erstwhile savage people before we die and become as the dust of my adopted planet, Almuric.

THE END

Contents

THE TREASURES OF TARTARY

By Robert E. Howard

Chapter I - Key to the Treasure

It was not mere impulsiveness that sent Kirby O'Donnell into the welter of writhing limbs and whickering blades that loomed so suddenly in the semidarkness ahead of him. In that dark alley of Forbidden Shahrazar it was no light act to plunge headlong into a nameless brawl; and O'Donnell, for all his Irish love of a fight, was not disposed thoughtlessly to jeopardize his secret mission.

But the glimpse of a scarred, bearded face swept from his mind all thought and emotion save a crimson wave of fury. He acted instinctively.

Full into the midst of the flailing group, half-seen by the light of a distant cresset, O'Donnell leaped, kindhjal in hand. He was dimly aware that one man was fighting three or four others, but all his attention was fixed on a single tall gaunt form, dim in the shadows. His long, narrow, curved blade licked venomously at this figure, ploughing through cloth, bringing a yelp as the edge sliced skin. Something crashed down on O'Donnell's head, gun butt or bludgeon, and he reeled, and closed with someone he could not see.

His groping hand locked on a chain that encircled a bull neck, and with a straining gasp he ripped upward and felt his keen kindhjal slice through cloth, skin and belly muscles. An agonized groan burst from his victim's lips, and blood gushed sickeningly over O'Donnell's hand.

Through a blur of clearing sight, the American saw a broad bearded face falling away from him--not the face he had seen before. The next instant he had leaped clear of the dying man, and was slashing at the shadowy forms about him. An instant of flickering steel, and then the figures were running fleetly up the alley. O'Donnell, springing in pursuit, his hot blood lashed to murderous fury, tripped over a writhing form and fell headlong. He rose, cursing, and was aware of a man near him, panting heavily. A tall man, with a long curved blade in hand. Three forms lay in the mud of the alley.

"Come, my friend, whoever you are!" the tall man panted in Turki. "They have fled, but they will return with others. Let us go!"

O'Donnell made no reply. Temporarily accepting the alliance into which chance had cast him, he followed the tall stranger who ran down the winding alley with the sure foot of familiarity. Silence held them until they emerged from a low dark arch, where a tangle of alleys debouched upon a broad square, vaguely lighted by small fires about which groups of turbaned men squabbled and brewed tea. A reek of unwashed bodies mingled with the odors of horses and camels. None noticed the two men standing in the shadow made by the angle of the mud wall.

O'Donnell looked at the stranger, seeing a tall slim man with thin dark features. Under his khalat which was draggled and darkly splashed, showed the silver-heeled boots of a horseman. His turban was awry, and though he had sheathed his scimitar, blood clotted the hilt and the scabbard mouth.

The keen black eyes took in every detail of the American's appearance, but O'Donnell did not flinch. His disguise had stood the test too many times for him to doubt its effectiveness.

The American was somewhat above medium height, leanly built, but with broad shoulders and corded sinews which gave him a strength out of all proportion to his weight. He was a hard-woven mass of wiry muscles and steel string nerves, combining the wolf-trap coordination of a natural fighter with a berserk fury resulting from an overflowing nervous energy. The kindhjal in his girdle and the scimitar at his hip were as much a part of him as his hands.

He wore the Kurdish boots, vest and girdled khalat like a man born to them. His keen features, bummed to bronze by desert suns, were almost as dark as those of his companion.

"Tell me thy name," requested the other. "I owe my life to thee."

"I am Ali el Ghazi, a Kurd," answered O'Donnell.

No hint of suspicion shadowed the other's countenance. Under the coiffed Arab kafiyeh O'Donnell's eyes blazed lambent blue, but blue eyes were not at all unknown among the warriors of the Iranian highlands.

The Turk lightly and swiftly touched the hawk-headed pommel of O'Donnell's scimitar.

"I will not forget," he promised. "I will know thee wherever we meet again. Now it were best we separated and went far from this spot, for men with knives will be seeking me--and thou too, for aiding me." And like a shadow he glided among the camels and bales and was gone.

O'Donnell stood silently for an instant, one ear cocked back toward the alley, the other absently taking in the sounds of the night. Somewhere a thin wailing voice sang to a twanging native lute. Somewhere else a feline-like burst of profanity marked the progress of a quarrel. O'Donnell breathed deep with contentment, despite the grim Hooded Figure that stalked forever at his shoulder, and the recent rage that still seethed in his veins. This was the real heart of the East, the East which had long ago stolen his heart and led him to wander afar from his own people.

He realized that he still gripped something in his left hand, and he lifted it to the flickering light of a nearby fire. It was a length of gold chain, one of its massy links twisted and broken. From it depended a curious plaque of beaten gold, somewhat larger than a silver dollar, but oval rather than round. There was no ornament, only a boldly carven inscription which O'Donnell, with all his Eastern lore, could not decipher.

He knew that he had torn the chain from the neck of the man he had killed in that black alley, but he had no idea as to its meaning. Slipping it into his broad girdle, he strode across the square, walking with the swagger of a nomadic horseman that was so natural to him.

Leaving the square he strode down a narrow street, the overhanging balconies of which almost touched one another. It was not late. Merchants in flowing silk robes sat cross-legged before their booths, extolling the quality of their goods--Mosul silk, matchlocks from Herat, edged weapons from India, and seed pearls from Baluchistan, hawk-like Afghans and weapon-girdled Uzbeks jostled him. Lights streamed through silk-covered windows overhead, and the light silvery laughter of women rose above the noise of barter and dispute.

There was a tingle in the realization that he, Kirby O'Donnell, was the first Westerner ever to set foot in forbidden Shahrazar, tucked away in a nameless valley not many days' journey from where the Afghan mountains swept down into the steppes of the Turkomans. As a wandering Kurd, traveling with a caravan from Kabul he had come, staking his life against the golden lure of a treasure beyond men's dreams.

In the bazaars and serais he had heard a tale: To Shaibar Khan, the Uzbek chief who had made himself master of Shahrazar, the city had given up its ancient secret. The Uzbek had found the treasure hidden there so long ago by Muhammad Shah, king of Khuwarezm, the Land of the Throne of Gold, when his empire fell before the Mongols.

O'Donnell was in Shahrazar to steal that treasure; and he did not change his plans because of the bearded face he had recognized in the alley--the face of an old and hated enemy. Yar Akbar the Afridi, traitor and murderer.

O'Donnell turned from the street and entered a narrow arched gate which stood open as if in invitation. A narrow stair went up from a small court to a balcony. This he mounted, guided by the tinkle of a guitar and a plaintive voice singing in Pushtu.

He entered a room whose latticed casement overhung the street, and the singer ceased her song to greet him and make half-mocking salaam with a lithe flexing of supple limbs. He replied, and deposited himself on a divan. The furnishings of the room were not elaborate, but they were costly. The garments of the woman who watched interestedly were of silk, her satin vest sewn with seed pearls. Her dark eyes, over the filmy yasmaq, were lustrous and expressive, the eyes of a Persian.

"Would my lord have food--and wine?" she inquired; and O'Donnell signified assent with the lordly gesture of a Kurdish swashbuckler who is careful not to seem too courteous to any woman, however famed in intrigue she may be. He had come there not for food and drink, but because he had heard in the bazaars that news of many kinds blew on the winds through the house of Ayisha, where men from far and near came to drink her wine and listen to her songs.

She served him, and, sinking down on cushions near him, watched him eat and drink. O'Donnell's appetite was not feigned. Many lean days had taught him to eat when and where he could. Ayisha seemed to him more like a curious child than an intriguing woman, evincing so much interest over a wandering Kurd, but he knew that she was weighing him carefully behind her guileless stare, as she weighed all men who came into her house.

In that hotbed of plot and ambitions, the wandering stranger today might be the Amir of Afghanistan or the Shah of Persia tomorrow--or the morrow might see his headless body dangling as a feast for the birds.

"You have a good sword," said she. He involuntarily touched the hilt. It was an Arab blade, long, lean, curved like the crescent moon, with a brass hawk's head for a pommel.

"It has cut many a Turkoman out of the saddle," he boasted, with his mouth full, carrying out his character. Yet it was no empty boast.

"Hai!" She believed him and was impressed. She rested her chin on her small fists and gazed up at him, as if his dark, hawk-like face had caught her fancy.

"The Khan needs swords like yours," she said.

"The Khan has many swords," he retorted, gulping wine loudly.

"No more than he will need if Orkhan Bahadur comes against him," she prophesied.

"I have heard of this Orkhan," he replied. And so he had; who in Central Asia had not heard of the daring and valorous Turkoman chief who defied the power of Moscow and had cut to pieces a Russian expedition sent to subdue him? "In the bazaars they say the Khan fears him."

That was a blind venture. Men did not speak of Shaibar Khan's fears openly.

Ayisha laughed. "Who does the Khan fear? Once the Amir sent troops to take Shahrazar, and those who lived were glad to flee! Yet if any man lives who could storm the city, Orkhan Bahadur is that man. Only tonight the Uzbeks were hunting his spies through the alleys."

O'Donnell remembered the Turkish accent of the stranger he had unwittingly aided. It was quite possible that the man was a Turkoman spy.

As he pondered this, Ayisha's sharp eyes discovered the broken end of the gold chain dangling from his girdle, and with a gurgle of delight she snatched it forth before he could stop her. Then with a squeal she dropped it as if it were hot, and prostrated herself in wriggling abasement among the cushions.

He scowled and picked up the trinket.

"Woman, what are you about?" he demanded.

"Your pardon, lord!" She clasped her hands, but her fear seemed more feigned than real; her eyes sparkled. "I did not know it was the token. Aie, you have been making game of me--asking me things none could know better than yourself. Which of the Twelve are you?"

"You babble as bees hum!" He scowled, dangling the pendant before her eyes. "You speak as one of knowledge, when, by Allah, you know not the meaning of this thing."

"Nay, but I do!" she protested. "I have seen such emblems before on the breasts of the emirs of the Inner Chamber. I know that it is a talsmin greater than the seal of the Amir, and the wearer comes and goes at will in or out of the Shining Palace."

"But why, wench, why?" he growled impatiently.

"Nay, I will whisper what you know so well," she answered, kneeling beside him. Her breath came soft as the sighing of the distant night wind. "It is the symbol of a Guardian of the Treasure!"

She fell away from him laughing. "Have I not spoken truly?"

He did not at once reply. His brain was dizzy, the blood pounding madly in his veins.

"Say nothing of this," he said at last, rising. "Your life upon it." And casting her a handful of coins at random, he hurried down the stair and into the street. He realized that his departure was too abrupt, but he was too dizzy, with the realization of what had fallen into his hands, for an entirely placid course of action.

The treasure! In his hand he held what well might be the key to it--at least a key into the palace, to gain entrance into which he had racked his brain in vain ever since coming to Shahrazar. His visit to Ayisha had borne fruit beyond his wildest dreams.

Chapter II - The Unholy Plan

Doubtless in Muhammad Shah's day the Shining Palace deserved its name; even now it preserved some of its former splendor. It was separated from the rest of the city by a thick wall, and at the great gate there always stood a guard of Uzbeks with Lee-Enfield rifles, and girdles bristling with knives and pistols.

Shaibar Khan had an almost superstitious terror of accidental gunfire, and would allow only edged weapons to be brought into the palace. But his warriors were armed with the best rifles that could be smuggled into the hills.

There was a limit to O'Donnell's audacity. There might be men on guard at the main gates who knew by sight all the emirs of the symbol. He made his way to a small side gate, through a loophole in which, at his imperious call, there peered a black man with the wizened features of a mute. O'Donnell had fastened the broken finks together and the chain now looped his corded neck. He indicated the plaque which rested on the silk of his khalat; and with a deep salaam, the black man opened the gate.

O'Donnell drew a deep breath. He was in the heart of the lion's lair now, and he dared not hesitate or pause to deliberate. He found himself in a garden which gave onto an open court surrounded by arches supported on marble pillars. He crossed the court, meeting no one. On the opposite side a grim-looking Uzbek, leaning on a spear, scanned him narrowly but said nothing. O'Donnell's skin crawled as he strode past the somber warrior, but the man merely stared curiously at the gold oval gleaming against the Kurdish vest.

O'Donnell found himself in a corridor whose walls were decorated by a gold frieze, and he went boldly on, seeing only soft-footed slaves who took no heed of him. As he passed into another corridor, broader and hung with velvet tapestries, his heart leaped into his mouth.

It was a tall slender man in long fur-trimmed robes and a silk turban who glided from an arched doorway and halted him. The man had the pale oval face of a Persian, with a black pointed beard, and dark shadowed eyes. As with the others his gaze sought first the talsmin on O'Donnell's breast--the token, undoubtedly, of a servitor beyond suspicion.

"Come with me!" snapped the Persian. "I have work for you." And vouchsafing no further enlightenment, he stalked down the corridor as if expecting O'Donnell to follow without question; which, indeed, the American did, believing that such would have been the action of the genuine Guardian of the Treasure. He knew this Persian was Ahmed Pasha, Shaibar Khan's vizir; he had seen him riding along the streets with the royal house troops.

The Persian led the way into a small domed chamber, without windows, the walls hung with thick tapestries. A small bronze lamp lighted it dimly. Ahmed Pasha drew aside the hangings, directly behind a heap of cushions, and disclosed a hidden alcove.

"Stand there with drawn sword," he directed. Then he hesitated. "Can you speak or understand any Frankish tongue?" he demanded. The false Kurd shook his head.

"Good!" snapped Ahmed Pasha. "You are here to watch, not to listen. Our lord does not trust the man he is to meet here--alone. You are stationed behind the spot where this man will sit. Watch him like a hawk. If he makes a move against the Khan, cleave his skull. If harm comes to our prince, you shall be flayed alive." He paused, glared an instant, then snarled:

"And hide that emblem, fool! Shall the whole world know you are an emir of the Treasure?"

"Hearkening and obedience, ya khawand," mumbled O'Donnell, thrusting the symbol inside his garments. Ahmed jerked the tapestries together, and left the chamber. O'Donnell glanced through a tiny opening, waiting for the soft pad of the vizir's steps to fade away before he should glide out and take up again his hunt for the treasure.

But before he could move, there was a low mutter of voices, and two men entered the chamber from opposite sides. One bowed low and did not venture to seat himself until the other had deposited his fat body on the cushions, and indicated permission.

O'Donnell knew that he looked on Shaibar Khan, once the terror of the Kirghiz steppes, and now lord of Shahrazar. The Uzbek had the broad powerful build of his race, but his thick limbs were soft from easy living. His eyes held some of their old restless fire, but the muscles of his face seemed flabby, and his features were lined and purpled with debauchery. And there seemed something else--a worried, haunted look, strange in that son of reckless nomads. O'Donnell wondered if the possession of the treasure was weighing on his mind.

The other man was slender, dark, his garments plain beside the gorgeous ermine-trimmed kaftan, pearl-sewn girdle and green, emerald-crested turban of the Khan.

This stranger plunged at once into conversation, low voiced but animated and urgent. He did most of the talking, while Shaibar Khan listened, occasionally interjecting a question, or a grunt of gratification. The Khan's weary eyes began to blaze, and his pudgy hands knotted as if they gripped again the hilt of the blade which had carved his way to power.

And Kirby O'Donnell forgot to curse the luck which held him prisoner while precious time drifted by. Both men spoke a tongue the American had not heard in years--a European language. And scanning closely the slim dark stranger, O'Donnell admitted himself baffled. If the man were, as he suspected, a European disguised as an Oriental, then O'Donnell knew he had met his equal in masquerade.

For it was European politics he talked, European politics that lay behind the intrigues of the East. He spoke of war and conquest, and vast hordes rolling down the Khybar Pass into India; to complete the overthrow, said the dark slender man, of a rule outworn.

He promised power and honors to Shaibar Khan, and O'Donnell, listening, realized that the Uzbek was but a pawn in his game, no less than those others he mentioned. The Khan, narrow of vision, saw only a mountain kingdom for himself, reaching down into the plains of Persia and India, and backed by European guns--not realizing those same guns could just as easily overwhelm him when the time was ripe.

But O'Donnell, with his western wisdom, read behind the dark stranger's words, and recognized there a plan of imperial dimensions, and the plot of a European power to seize half of Asia. And the first move in that game was to be the gathering of warriors by Shaibar Khan. How? With the treasure of Khuwarezm! With it he could buy all the swords of Central Asia.

So the dark man talked and the Uzbek listened like an old wolf who harks to the trampling of the musk oxen in the snow. O'Donnell listened, his blood freezing as the dark man casually spoke of invasions and massacres; and as the plot progressed and became more plain in detail, more monstrous and ruthless in conception, he trembled with a mad urge to leap from his cover and slash and hack both these bloody devils into pieces with the scimitar that quivered in his nervous grasp. Only a sense of self-preservation stayed him from this madness; and presently Shaibar Khan concluded the audience and left the chamber, followed by the dark stranger. O'Donnell saw this one smile furtively, like a man who has victory in his grasp.

O'Donnell started to draw aside the curtain, when Ahmed Pasha came padding into the chamber. It occurred to the American that it would be better to let the vizir find him at his post. But before Ahmed could speak, or draw aside the curtain, there sounded a rapid pattering of bare feet in the corridor outside, and a man burst into the room, wild eyed and panting.

At the sight of him a red mist wavered across O'Donnell's sight. It was Yar Akbar!

Chapter - III Wolf Pack

The Afridi fell on his knees before Ahmed Pasha. His garments were tattered; blood seeped from a broken tooth and clotted his straggly beard.

"Oh, master," he panted, "the dog has escaped!"

"Escaped!" The vizir rose to his full height, his face convulsed with passion. O'Donnell thought that he would strike down the Afridi, but his arm quivered, fell by his side.

"Speak!" The Persian's voice was dangerous as the hiss of a cobra.

"We hedged him in a dark alley," Yar Akbar babbled. "He fought like Shaitan. Then others came to his aid--a whole nest of Turkomans, we thought, but mayhap it was but one man. He too was a devil! He slashed my side--see the blood! For hours since we have hunted them, but found no trace. He is over the wall and gone!" In his agitation Yar Akbar plucked at a chain about his neck; from it depended an oval like that held by O'Donnell. The American realized that Yar Akbar, too, was an emir of the Treasure. The Afridi's eyes burned like a wolf's in the gloom, and his voice sank.

"He who wounded me slew Othman," he whispered fearfully, "and despoiled him of the talsmin!"

"Dog!" The vizir's blow knocked the Afridi sprawling. Ahmed Pasha was livid. "Call the other emirs of the Inner Chamber, swiftly!"

Yar Akbar hastened into the corridor, and Ahmed Pasha called:

"Ohe! You who hide behind the hangings--come forth!" There was no reply, and pale with sudden suspicion, Ahmed drew a curved dagger and with a pantherish spring tore the tapestry aside. The alcove was empty.

As he glared in bewilderment, Yar Akbar ushered into the chamber as unsavory a troop of ruffians as a man might meet, even in the hills: Uzbeks, Afghans, Gilzais, Pathans, scarred with crime and old in wickedness. Ahmed Pasha counted them swiftly. With Yar Akbar there were eleven.

"Eleven," he muttered. "And dead Othman makes twelve. All these men are known to you, Yar Akbar?"

"My head on it!" swore the Afridi. "These be all true men."

Ahmed clutched his beard.

"Then, by God, the One True God," he groaned, "that Kurd I set to guard the Khan was a spy and a traitor." And at that moment a shriek and a clash of steel re-echoed through the palace.

When O'Donnell heard Yar Akbar gasping out his tale to the vizir, he knew the game was up. He did not believe that the alcove was a blind niche in the wall; and, running swift and practiced hands over the panels, he found and pressed a hidden catch. An instant before Ahmed Pasha tore aside the tapestry, the American wriggled his lean body through the opening and found himself in a dimly lighted chamber on the other side of the wall. A black slave dozed on his haunches, unmindful of the blade that hovered over his ebony neck, as O'Donnell glided across the room, and through a curtained doorway.

He found himself back in the corridor into which one door of the audience chamber opened, and crouching among the curtains, he saw Yar Akbar come up the hallway with his villainous crew. He saw, too, that they had come up a marble stair at the end of the hall.

His heart leaped. In that direction, undoubtedly, lay the treasure--now supposedly unguarded. As soon as the emirs vanished into the audience chamber where the vizir waited, O'Donnell ran swiftly and recklessly down the corridor.

But even as he reached the stairs, a man sitting on them sprang up, brandishing a tulwar. A black slave, evidently left there with definite orders, for the sight of the symbol on O'Donnell's breast did not halt him. O'Donnell took a desperate chance, gambling his speed against the cry that rose in the thick black throat.

He lost. His scimitar licked through the massive neck and the Soudani rolled down the stairs, spurting blood. But his yell had rung to the roof.

And at that yell the emirs of the gold came headlong out of the audience chamber, giving tongue like a pack of wolves. They did not need Ahmed's infuriated shriek of recognition and command. They were men picked for celerity of action as well as courage, and it seemed to O'Donnell that they were upon him before the Negro's death yell had ceased to echo.

He met the first attacker, a hairy Pathan, with a long lunge that sent his scimitar point through the thick throat even as the man's broad tulwar went up for a stroke. Then a tall Uzbek swung his heavy blade like a butcher's cleaver. No time to parry; O'Donnell caught the stroke near his own hilt, and his knees bent under the impact.

But the next instant the kindhjal in his left hand ripped through the Uzbek's entrails, and with a powerful heave of his whole body, O'Donnell hurled the dying man against those behind him, bearing them back with him. Then O'Donnell wheeled and ran, his eyes blazing defiance of the death that whickered at his back.

Ahead of him another stair led up. O'Donnell reached it one long bound ahead of his pursuers, gained the steps and wheeled, all in one motion, slashing down at the heads of the pack that came clamoring after him.

Shaibar Khan's broad pale face peered up at the melee from the curtains of an archway, and O'Donnell was grateful to the Khan's obsessional fear that had barred firearms from the palace. Otherwise, he would already have been shot down like a dog. He himself had no gun; the pistol with which he had started the adventure had slipped from its holster somewhere on that long journey, and lay lost among the snows of the Himalayas.

No matter; he had never yet met his match with cold steel. But no blade could long have held off the ever-increasing horde that swarmed up the stair at him.

He had the advantage of position, and they could not crowd past him on the narrow stair; their very numbers hindered them. His flesh crawled with the fear that others would come down the stair and take him from behind, but none came. He retreated slowly, plying his dripping blades with berserk frenzy. A steady stream of taunts and curses flowed from his lips, but even in his fury he spoke in the tongues of the East, and not one of his assailants realized that the madman who opposed them was anything but a Kurd.

He was bleeding from a dozen flesh cuts, when he reached the head of the stairs which ended in an open trap. Simultaneously the wolves below him came clambering up to drag him down. One gripped his knees, another was hewing madly at his head. The others howled below them, unable to get at their prey.

O'Donnell stooped beneath the sweep of a tulwar and his scimitar split the skull of the wielder. His kindhjal he drove through the breast of the man who clung to his knees, and kicking the clinging body away from him, he reeled up through the trap. With frantic energy, he gripped the heavy iron-bound door and slammed it down, falling across it in semicollapse.

The splintering of wood beneath him warned him and he rolled clear just as a steel point crunched up through the door and quivered in the starlight. He found and shot the bolt, and then lay prostrate, panting for breath. How long the heavy wood would resist the attacks from below he did not know.

He was on a flat-topped roof, the highest part of the palace. Rising, he stumbled over to the nearest parapet, and looked down, onto lower roofs. He saw no way to get down. He was trapped.

It was the darkness just before dawn. He was on a higher level than the walls or any of the other houses in Shahrazar. He could dimly make out the sheer of the great cliffs which flanked the valley in which Shahrazar stood, and he saw the starlight's pale glimmer on the slim river which trickled past the massive walls. The valley ran southeast and northwest.

And suddenly the wind, whispering down from the north, brought a burst of crackling reports. Shots? He stared northwestward, toward where, he knew, the valley pitched upward, narrowing to a sheer gut, and a mud-walled village dominated the pass. He saw a dull red glow against the sky. Again came reverberations.

Somewhere in the streets below sounded a frantic clatter of flying hoofs that halted before the palace gate. There was silence then, in which O'Donnell heard the splintering blows on the trap door, and the heavy breathing of the men who struck them. Then suddenly they ceased as if the attackers had dropped dead; utter silence attended a shrilling voice, indistinct through distance and muffling walls. A wild clamor burst forth in the streets below; men shouted, women screamed.

No more blows fell on the trap. Instead there were noises below--the rattle of arms, tramp of men, and a voice that held a note of hysteria shouting orders.

O'Donnell heard the clatter of galloping horses, and saw torches moving through the streets, toward the northwestern gate. In the darkness up the valley he saw orange jets of flame and heard the unmistakable reports of firearms.

Shrugging his shoulders, he sat down in an angle of the parapet, his scimitar across his knees. And there weary Nature asserted itself, and in spite of the clamor below him, and the riot in his blood, he slept.

Chapter IV Furious Battle!

He did not sleep long, for dawn was just stealing whitely over the mountains when he awoke. Rifles were cracking all around, and crouching at the parapet, he saw the reason. Shahrazar was besieged by warriors in sheepskin coats and fur kalpaks. Herds of their horses grazed just beyond rifle fire, and the warriors themselves were firing from every rock and tree. Numbers of them were squirming along the half-dry river bed, among the willows, sniping at the men on the walls, who gave back their fire.

The Turkomans of Orkhan Bahadur! That blaze in the darkness told of the fate of the village that guarded the pass. Turks seldom made night raids; but Orkhan was nothing if not original.

The Uzbeks manned the walls, and O'Donnell believed he could make out the bulky shape and crested turban of Shaibar Khan among a cluster of peacock-clad nobles. And as he gazed at the turmoil in the streets below, the belief grew that every available Uzbek in the city was on the walls. This was no mere raid; it was a tribal war of extermination.

O'Donnell's Irish audacity rose like heady wine in his veins, and he tore aside the splintered door and gazed down the stairs. The bodies still lay on the steps, stiff and unseeing. No living human met his gaze as he stole down the stairs, scimitar in hand. He gained the broad corridor, and still he saw no one. He hurried down the stair whereon he had slain the black slave, and reached a broad chamber with a single tapestried door.

There was the sudden crash of a musket; a spurt of flame stabbed at him. The ball whined past him and he covered the space with a long leap, grappled a snarling, biting figure behind the tapestry and dragged it into the open. It was Ahmed Pasha.

"Accursed one!" The vizir fought like a mad dog. "I guessed you would come skulking here--Allah's curse on the hashish that has made my hand unsteady--"

His dagger girded through O'Donnell's garments, drawing blood. Under his silks the Persian's muscles were like taut wires. Employing his superior weight, the American hurled himself hard against the other, driving the vizir's head back against the stone wall with a stunning crack. As the Persian relaxed with a groan, O'Donnell's left hand wrenched from his grasp and lurched upward, and the keen kindhjal encountered flesh and bone.

The American lifted the still twitching corpse and thrust it behind the tapestry, hiding it as best he could. A bunch of keys at the dead man's girdle caught his attention, and they were in his hand as he approached the curtained door.

The heavy teakwood portal, bound in arabesqued copper, would have resisted any onslaught short of artillery. A moment's fumbling with the massive keys, and O'Donnell found the right one. He passed into a narrow corridor dimly lighted by some obscure means. The walls were of marble, the floor of mosaics. It ended at what seemed to be a blank carven wall, until O'Donnell saw a thin crack in the marble.

Through carelessness or haste, the secret door had been left partly open. O'Donnell heard no sound, and was inclined to believe that Ahmed Pasha had remained to guard the treasure alone. He gave the vizir credit for wit and courage.

O'Donnell pulled open the door--a wide block of marble revolving on a pivot--and halted short, a low cry escaping his lips. He had come full upon the treasure of Khuwarezm, and the sight stunned him!

The dim light must have come through hidden interstices in the colored dome of the circular chamber in which he stood. It illumined a shining pyramidal heap upon a dais in the center of the floor, a platform that was a great round slab of pure jade. And on that jade gleamed tokens of wealth beyond the dreams of madness. The foundations of the pile consisted of

blocks of virgin gold and upon them lay, rising to a pinnacle of blazing splendor, ingots of hammered silver, ornaments of golden enamel, wedges of jade, pearls of incredible perfection, inlaid ivory, diamonds that dazzled the sight, rubies like clotted blood, emeralds like drops of green fire, pulsing sapphires--O'Donnell's senses refused to accept the wonder of what he saw. Here, indeed, was wealth sufficient to buy every sword in Asia. A sudden sound brought him about. Someone was coming down the corridor outside, someone who labored for breath and ran staggeringly. A quick glance around, and O'Donnell slipped behind the rich gilt-worked arras which masked the walls. A niche where, perhaps, had stood an idol in the old pagan days, admitted his lean body, and he gazed through a slit cut in the velvet.

It was Shaibar Khan who came into the chamber. The Khan's garments were torn and splashed darkly. He stared at his treasure with haunted eyes, and he groaned. Then he called for Ahmed Pasha.

One man came, but it was not the vizir who lay dead in the outer corridor. It was Yar Akbar, crouching like a great gray wolf, beard bristling in his perpetual snarl.

"Why was the treasure left unguarded?" demanded Shaibar Khan petulantly. "Where is Ahmed Pasha?"

"He sent us on the wall," answered Yar Akbar, hunching his shoulders in servile abasement. "He said he would guard the treasure himself."

"No matter!" Shaibar Khan was shaking like a man with an ague. "We are lost. The people have risen against me and opened the gates to that devil Orkhan Bahadur. His Turkomans are cutting down my Uzbeks in the streets. But he shall not have the treasure. See ye that golden bar that juts from the wall, like a sword hilt from the scabbard? I have but to pull that, and the treasure falls into the subterranean river which runs below this palace, to be lost forever to the sight of men. Yar Akbar, I give you a last command--pull that bar!"

Yar Akbar moaned and wrung his beard, but his eyes were red as a wolf's, and he turned his ear continually toward the outer door.

"Nay, lord, ask of me anything but that!"

"Then I will do it!" Shaibar Khan moved toward the bar, reached out his hand to grasp it. With a snarl of a wild beast, Yar Akbar sprang on his back, grunting as he struck. O'Donnell saw the point of the Khyber knife spring out of Shaibar Khan's silk-clad breast, as the Uzbek chief threw wide his arms, cried out chokingly, and tumbled forward to the floor. Yar Akbar spurned the dying body with a vicious foot.

"Fool!" he croaked. "I will buy my life from Orkhan Bahadur. Aye, this treasure shall gain me much honor with him, now the other emirs are dead--"

He halted, crouching and glaring, the reddened knife quivering in his hairy fist. O'Donnell had swept aside the tapestry and stepped into the open. "Y'Allah!" ejaculated the Afridi. "The dog-Kurd!"

"Look more closely, Yar Akbar," answered O'DonneIl grimly, throwing back his kafiyeh and speaking in English. "Do you not remember the Gorge of Izz ed din and the scout trapped there by your treachery? One man escaped, you dog of the Khyber."

Slowly a red flame grew in Yar Akbar's eyes.

"El Shirkuh!" he muttered, giving O'Donnell his Afghan name--the Mountain Lion. Then, with a howl that rang to the domed roof, he launched himself through the air, his three-foot knife gleaming.

O'Donnell did not move his feet. A supple twist of his torso avoided the thrust, and the furiously driven knife hissed between left arm and body, tearing his khalat. At the same instant O'Donnell's left forearm bent up and under the lunging arm that guided the knife. Yar Akbar screamed, spat on the kindhjal's narrow blade. Unable to halt his headlong rush, he caromed bodily against O'Donnell, bearing him down.

They struck the floor together, and Yar Akbar, with a foot of trenchant steel in his vitals, yet reared up, caught O'Donnell's hair in a fierce grasp, gasped a curse, lifted his knife--and then his wild beast vitality failed him, and with a convulsive shudder he rolled clear and lay still in a spreading pool of blood.

O'Donnell rose and stared down at the bodies upon the floor, then at the glittering heap on the jade slab. His soul yearned to it with the fierce yearning that had haunted him for years. Dared he take the desperate chance of hiding it under the very noses of the invading Turkomans? If he could, he might escape, to return later, and bear it away. He had taken more desperate chances before.

Across his mental vision flashed a picture of a slim dark stranger who spoke a European tongue. It was lure of the treasure which had led Orkhan Bahadur out of his steppes; and the treasure in his hands would be as dangerous as it was in the hands of Shaibar Khan. The Power represented by the dark stranger could deal with the Turkoman as easily as with the Uzbek.

No; one Oriental adventurer with that treasure was as dangerous to the peace of Asia as another. He dared not run the risk of Orkhan Bahadur finding that pile of gleaming wealth--sweat suddenly broke out on O'Donnell's body as he realized, for once in his life, a driving power mightier than his own desire. The helpless millions of India were in his mind as, cursing sickly, he gripped the gold bar and heaved it!

With a grinding boom something gave way, the jade slab moved, turned, tilted, and disappeared, and with it vanished, in a final iridescent burst of dazzling splendor, the treasure of Khuwarezm. Far below came a sullen splash, and the sound of waters roaring in the darkness; then silence, and where a black hole had gaped there showed a circular slab of the same substance as the rest of the floor.

O'Donnell hurried from the chamber. He did not wish to be found where the Turkomans might connect him with the vanishing of the treasure they had battled to win. Let them think, if they would, that Shaibar Khan and Yar Akbar had disposed of it somehow, and slain one another. As he emerged from the palace into an outer court, lean warriors in sheepskin kaftans and high fur caps were swarming in. Cartridge belts crossed on their breasts, and yataghans hung at their girdles. One of them lifted a rifle and took deliberate aim at O'Donnell.

Then it was struck aside, and a voice shouted:

"By Allah, it is my friend Ali el Ghazi!" There strode forward a tall man whose kalpak was of white lambskin, and whose kaftan was trimmed with ermine. O'Donnell recognized the man he had aided in the alley.

"I am Orkhan Bahadur!" exclaimed the chief with a ringing laugh. "Put up your sword, friend; Shahrazar is mine! The heads of the Uzbeks are heaped in the market square! When I fled from their swords last night, they little guessed my warriors awaited my coming in the mountains beyond the pass! Now I am prince of Shahrazar, and thou art my cup-companion. Ask what thou wilt, yea, even a share of the treasure of Khuwarezm--when we find it."

"When you find it!" O'Donnell mentally echoed, sheathing his scimitar with a Kurdish swagger. The American was something of a fatalist. He had come out of this adventure with his life at least, and the rest was in the hands of Allah.

"Alhamdolillah!" said O'Donnell, joining arms with his new cup-companion.

THE END

Contents

THE VOICE OF EL-LIL

By Robert E. Howard

Maskat, like many another port, is a haven for the drifters of many nations who bring their tribal customs and peculiarities with them. Turk rubs shoulders with Greek and Arab squabbles with Hindoo. The tongues of half the Orient resound in the loud smelly bazaar. Therefore it did not seem particularly incongruous to hear, as I leaned on a bar tended by a smirking Eurasian, the musical notes of a Chinese gong sound clearly through the lazy hum of native traffic. There was certainly nothing so startling in those mellow tones that the big Englishman next me should start and swear and spill his whisky-and-soda on my sleeve.

He apologized and berated his clumsiness with honest profanity, but I saw he was shaken. He interested me as his type always does--a fine upstanding fellow he was; over six feet tall, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped, heavy-limbed, the perfect fighting man, brown-faced, blue-eyed and tawny-haired. His breed is old as Europe, and the man himself brought to mind vague legendary characters--Hengist, Hereward, Cerdic--born rovers and fighters of the original Anglo-Saxon stock.

I saw, furthermore, that he was in a mood to talk. I introduced myself, ordered drinks and waited. My specimen thanked me, muttered to himself, quaffed his liquor hastily and spoke abruptly:

"You're wondering why a grown man should be so suddenly upset by such a small thing--well, I admit that damned gong gave me a start. It's that fool Yotai Lao, bringing his nasty joss sticks and Buddhas into a decent town--for a half-penny I'd bribe some Moslem fanatic to cut his yellow throat and sink his confounded gong into the gulf. And I'll tell you why I hate the thing.

"My name," said my Saxon, "is Bill Kirby. It was in Jibuti on the Gulf of Aden that I met John Conrad. A slim, keen-eyed young New Englander he was--professor too, for all his youth. Victim of obsession also, like most of his kind. He was a student of bugs, and it was a particular bug that had brought him to the East Coast; or rather, the hope of the blooming beast, for he never found it. It was almost uncanny to see the chap work himself into a blaze of enthusiasm when speaking on his favorite subject. No doubt he could have taught me much I should know, but insects are not among my enthusiasms, and he talked, dreamed and thought of little else at first....

"Well, we paired off well from the start. He had money and ambitions and I had a bit of experience and a roving foot. We got together a small, modest but efficient safari and wandered down into the back country of Somaliland. Now you'll hear it spoken today that this country has been exhaustively explored and I can prove that statement to be a lie. We found things that no white man has ever dreamed of.

"We had trekked for the best part of a month and had gotten into a part of the country I knew was unknown to the average explorer. The veldt and thorn forests gave way to what approached real jungle and what natives we saw were a thick-lipped, low-browed, dog-toothed breed--not like the Somali at all. We wandered on though, and our porters and askari began muttering among themselves. Some of the black fellows had been hobnobbing with them and telling them tales that frightened them from going on. Our men wouldn't talk to me or Conrad about it, but we had a camp servant, a half-caste named Selim, and I told him to see what he could learn. That night he came to my tent. We had pitched camp in a sort of big glade and had built a thorn boma; for the lions were raising merry Cain in the bush.

"'Master,' said he in the mongrel English he was so proud of, 'them black fella he is scaring the porters and askari with bad ju-ju talk. They be tell about a mighty ju-ju curse on the country in which we go to, and--'

"He stopped short, turned ashy, and my head jerked up. Out of the dim, jungle-haunted mazes of the south whispered a haunting voice. Like the echo of an echo it was, yet strangely distinct, deep, vibrant, melodious. I stepped from my tent and saw Conrad standing before a fire, taut and tense as a hunting hound.

"'Did you hear that?' he asked. 'What was it?'

"'A native drum,' I answered--but we both knew I lied. The noise and chatter of our natives about their cooking-fires had ceased as if they had all died suddenly.

"We heard nothing more of it that night, but the next morning we found ourselves deserted. The black boys had decamped with all the luggage they could lay hand to. We held a council of war, Conrad, Selim and I. The half-caste was scared pink, but the pride of his white blood kept him carrying on.

"'What now?' I asked Conrad. 'We've our guns and enough supplies to give us a sporting chance of reaching the coast.'

"'Listen!' he raised his hand. Out across the bush-country throbbed again that haunting whisper. 'We'll go on. I'll never rest until I know what makes that sound. I never heard anything like it in the world before.'

"'The jungle will pick our bally bones,' I said. He shook his head.

"'Listen!' said he.

"It was like a call. It got into your blood. It drew you as a fakir's music draws a cobra. I knew it was madness. But I didn't argue. We cached most of our duffle and started on. Each night we built a thorn boma and sat inside it while the big cats yowled and grunted outside. And ever clearer as we worked deeper and deeper in the jungle mazes, we heard that voice. It was deep, mellow, musical. It made you dream strange things; it was pregnant with vast age. The lost glories of antiquity whispered in its booming. It centered in its resonance all the yearning and mystery of life; all the magic soul of the East. I awoke in the middle of the night to listen to its whispering echoes, and slept to dream of sky-towering minarets, of long ranks of bowing, brown-skinned worshippers, of purple-canopied peacock thrones and thundering golden chariots.

"Conrad had found something at last that rivaled his infernal bugs in his interest. He didn't talk much; he hunted insects in an absent-minded way. All day he would seem to be in an attitude of listening, and when the deep golden notes would roll out across the jungle, he would tense like a hunting dog on the scent, while into his eyes would steal a look strange for a civilized professor. By Jove, it's curious to see some ancient primal influence steal through the veneer of a cold-blooded scientist's soul and touch the red flow of life beneath! It was new and strange to Conrad; here was something he couldn't explain away with his new-fangled, bloodless psychology.

"Well, we wandered on in that mad search--for it's the white man's curse to go into Hell to satisfy his curiosity. Then in the gray light of an early dawn the camp was rushed. There was no fight. We were simply flooded and submerged by numbers. They must have stolen up and surrounded us on all sides; for the first thing I knew, the camp was full of fantastic figures and there were half a dozen spears at my throat. It rasped me terribly to give up without a shot fired, but there was no bettering it, and I cursed myself for not having kept a better lookout. We should have expected something of the kind, with that devilish chiming in the south.

"There were at least a hundred of them, and I got a chill when I looked at them closely. They weren't black boys and they weren't Arabs. They were lean men of middle height, light yellowish brown, with dark eyes and big noses. They wore no beards and their heads were close-shaven. They were clad in a sort of tunic, belted at the waist with a wide leather girdle, and sandals. They also wore a queer kind of iron helmet, peaked at the top, open in front and coming down nearly to their shoulders behind and at the sides. They carried big metal-braced shields, nearly square, and were armed with narrow-bladed spears, strangely made bows and arrows, and short straight swords such as I had never seen before--or since.

"They bound Conrad and me hand and foot and they butchered Selim then and there--cut his throat like a pig while he kicked and howled. A sickening sight--Conrad nearly fainted and I dare say I looked a bit pale myself. Then they set out in the direction we had been heading, making us walk between them, with our hands tied behind our backs and their spears threatening us. They brought along our scanty dunnage, but from the way they carried the guns I didn't believe they knew what those were for. Scarcely a word had been spoken between them and when I essayed various dialects I only got the prod of a spear-point. Their silence was a bit ghostly and altogether ghastly. I felt as if we'd been captured by a band of spooks.

"I didn't know what to make of them. They had the look of the Orient about them but not the Orient with which I was familiar, if you understand me. Africa is of the East but not one with it. They looked no more African than a Chinaman does. This is hard to explain. But I'll say this: Tokyo is Eastern, and Benares is equally so, but Benares symbolizes a different, older phase of the Orient, while Peking represents still another, and older one. These men were of an Orient I had never known; they were part of an East older than Persia--older than Assyria--older than Babylon! I felt it about them like an aura and I shuddered from the gulfs of Time they symbolized. Yet it fascinated me, too. Beneath the Gothic arches of an age-old jungle, speared along by silent Orientals whose type has been forgotten for God knows how many eons, a man can have fantastic thoughts. I almost wondered if these fellows were real, or but the ghosts of warriors dead four thousand years!

"The trees began to thin and the ground sloped upward. At last we came out upon a sort of cliff and saw a sight that made us gasp. We were looking into a big valley surrounded entirely by high, steep cliffs, through which various streams had cut narrow canyons to feed a good-sized lake in the center of the valley. In the center of that lake was an island and on that island was a temple and at the farther end of the lake was a city! No native village of mud and bamboo, either. This seemed to be of stone, yellowish-brown in color.

"The city was walled and consisted of square-built, flat-topped houses, some apparently three or four stories high. All the shores of the lake were in cultivation and the fields were green and flourishing, fed by artificial ditches. They had a system of irrigation that amazed me. But the most astonishing thing was the temple on the island.

"I gasped, gaped and blinked. It was the tower of Babel true to life! Not as tall or as big as I'd imagined it, but some ten tiers high and sullen and massive just like the pictures, with that same intangible impression of evil hovering over it.

"Then as we stood there, from that vast pile of masonry there floated out across the lake that deep resonant booming--close and clear now--and the very cliffs seemed to quiver with the vibrations of that music-laden air. I stole a glance at Conrad; he looked all at sea. He was of that class of scientists who have the universe classified and pigeon-holed and everything in its proper little nook. By Jove! It knocks them in a heap to be confronted with the paradoxical-unexplainable-shouldn't-be more than it does common chaps like you and me, who haven't much preconceived ideas of things in general.

"The soldiers took us down a stairway cut into the solid rock of the cliffs and we went through irrigated fields where shaven-headed men and dark-eyed women paused in their work to stare curiously at us. They took us to a big, iron-braced gate where a small body of soldiers equipped like our captors challenged them, and after a short parley we were escorted into the city. It was much like any other Eastern city--men, women and children going to and fro, arguing, buying and selling. But all in all, it had that same effect of apartness--of vast antiquity. I couldn't classify the architecture any more than I could understand the language. The only thing I could think of as I stared at those squat, square buildings was the huts certain low-caste, mongrel peoples still build in the valley of the Euphrates in Mesopotamia. Those huts might be a degraded evolution from the architecture in that strange African city.

"Our captors took us straight to the largest building in the city, and while we marched along the streets, we discovered that the houses and walls were not of stone after all, but a sort of brick. We were taken into a huge-columned hall before which stood ranks of silent soldiery, and taken before a dais up which led broad steps. Armed warriors stood behind and on either side of a throne, a scribe stood beside it, girls clad in ostrich-plumes lounged on the broad steps, and on the throne sat a grim-eyed devil who alone of all the men of that fantastic city wore his hair long. He was black-bearded, wore a sort of crown and had the haughtiest, cruelest face I ever saw on any man. An Arab sheikh or Turkish shah was a lamb beside him. He reminded me of some artist's conception of Belshazzar or the Pharaohs--a king who was more than a king in his own mind and the eyes of his people--a king who was at once king and high priest and god.

"Our escort promptly prostrated themselves before him and knocked their heads on the matting until he spoke a languid word to the scribe and this personage signed for them to rise. They rose, and the leader began a long rigmarole to the king, while the scribe scratched away like mad on a clay tablet and Conrad and I stood there like a pair of blooming gaping jackasses, wondering what it was all about. Then I heard a word repeated continually, and each time he spoke it, he indicated us. The word sounded like 'Akkaddian,' and suddenly my brain reeled with the possibilities it betokened. It couldn't be--yet it had to be!

"Not wanting to break in on the conversation and maybe lose my bally head, I said nothing, and at last the king gestured and spoke, the soldiers bowed again and seizing us, hustled us roughly from the royal presence into a columned corridor, across a huge chamber and into a small cell where they thrust us and locked the door. There was only a heavy bench and one window, closely barred.

"'My heavens, Bill,' exclaimed Conrad, 'who could have imagined anything equal to this? It's like a nightmare--or a tale from The Arabian Nights! Where are we? Who are these people?'

"'You won't believe me,' I said, 'but--you've read of the ancient empire of Sumeria?'

"'Certainly; it flourished in Mesopotamia some four thousand years ago. But what--by Jove!' he broke off, staring at me wide-eyed as the connection struck him.

"I leave it to you what the descendants of an Asia-Minor kingdom are doing in East Africa,' I said, feeling for my pipe, 'but it must be--the Sumerians built their cities of sun-dried brick. I saw men making bricks and stacking them up to dry along the lake shore. The mud is remarkably like that you find in the Tigris and Euphrates valley. Likely that's why these chaps settled here. The Sumerians wrote on clay tablets by scratching the surface with a sharp point just as the chap was doing in the throne room.

"'Then look at their arms, dress and physiognomy. I've seen their art carved on stone and pottery and wondered if those big noses were part of their faces or part of their helmets. And look at that temple in the lake! A small counterpart of the temple reared to the god El-lil in Nippur--which probably started the myth of the tower of Babel.

"'But the thing that clinches it is the fact that they referred to us as Akkaddians. Their empire was conquered and subjugated by Sargon of Akkad in 2750 B.C. If these are descendants of a band who fled their conqueror, it's natural that, pent in these hinterlands and separated from the rest of the world, they'd come to call all outlanders Akkaddians, much as secluded oriental nations call all Europeans Franks in memory of Martel's warriors who scuttled them at Tours.'

"'Why do you suppose they haven't been discovered before now?'

"'Well, if any white man's been here before, they took good care he didn't get out to tell his tale. I doubt if they wander much; probably think the outside world's overrun with bloodthirsty Akkaddians.'

"At this moment the door of our cell opened to admit a slim young girl, clad only in a girdle of silk and golden breast-plates. She brought us food and wine, and I noted how lingeringly she gazed at Conrad. And to my surprize she spoke to us in fair Somali.

"'Where are we?' I asked her. 'What are they going to do with us? Who are you?'

"'I am Naluna, the dancer of El-lil,' she answered--and she looked it--lithe as a she-panther she was. 'I am sorry to see you in this place; no Akkaddian goes forth from here alive.'

"'Nice friendly sort of chaps,' I grunted, but glad to find someone I could talk to and understand. 'And what's the name of this city?'

"'This is Eridu,' said she. 'Our ancestors came here many ages ago from ancient Sumer, many moons to the East. They were driven by a great and cruel king, Sargon of the Akkaddians--desert people. But our ancestors would not be slaves like their kin, so they fled, thousands of them in one great band, and traversed many strange, savage countries before they came to this land.'

"Beyond that her knowledge was very vague and mixed up with myths and improbable legends. Conrad and I discussed it afterward, wondering if the old Sumerians came down the west coast of Arabia and crossed the Red Sea about where Mocha is now, or if they went over the Isthmus of Suez and came down on the African side. I'm inclined to the last opinion. Likely the Egyptians met them as they came out of Asia Minor and chased them south. Conrad thought they might have made most of the trip by water, because, as he said, the Persian Gulf ran up something like a hundred and thirty miles farther than it does now, and Old Eridu was a seaport town. But just at the moment something else was on my mind.

"'Where did you learn to speak Somali?' I asked Naluna.

"'When I was little,' she answered, 'I wandered out of the valley and into the jungle where a band of raiding black men caught me. They sold me to a tribe who lived near the coast and I spent my childhood among them. But when I had grown into girlhood I remembered Eridu and one day I stole a camel and rode across many leagues of veldt and jungle and so came again to the city of my birth. In all Eridu I alone can speak a tongue not mine own, except for the black slaves--and they speak not at all, for we cut out their tongues when we capture them. The people of Eridu go not forth beyond the jungles and they traffic not with the black peoples who sometimes come against us, except as they take a few slaves.'

"I asked her why they killed our camp servant and she said that it was forbidden for blacks and whites to mate in Eridu and the offspring of such union was not allowed to live. They didn't like the poor beggar's color.

"Naluna could tell us little of the history of the city since its founding, outside the events that had happened in her own memory--which dealt mainly with scattered raids by a cannibalistic tribe living in the jungles to the south, petty intrigues of court and temple, crop failures and the like--the scope of a woman's life in the East is much the same, whether in the palace of Akbar, Cyrus or Asshurbanipal. But I learned that the ruler's name was Sostoras and that he was both high priest and king--just as the rulers were in old Sumer, four thousand years ago. El-lil was their god, who abode in the temple in the lake, and the deep booming we had heard was, Naluna said, the voice of the god.

"At last she rose to go, casting a wistful look at Conrad, who sat like a man in a trance--for once his confounded bugs were clean out of his mind.

"'Well,' said I, 'what d'you think of it, young fella-me-lad?'

"'It's incredible,' said he, shaking his head. 'It's absurd--an intelligent tribe living here four thousand years and never advancing beyond their ancestors.'

"'You're stung with the bug of progress,' I told him cynically, cramming my pipe bowl full of weed. 'You're thinking of the mushroom growth of your own country. You can't generalize on an Oriental from a Western viewpoint. What about China's famous long sleep? As for these chaps, you forget they're no tribe but the tag-end of a civilization that lasted longer than any has lasted since. They passed the peak of their progress thousands of years ago. With no intercourse with the outside world and no new blood to stir them up, these people are slowly sinking in the scale. I'd wager their culture and art are far inferior to that of their ancestors.'

"'Then why haven't they lapsed into complete barbarism?'

"'Maybe they have, to all practical purposes,' I answered, beginning to draw on my old pipe. 'They don't strike me as being quite the proper thing for offsprings of an ancient and honorable civilization. But remember they grew slowly and their retrogression is bound to be equally slow. Sumerian culture was unusually virile. Its influence is felt in Asia Minor today. The Sumerians had their civilization when our bloomin' ancestors were scrapping with cave bears and sabertooth tigers, so to speak. At least the Aryans hadn't passed the first milestones on the road to progress, whoever their animal neighbors were. Old Eridu was a seaport of consequence as early as 6500 B.C. From then to 2750 B.C. is a bit of time for any empire. What other empire stood as long as the Sumerian? The Akkaddian dynasty established by Sargon stood two hundred years before it was overthrown by another Semitic people, the Babylonians, who borrowed their culture from Akkaddian Sumer just as Rome later stole hers from Greece; the Elamitish Kassite dynasty supplanted the original Babylonian, the Assyrian and the Chaldean followed--well, you know the rapid succession of dynasty on dynasty in Asia Minor, one Semitic people overthrowing another, until the real conquerors hove in view on the Eastern horizon--the Aryan Medes and Persians--who were destined to last scarcely longer than their victims.

"'Compare each fleeting kingdom with the long dreamy reign of the ancient pre-Semitic Sumerians! We think the Minoan Age of Crete is a long time back, but the Sumerian empire of Erech was already beginning to decay before the rising power of Sumerian Nippur, before the ancestors of the Cretans had emerged from the Neolithic Age. The Sumerians had something the succeeding Hamites, Semites and Aryans lacked. They were stable. They grew slowly and if left alone would have decayed as slowly as these fellows are decaying. Still and all, I note these chaps have made one advancement--notice their weapons?

"'Old Sumer was in the Bronze Age. The Assyrians were the first to use iron for anything besides ornaments. But these lads have learned to work iron--probably a matter of necessity. No copper hereabouts but plenty of iron ore, I daresay.'

"'But the mystery of Sumer still remains,' Conrad broke in. 'Who are they? Whence did they come? Some authorities maintain they were of Dravidian origin, akin to the Basques--'

"'It won't stick, me lad,' said I. 'Even allowing for possible admixture of Aryan or Turanian blood in the Dravidian descendants, you can see at a glance these people are not of the same race.'

"'But their language--' Conrad began arguing, which is a fair way to pass the time while you're waiting to be put in the cooking-pot, but doesn't prove much except to strengthen your own original ideas.

"Naluna came again about sunset with food, and this time she sat down by Conrad and watched him eat. Seeing her sitting thus, elbows on knees and chin on hands, devouring him with her large, lustrous dark eyes, I said to the professor in English, so she wouldn't understand: 'The girl's badly smitten with you; play up to her. She's our only chance.'

"He blushed like a blooming school girl. 'I've a fiancee back in the States.'

"'Blow your fiancee,' I said. 'Is it she that's going to keep the bally heads on our blightin' shoulders? I tell you this girl's silly over you. Ask her what they're going to do with us.'

"He did so and Naluna said: 'Your fate lies in the lap of El-lil.'

"'And the brain of Sostoras,' I muttered. 'Naluna, what was done with the guns that were taken from us?'

"She replied that they were hung in the temple of El-lil as trophies of victory. None of the Sumerians was aware of their purpose. I asked her if the natives they sometimes fought had never used guns and she said no. I could easily believe that, seeing that there are many wild tribes in those hinterlands who've scarcely seen a single white man. But it seemed incredible that some of the Arabs who've raided back and forth across Somaliland for a thousand years hadn't stumbled onto Eridu and shot it up. But it turned out to be true--just one of those peculiar quirks and back-eddies in events like the wolves and wildcats you still find in New York state, or those queer pre-Aryan peoples you come onto in small communities in the hills of Connaught and Galway. I'm certain that big slave raids had passed within a few miles of Eridu, yet the Arabs had never found it and impressed on them the meaning of firearms.

"So I told Conrad: 'Play up to her, you chump! If you can persuade her to slip us a gun, we've a sporting chance.'

"So Conrad took heart and began talking to Naluna in a nervous sort of manner. Just how he'd have come out, I can't say, for he was little of the Don Juan, but Naluna snuggled up to him, much to his embarrassment, listening to his stumbling Somali with her soul in her eyes. Love blossoms suddenly and unexpectedly in the East.

"However, a peremptory voice outside our cell made Naluna jump half out of her skin and sent her scurrying, but as she went she pressed Conrad's hand and whispered something in his ear that we couldn't understand, but it sounded highly passionate.

"Shortly after she had left, the cell opened again and there stood a file of silent dark-skinned warriors. A sort of chief, whom the rest addressed as Gorat, motioned us to come out. Then down a long, dim, colonnaded corridor we went, in perfect silence except for the soft scruff of their sandals and the tramp of our boots on the tiling. An occasional torch flaring on the walls or in a niche of the columns lighted the way vaguely. At last we came out into the empty streets of the silent city. No sentry paced the streets or the walls, no lights showed from inside the flat-topped houses. It was like walking a street in a ghost city. Whether every night in Eridu was like that or whether the people kept indoors because it was a special and awesome occasion, I haven't an idea.

"We went on down the streets toward the lake side of the town. There we passed through a small gate in the wall--over which, I noted with a slight shudder, a grinning skull was carved--and found ourselves outside the city. A broad flight of steps led down to the water's edge and the spears at our backs guided us down them. There a boat waited, a strange high-prowed affair whose prototype must have plied the Persian Gulf in the days of Old Eridu.

"Four black men rested on their oars, and when they opened their mouths I saw their tongues had been cut out. We were taken into the boat, our guards got in and we started a strange journey. Out on the silent lake we moved like a dream, whose silence was broken only by the low rippling of the long, slim, golden-worked oars through the water. The stars flecked the deep blue gulf of the lake with silver points. I looked back and saw the silent city of Eridu sleeping beneath the stars. I looked ahead and saw the great dark bulk of the temple loom against the stars. The naked black mutes pulled the shining oars and the silent warriors sat before and behind us with their spears, helms and shields. It was like the dream of some fabulous city of Haroun-al-Raschid's time, or of Sulieman-ben-Daoud's, and I thought how blooming incongruous Conrad and I looked in that setting, with our boots and dingy, tattered khakis.

"We landed on the island and I saw it was girdled with masonry--built up from the water's edge in broad flights of steps which circled the entire island. The whole seemed older, even, than the city--the Sumerians must have built it when they first found the valley, before they began on the city itself.

"We went up the steps, that were worn deep by countless feet, to a huge set of iron doors in the temple, and here Gorat laid down his spear and shield, dropped on his belly and knocked his helmed head on the great sill. Some one must have been watching from a loophole, for from the top of the tower sounded one deep golden note and the doors swung silently open to disclose a dim, torch-lighted entrance. Gorat rose and led the way, we following with those confounded spears pricking our backs.

"We mounted a flight of stairs and came onto a series of galleries built on the inside of each tier and winding around and up. Looking up, it seemed much higher and bigger than it had seemed from without, and the vague, half-lighted gloom, the silence and the mystery gave me the shudders. Conrad's face gleamed white in the semi-darkness. The shadows of past ages crowded in upon us, chaotic and horrific, and I felt as though the ghosts of all the priests and victims who had walked those galleries for four thousand years were keeping pace with us. The vast wings of dark, forgotten gods hovered over that hideous pile of antiquity.

"We came out on the highest tier. There were three circles of tall columns, one inside the other--and I want to say that for columns built of sun-dried brick, these were curiously symmetrical. But there was none of the grace and open beauty of, say, Greek architecture. This was grim, sullen, monstrous--something like the Egyptian, not quite so massive but even more formidable in starkness--an architecture symbolizing an age when men were still in the dawn-shadows of Creation and dreamed of monstrous gods.

"Over the inner circle of columns was a curving roof--almost a dome. How they built it, or how they came to anticipate the Roman builders by so many ages, I can't say, for it was a startling departure from the rest of their architectural style, but there it was. And from this dome-like roof hung a great round shining thing that caught the starlight in a silver net. I knew then what we had been following for so many mad miles! It was a great gong--the Voice of El-lil. It looked like jade but I'm not sure to this day. But whatever it was, it was the symbol on which the faith and cult of the Sumerians hung--the symbol of the god-head itself. And I know Naluna was right when she told us that her ancestors brought it with them on that long, grueling trek, ages ago, when they fled before Sargon's wild riders. And how many eons before that dim time must it have hung in El-lil's temple in Nippur, Erech or Old Eridu, booming out its mellow threat or promise over the dreamy valley of the Euphrates, or across the green foam of the Persian Gulf!

"They stood us just within the first ring of columns, and out of the shadows somewhere, looking like a shadow from the past himself, came old Sostoras, the priest-king of Eridu. He was clad in a long robe of green, covered with scales like a snake's hide, and it rippled and shimmered with every step he took. On his head he wore a head-piece of waving plumes and in his hand he held a long-shafted golden mallet.

"He tapped the gong lightly and golden waves of sound flowed over us like a wave, suffocating us in its exotic sweetness. And then Naluna came. I never knew if she came from behind the columns or up through some trap floor. One instant the space before the gong was bare, the next she was dancing like a moonbeam on a pool. She was clad in some light, shimmery stuff that barely veiled her sinuous body and lithe limbs. And she danced before Sostoras and the Voice of El-lil as women of her breed had danced in old Sumer four thousand years ago.

"I can't begin to describe that dance. It made me freeze and tremble and burn inside. I heard Conrad's breath come in gasps and he shivered like a reed in the wind. From somewhere sounded music, that was old when Babylon was young, music as elemental as the fire in a tigress' eyes, and as soulless as an African midnight. And Naluna danced. Her dancing was a whirl of fire and wind and passion and all elemental forces. From all basic, primal fundamentals she drew underlying principles and combined them in one spin-wheel of motion. She narrowed the universe to a dagger-point of meaning and her flying feet and shimmering body wove out the mazes of that one central Thought. Her dancing stunned, exalted, maddened and hypnotized.

"As she whirled and spun, she was the elemental Essence, one and a part of all powerful impulses and moving or sleeping powers--the sun, the moon, the stars, the blind groping of hidden roots to light, the fire from the furnace, the sparks from the anvil, the breath of the fawn, the talons of the eagle. Naluna danced, and her dancing was Time and Eternity, the urge of Creation and the urge of Death; birth and dissolution in one, age and infancy combined.

"My dazed mind refused to retain more impressions; the girl merged into a whirling flicker of white fire before my dizzy eyes; then Sostoras struck one light note on the Voice and she fell at his feet, a quivering white shadow. The moon was just beginning to glow over the cliffs to the East.

"The warriors seized Conrad and me, and bound me to one of the outer columns. Him they dragged to the inner circle and bound to a column directly in front of the great gong. And I saw Naluna, white in the growing glow, gaze drawnly at him, then shoot a glance full of meaning at me, as she faded from sight among the dark sullen columns.

"Old Sostoras made a motion and from the shadows came a wizened black slave who looked incredibly old. He had the withered features and vacant stare of a deaf-mute, and the priest-king handed the golden mallet to him. Then Sostoras fell back and stood beside me, while Gorat bowed and stepped back a pace and the warriors likewise bowed and backed still farther away. In fact they seemed most blooming anxious to get as far away from that sinister ring of columns as they could.

"There was a tense moment of waiting. I looked out across the lake at the high, sullen cliffs that girt the valley, at the silent city lying beneath the rising moon. It was like a dead city.

The whole scene was most unreal, as if Conrad and I had been transported to another planet or back into a dead and forgotten age. Then the black mute struck the gong.

"At first it was a low, mellow whisper that flowed out from under the black man's steady mallet. But it swiftly grew in intensity. The sustained, increasing sound became nerve-racking--it grew unbearable. It was more than mere sound. The mute evoked a quality of vibration that entered into every nerve and racked it apart. It grew louder and louder until I felt that the most desirable thing in the world was complete deafness, to be like that blank-eyed mute who neither heard nor felt the perdition of sound he was creating. And yet I saw sweat beading his ape-like brow. Surely some thunder of that brain-shattering cataclysm re-echoed in his own soul. El-lil spoke to us and death was in his voice. Surely, if one of the terrible, black gods of past ages could speak, he would speak in just such tongue! There was neither mercy, pity nor weakness in its roar. It was the assurance of a cannibal god to whom mankind was but a plaything and a puppet to dance on his string.

"Sound can grow too deep, too shrill or too loud for the human ear to record. Not so with the Voice of El-lil, which had its creation in some inhuman age when dark wizards knew how to rack brain, body and soul apart. Its depth was unbearable, its volume was unbearable, yet ear and soul were keenly alive to its resonance and did not grow mercifully numb and dulled. And its terrible sweetness was beyond human endurance; it suffocated us in a smothering wave of sound that yet was barbed with golden fangs. I gasped and struggled in physical agony. Behind me I was aware that even old Sostoras had his hands over his ears, and Gorat groveled on the floor, grinding his face into the bricks.

"And if it so affected me, who was just within the magic circle of columns, and those Sumerians who were outside the circle, what was it doing to Conrad, who was inside the inner ring and beneath that domed roof that intensified every note?

"Till the day he dies Conrad will never be closer to madness and death than he was then. He writhed in his bonds like a snake with a broken back; his face was horribly contorted, his eyes distended, and foam flecked his livid lips. But in that hell of golden, agonizing sound I could hear nothing--I could only see his gaping mouth and his frothy, flaccid lips, loose and writhing like an imbecile's. But I sensed he was howling like a dying dog.

"Oh, the sacrificial dagger of the Semites was merciful. Even Moloch's lurid furnace was easier than the death promised by this rending and ripping vibration that armed sound waves with venomed talons. I felt my own brain was brittle as frozen glass. I knew that a few seconds more of that torture and Conrad's brain would shatter like a crystal goblet and he would die in the black raving of utter madness. And then something snapped me back from the mazes I'd gotten into. It was the fierce grasp of a small hand on mine, behind the column to which I was bound. I felt a tug at my cords as if a knife edge was being passed along them, and my hands were free. I felt something pressed into my hand and a fierce exultation surged through me. I'd recognize the familiar checkered grip of my Webley .44 in a thousand!

"I acted in a flash that took the whole gang off guard. I lunged away from the column and dropped the black mute with a bullet through his brain, wheeled and shot old Sostoras through the belly. He went down, spewing blood, and I crashed a volley square into the stunned ranks of the soldiers. At that range I couldn't miss. Three of them dropped and the rest woke up and scattered like a flock of birds. In a second the place was empty except for Conrad, Naluna and me, and the men on the floor. It was like a dream, the echoes from the shots still crashing, and the acrid scent of powder and blood knifing the air.

"The girl cut Conrad loose and he fell on the floor and yammered like a dying imbecile. I shook him but he had a wild glare in his eyes and was frothing like a mad dog, so I dragged him up, shoved an arm under him and started for the stair. We weren't out of the mess yet, by a long shot. Down those wide, winding, dark galleries we went, expecting any minute to be ambushed, but the chaps must have still been in a bad funk, because we got out of that hellish temple without any interference. Outside the iron portals Conrad collapsed and I tried to talk to him, but he could neither hear nor speak. I turned to Naluna.

"'Can you do anything for him?'

"Her eyes flashed in the moonlight. 'I have not defied my people and my god and betrayed my cult and my race for naught! I stole the weapon of smoke and flame, and freed you, did I not? I love him and I will not lose him now!'

"She darted into the temple and was out almost instantly with a jug of wine. She claimed it had magical powers. I don't believe it. I think Conrad simply was suffering from a sort of shell-shock from close proximity to that fearful noise and that lake water would have done as well as the wine. But Naluna poured some wine between his lips and emptied some over his head, and soon he groaned and cursed.

"'See!' she cried triumphantly, 'the magic wine has lifted the spell El-lil put on him!' And she flung her arms around his neck and kissed him vigorously.

"'My God, Bill,' he groaned, sitting up and holding his head, 'what kind of a nightmare is this?'

"'Can you walk, old chap?' I asked. 'I think we've stirred up a bloomin' hornet's nest and we'd best leg it out of here.'

"'I'll try.' He staggered up, Naluna helping him. I heard a sinister rustle and whispering in the black mouth of the temple and I judged the warriors and priests inside were working up their nerve to rush us. We made it down the steps in a great hurry to where lay the boat that had brought us to the island. Not even the black rowers were there. An ax and shield lay in it and I seized the ax and knocked holes in the bottoms of the other boats which were tied near it.

"Meanwhile the big gong had begun to boom out again and Conrad groaned and writhed as every intonation rasped his raw nerves. It was a warning note this time and I saw lights flare up in the city and heard a sudden hum of shouts float out across the lake. Something hissed softly by my head and slashed into the water. A quick look showed me Gorat standing in the door of the temple bending his heavy bow. I leaped in, Naluna helped Conrad in, and we shoved off in a hurry to the accompaniment of several more shafts from the charming Gorat, one of which took a lock of hair from Naluna's pretty head.

"I laid to the oars while Naluna steered and Conrad lay on the bottom of the boat and was violently sick. We saw a fleet of boats put out from the city, and as they saw us by the gleam of the moon, a yell of concentrated rage went up that froze the blood in my veins. We were heading for the opposite end of the lake and had a long start on them, but in this way we were forced to round the island and we'd scarcely left it astern when out of some nook leaped a long boat with six warriors--I saw Gorat in the bows with that confounded bow of his.

"I had no spare cartridges so I laid to it with all my might, and Conrad, somewhat green in the face, took the shield and rigged it up in the stern, which was the saving of us, because Gorat hung within bowshot of us all the way across the lake and he filled that shield so full of arrows it resembled a blooming porcupine. You'd have thought they'd had plenty after the slaughter I made among them on the roof, but they were after us like hounds after a hare.

"We'd a fair start on them but Gorat's five rowers shot his boat through the water like a racehorse, and when we grounded on the shore, they weren't half a dozen jumps behind us. As we scrambled out I saw it was either make a fight of it there and be cut down from the front, or else be shot like rabbits as we ran. I called to Naluna to run but she laughed and drew a dagger--she was a man's woman, that girl!

"Gorat and his merry men came surging up to the landing with a clamor of yells and a swirl of oars--they swarmed over the side like a gang of bloody pirates and the battle was on! Luck was with Gorat at the first pass, for I missed him and killed the man behind him. The hammer snapped on an empty shell and I dropped the Webley and snatched up the ax just as they closed with us. By Jove! It stirs my blood now to think of the touch-and-go fury of that fight! Knee-deep in water we met them, hand to hand, chest to chest!

"Conrad brained one with a stone he picked from the water, and out of the tail of my eye, as I swung for Gorat's head, I saw Naluna spring like a she-panther on another, and they went down together in a swirl of limbs and a flash of steel. Gorat's sword was thrusting for my life, but I knocked it aside with the ax and he lost his footing and went down--for the lake bottom was solid stone there, and treacherous as sin.

"One of the warriors lunged in with a spear, but he tripped over the fellow Conrad had killed, his helmet fell off and I crushed his skull before he could recover his balance. Gorat was up and coming for me, and the other was swinging his sword in both hands for a death blow, but he never struck, for Conrad caught up the spear that had been dropped, and spitted him from behind, neat as a whistle.

"Gorat's point raked my ribs as he thrust for my heart and I twisted to one side, and his up-flung arm broke like a rotten stick beneath my stroke but saved his life. He was game--they were all game or they'd never have rushed my gun. He sprang in like a blood-mad tiger, hacking for my head. I ducked and avoided the full force of the blow but couldn't get away from it altogether and it laid my scalp open in a three-inch gash, clear to the bone--here's the scar to prove it. Blood blinded me and I struck back like a wounded lion, blind and terrible, and by sheer chance I landed squarely. I felt the ax crunch through metal and bone, the haft splintered in my hand, and there was Gorat dead at my feet in a horrid welter of blood and brains.

"I shook the blood out of my eyes and looked about for my companions. Conrad was helping Naluna up and it seemed to me she swayed a little. There was blood on her bosom but it might have come from the red dagger she gripped in a hand stained to the wrist. God! It was a bit sickening, to think of it now. The water we stood in was choked with corpses and ghastly red. Naluna pointed out across the lake and we saw Eridu's boats sweeping down on us--a good way off as yet, but coming swiftly. She led us at a run away from the lake's edge. My wound was bleeding as only a scalp wound can bleed, but I wasn't weakened as yet. I shook the blood out of my eyes, saw Naluna stagger as she ran and tried to put my arm about her to steady her, but she shook me off.

"She was making for the cliffs and we reached them out of breath. Naluna leaned against Conrad and pointed upward with a shaky hand, breathing in great, sobbing gasps. I caught her meaning. A rope ladder led upward. I made her go first with Conrad following. I came after him, drawing the ladder up behind me. We'd gotten some halfway up when the boats landed and the warriors raced up the shore, loosing their arrows as they ran. But we were in the shadow of the cliffs, which made aim uncertain, and most of the shafts fell short or broke on the face of the cliff. One stuck in my left arm, but I shook it out and didn't stop to congratulate the marksman on his eye.

"Once over the cliff's edge, I jerked the ladder up and tore it loose, and then turned to see Naluna sway and collapse in Conrad's arms. We laid her gently on the grass, but a man with half an eye could tell she was going fast. I wiped the blood from her bosom and stared aghast. Only a woman with a great love could have made that run and that climb with such a wound as that girl had under her heart.

"Conrad cradled her head in his lap and tried to falter a few words, but she weakly put her arms around his neck and drew his face down to hers.

"'Weep not for me, my lover,' she said, as her voice weakened to a whisper. 'Thou hast been mine aforetime, as thou shalt be again. In the mud huts of the Old River, before Sumer was, when we tended the flocks, we were as one. In the palaces of Old Eridu, before the barbarians came out of the East, we loved each other. Aye, on this very lake have we floated in past ages, living and loving, thou and I. So weep not, my lover, for what is one little life when we have known so many and shall know so many more? And in each of them, thou art mine and I am thine.

"'But thou must not linger. Hark! They clamor for thy blood below. But since the ladder is destroyed there is but one other way by which they may come upon the cliffs--the place by which they brought thee into the valley. Haste! They will return across the lake, scale the cliffs there and pursue thee, but thou may'st escape them if thou be'st swift. And when thou hearest the Voice of El-lil, remember, living or dead, Naluna loves thee with a love greater than any god.

"'But one boon I beg of thee,' she whispered, her heavy lids drooping like a sleepy child's. 'Press, I beg thee, thy lips on mine, my master, before the shadows utterly enfold me; then leave me here and go, and weep not, oh my lover, for what is--one--little--life--to--us--who--have--loved--in--so--many--'

"Conrad wept like a blithering baby, and so did I, by Judas, and I'll stamp the lousy brains out of the jackass who twits me for it! We left her with her arms folded on her bosom and a smile on her lovely face, and if there's a heaven for Christian folk, she's there with the best of them, on my oath.

"Well, we reeled away in the moonlight and my wounds were still bleeding and I was about done in. All that kept me going was a sort of wild beast instinct to live, I fancy, for if I was ever near to lying down and dying, it was then. We'd gone perhaps a mile when the Sumerians played their last ace. I think they'd realized we'd slipped out of their grasp and had too much start to be caught.

"At any rate, all at once that damnable gong began booming. I felt like howling like a dog with rabies. This time it was a different sound. I never saw or heard of a gong before or since whose notes could convey so many different meanings. This was an insidious call--a luring urge, yet a peremptory command for us to return. It threatened and promised; if its attraction had been great before we stood on the tower of El-lil and felt its full power, now it was almost irresistible. It was hypnotic. I know now how a bird feels when charmed by a snake and how the snake himself feels when the fakirs play on their pipes. I can't begin to make you understand the overpowering magnetism of that call. It made you want to writhe and tear at the air and run back, blind and screaming, as a hare runs into a python's jaws. I had to fight it as a man fights for his soul.

"As for Conrad, it had him in its grip. He halted and rocked like a drunken man.

"'It's no use,' he mumbled thickly. 'It drags at my heart-strings; it's fettered my brain and my soul; it embraces all the evil lure of all the universes. I must go back.'

"And he started staggering back the way we had come--toward that golden lie floating to us over the jungle. But I thought of the girl Naluna that had given up her life to save us from that abomination, and a strange fury gripped me.

"'See here!' I shouted. 'This won't do, you bloody fool! You're off your bally bean! I won't have it, d'you hear?'

"But he paid no heed, shoving by me with eyes like a man in a trance, so I let him have it--an honest right hook to the jaw that stretched him out dead to the world. I slung him over my shoulder and reeled on my way, and it was nearly an hour before he came to, quite sane and grateful to me.

"Well, we saw no more of the people of Eridu. Whether they trailed us at all or not, I haven't an idea. We could have fled no faster than we did, for we were fleeing the haunting, horrible mellow whisper that dogged us from the south. We finally made it back to the spot where we'd cached our dunnage, and then, armed and scantily equipped, we started the long trek for the coast. Maybe you read or heard something about two emaciated wanderers being picked up by an elephant-hunting expedition in the Somaliland back country, dazed and incoherent from suffering. Well, we were about done for, I'll admit, but we were perfectly sane. The incoherent part was when we tried to tell our tale and the blasted idiots wouldn't believe it. They patted our backs and talked in a soothing tone and poured whisky-and-sodas down us. We soon shut up, seeing we'd only be branded as liars or lunatics. They got us back to Jibuti, and both of us had had enough of Africa for a spell. I took ship for India and Conrad went the other way--couldn't get back to New England quick enough, where I hope he married that little American girl and is living happily. A wonderful chap, for all his damnable bugs.

"As for me, I can't hear any sort of a gong today without starting. On that long, grueling trek I never breathed easily until we were beyond the sound of that ghastly Voice. You can't tell what a thing like that may do to your mind. It plays the very deuce with all rational ideas.

"I still hear that hellish gong in my dreams, sometimes, and see that silent, hideously ancient city in that nightmare valley. Sometimes I wonder if it's still calling to me across the years. But that's nonsense. Anyway, there's the yarn as it stands and if you don't believe me, I won't blame you at all."

But I prefer to believe Bill Kirby, for I know his breed from Hengist down, and know him to be like all the rest--truthful, aggressive, profane, restless, sentimental and straightforward, a true brother of the roving, fighting, adventuring Sons of Aryan.

THE END

Contents

THE VALLEY OF THE WORM

By Robert E. Howard

I WILL TELL YOU OF NIORD AND THE WORM. You have heard the tale before in many guises wherein the hero was named Tyr, or Perseus, or Siegfried, or Beowulf, or St George. But it was Niord who met the loathly demoniac thing that crawled hideously up from hell, and from which meeting sprang the cycle of hero-tales that revolves down the ages until the very substance of the truth is lost and passes into the limbo of all forgotten legends. I know whereof I speak, for I was Niord.

As I lie here awaiting death, which creeps slowly upon me like a blind slug, my dreams are filled with glittering visions and the pageantry of glory. It is not of the drab, disease-racked life of James Allison I dream, but all the gleaming figures of the mighty pageantry that have passed before, and shall come after; for I have faintly glimpsed, not merely the shapes that come after, as a man in a long parade glimpses, far ahead, the line of figures that precede him winding over a distant hill, etched shadow-like against the sky. I am one and all the pageantry of shapes and guises and masks which have been, are, and shall be the visible manifestations of that illusive, intangible, but vitally existent spirit now promenading under the brief and temporary name of James Allison.

Each man on earth, each woman, is part and all of a similar caravan of shapes and beings. But they cannot remember--their minds cannot bridge the brief, awful gulfs of blackness which he between those unstable shapes, and which the spirit, soul or ego, in spanning, shakes off its fleshy masks. I remember. Why I can remember is the strangest tale of all; but as I lie here with death's black wings slowly unfolding over me, all the dim folds of my previous lives are shaken out before my eyes, and I see myself in many forms and guises-- braggart, swaggering, fearful, loving, foolish, all that men have been or will be.

I have been man in many lands and many conditions; yet--and here is another strange thing--my line of reincarnation runs straight down one unerring channel. I have never been any but a man of that restless race men once called Nordheimr and later Aryans, and today name by many names and designations. Their history is my history, from the first mewling wail of a hairless white ape cub in the wastes of the Arctic, to the death-cry of the last degenerate product of ultimate civilization, in some dim and unguessed future age.

My name has been Hialmar, Tyr, Bragi, Bran, Horsa, Eric and John. I strode red-handed through the deserted streets of Rome behind the yellow-maned Brennus; I wandered through the violated plantations with Alaric and his Goths when the flame of burning villas lit the land like day and an empire was gasping its last under our sandalled feet; I waded sword in hand through the foaming surf from Hengist's galley to lay the foundations of England in blood and pillage; when Leif the Lucky sighted the broad white beaches of an unguessed world, I stood beside him in the bows of the dragon-ship, my golden beard blowing in the wind; and when Godfrey of Bouillon led his Crusaders over the walls of Jerusalem, I was among them in steel cap and brigandine.

But it is of none of these things I would speak. I would take you back with me into an age beside which that of Brennus and Rome is as yesterday. I would take you back through, not merely centuries and millenniums, but epochs and dim ages unguessed by the wildest philosopher. Oh far, far and far will you fare into the nighted past before you win beyond the boundaries of my race, blue-eyed, yellow-haired, wanderers, slayers, lovers, mighty in rapine and wayfaring.

It is the adventure of Niord Worm's-bane of which I would speak--the rootstem of a whole cycle of herotales which has not yet reached its end, the grisly underlying reality that lurks behind time-distorted myths of dragons, fiends and monsters.

Yet it is not alone with the mouth of Niord that I will speak. I am James Allison no less than I was Niord, and as I unfold the tale, I will interpret some of his thoughts and dreams and deeds from the mouth of the modern I, so that the saga of Niord shall not be a meaningless chaos to you. His blood is your blood, who are sons of Aryan; but wide misty gulfs of aeons lie horrifically between, and the deeds and dreams of Niord seem as alien to your deeds and dreams as the primordial and lion-haunted forest seems alien to the white-walled city street.

It was a strange world in which Niord lived and loved and fought, so long ago that even my aeon-spanning memory cannot recognize landmarks. Since then the surface of the earth has changed, not once but a score of times; continents have risen and sunk, seas have changed their beds and rivers their courses, glaciers have waxed and waned, and the very stars and constellations have altered and shifted.

It was so long ago that the cradle-land of my race was still in Nordheim. But the epic drifts of my people had already begun, and blue-eyed, yellow-maned tribes flowed eastward and southward and westward, on century-long treks that carried them around the world and left their bones and their traces in strange lands and wild waste places. On one of these drifts I grew from infancy to manhood. My knowledge of that northern homeland was dim memories, like half-remembered dreams, of blinding white snow plains and ice fields, of great fires roaring in the circle of hide tents, of yellow manes flying in great winds, and a sun setting in a lurid wallow of crimson clouds, blazing on trampled snow where still dark forms lay in pools that were redder than the sunset.

That last memory stands out clearer than the others. It was the field of Jotunheim, I was told in later years, whereon had just been fought that terrible battle which was the Armageddon of the AEsir-folk, the subject of a cycle of hero-songs for long ages, and which still lives today in dim dreams of Ragnarok and Goetterdaemmerung. I looked on that battle as a mewling infant; so I must have lived about--but I will not name the age, for I would be called a madman, and historians and geologists alike would rise to refute me.

But my memories of Nordheim were few and dim, paled by memories of that long, long trek upon which I had spent my life. We had not kept to a straight course, but our trend had been for ever southward. Sometimes we had bided for a while in fertile upland valleys or rich river-traversed plains, but always we took up the trail again, and not always because of drouth or famine. Often we left countries teeming with game and wild grain to push into wastelands. On our trail we moved endlessly, driven only by our restless whim, yet blindly following a cosmic law, the workings of which we never guessed, any more than the wild geese guess in their flights around the world. So at last we came into the Country of the Worm.

I will take up the tale at the time when we came into jungle-clad hills reeking with rot and teeming with spawning life, where the tom-toms of a savage people pulsed incessantly through the hot breathless night. These people came forth to dispute our way short, strongly built men, black-haired, painted, ferocious, but indisputably white men. We knew their breed of old. They were Picts, and of all alien races the fiercest. We had met their kind before in thick forests, and in upland valleys beside mountain lakes. But many moons had passed since those meetings.

I believe this particular tribe represented the easternmost drift of the race. They were the most primitive and ferocious of any I ever met. Already they were exhibiting hints of characteristics I have noted among black savages in jungle countries, though they had dwelled in these environs only a few generations. The abysmal jungle was engulfing them, was obliterating their pristine characteristics and shaping them in its own horrific mould. They were drifting into head-hunting, and cannibalism was but a step which I believe they must have taken before they became extinct. These things are natural adjuncts to the jungle; the Picts did not learn them from the black people, for then there were no blacks among those hills. In later years they came up from the south, and the Picts first enslaved and then were absorbed by them. But with that my saga of Niord is not concerned.

We came into that brutish hill country, with its squalling abysms of savagery and black primitiveness. We were a whole tribe marching on foot, old men, wolfish with their long beards and gaunt limbs, giant warriors in their prime, naked children running along the line of march, women with tousled yellow locks carrying babies which never cried--unless it were

to scream from pure rage. I do not remember our numbers, except that there were some 500 fighting-men--and by fighting-men I mean all males, from the child just strong enough to lift a bow, to the oldest of the old men. In that madly ferocious age all were fighters. Our women fought, when brought to bay, like tigresses, and I have seen a babe, not yet old enough to stammer articulate words, twist its head and sink its tiny teeth in the foot that stamped out its life.

Oh, we were fighters! Let me speak of Niord. I am proud of him, the more when I consider the paltry crippled body of James Allison, the unstable mask I now wear. Niord was tall, with great shoulders, lean hips and mighty limbs. His muscles were long and swelling, denoting endurance and speed as well as strength. He could run all day without tiring, and he possessed a coordination that made his movements a blur of blinding speed. If I told you his full strength, you would brand me a liar. But there is no man on earth today strong enough to bend the bow Niord handled with ease. The longest arrow-flight on record is that of a Turkish archer who sent a shaft 482 yards. There was not a stripling in my tribe who could not have bettered that flight.

As we entered the jungle country we heard the tom-toms booming across the mysterious valleys that slumbered between the brutish hills, and in a broad, open plateau we met our enemies. I do not believe these Picts knew us, even by legends, or they had never rushed so openly to the onset, though they outnumbered us. But there was no attempt at ambush. They swarmed out of the trees, dancing and singing their war-songs, yelling their barbarous threats. Our heads should hang in their idol-hut and our yellow-haired women should bear their sons. Ho! ho! ho! By Ymir, it was Niord who laughed then, not James Allison. Just so we of the AEsir laughed to hear their threats--deep thunderous laughter from broad and mighty chests. Our trail was laid in blood and embers through many lands. We were the slayers and ravishers, striding sword in hand across the world, and that these folk threatened us woke our rugged humour.

We went to meet them, naked but for our wolfhides, swinging our bronze swords, and our singing was like rolling thunder in the hills. They sent their arrows among us, and we gave back their fire. They could not match us in archery. Our arrows hissed in blinding clouds among them, dropping them like autumn leaves, until they howled and frothed like mad dogs and changed to hand-grips. And we, mad with the fighting joy, dropped our bows and ran to meet them, as a lover runs to his love.

By Ymir, it was a battle to madden and make drunken with the slaughter and the fury. The Picts were as ferocious as we, but ours was the superior physique, the keener wit, the more highly developed fighting-brain. We won because we were a superior race, but it was no easy victory. Corpses littered the blood-soaked earth; but at last they broke, and we cut them down as they ran, to the very edge of the trees. I tell of that fight in a few bald words. I cannot paint the madness, the reek of sweat and blood, the panting, muscle-straining effort, the splintering of bones under mighty blows, the rending and hewing of quivering sentient flesh; above all the merciless abysmal savagery of the whole affair, in which there was neither rule nor order, each man fighting as he would or could. If I might do so, you would recoil in horror; even the modern I, cognizant of my close kinship with those times, stand aghast as I review that butchery. Mercy was yet unborn, save as some individual's whim, and rules of warfare were as yet undreamed of. It was an age in which each tribe and each human fought tooth and fang from birth to death, and neither gave nor expected mercy.

So we cut down the fleeing Picts, and our women came out on the field to brain the wounded enemies with stones, or cut their throats with copper knives. We did not torture. We were no more cruel than life demanded. The rule of life was ruthlessness, but there is more wanton cruelty today than ever we dreamed of. It was not wanton bloodthirstiness that made us butcher wounded and captive foes. It was because we knew our chances of survival increased with each enemy slain.

Yet there was occasionally a touch of individual mercy, and so it was in this fight. I had been occupied with a duel with an especially valiant enemy. His tousled thatch of black hair scarcely came above my chin, but he was a solid knot of steel-spring muscles, than which lightning scarcely moved faster. He had an iron sword and a hide-covered buckler. I had a knotty-headed bludgeon. That fight was one that glutted even my battle-lusting soul. I was bleeding from a score of flesh wounds before one of my terrible, lashing strokes smashed his shield like cardboard, and an instant later my bludgeon glanced from his unprotected head. Ymir! Even now I stop to laugh and marvel at the hardness of that Pict's skull. Men of that age were assuredly built on a rugged plan! That blow should have spattered his brains like water. It did lay his scalp open horribly, dashing him senseless to the earth, where I let him lie, supposing him to be dead, as I joined in the slaughter of the fleeing warriors.

When I returned reeking with sweat and blood, my club horridly clotted with blood and brains, I noticed that my antagonist was regaining consciousness, and that a naked tousle-headed girl was preparing to give him the finishing touch with a stone she could scarcely lift. A vagrant whim caused me to check the blow. I had enjoyed the fight, and I admired the adamantine quality of his skull.

We made camp a short distance away, burned our dead on a great pyre, and after looting the corpses of the enemy, we dragged them across the plateau and cast them down in a valley to make a feast for the hyenas, jackals and vultures which were already gathering. We kept close watch that night, but we were not attacked, though far away through the jungle we could make out the red gleam of fires, and could faintly hear, when the wind veered, the throb of tom-toms and demoniac screams and yells keenings for the slain or mere animal squallings of fury.

Nor did they attack us in the days that followed. We bandaged our captive's wounds and quickly learned his primitive tongue, which, however, was so different from ours that I cannot conceive of the two languages having ever had a common source.

His name was Grom, and he was a great hunter and fighter, he boasted. He talked freely and held no grudge, grinning broadly and showing tusk-like teeth, his beady eyes glittering from under the tangled black mane that fell over his low forehead. His limbs were almost ape-like in their thickness.

He was vastly interested in his captors, though he could never understand why he had been spared; to the end it remained an inexplicable mystery to him. The Picts obeyed the law of survival even more rigidly than did the AEsir. They were the more practical, as shown by their more settled habits. They never roamed as far or as blindly as we. Yet in every line we were the superior race.

Grom, impressed by our intelligence and fighting qualities, volunteered to go into the hills and make peace for us with his people. It was immaterial to us, but we let him go. Slavery had not yet been dreamed of.

So Grom went back to his people, and we forgot about him, except that I went a trifle more cautiously about my hunting, expecting him to be lying in wait to put an arrow through my back. Then one day we heard a rattle of tom-toms, and Grom appeared at the edge of the jungle, his face split in his gorilla grin, with the painted, skin-clad, feather-bedecked chiefs of the clans. Our ferocity had awed them, and our sparing of Grom further impressed them. They could not understand leniency; evidently we valued them too cheaply to bother about killing one when he was in our power.

So peace was made with much pow-wow, and sworn to with many strange oaths and rituals we swore only by Ymir, and an AEsir never broke that vow. But they swore by the elements, by the idol which sat in the fetish-hut where fires burned for ever and a withered crone slapped a leather-covered drum all night long, and by another being too terrible to be named.

Then we all sat around the fires and gnawed meat-bones, and drank a fiery concoction they brewed from wild grain, and the wonder is that the feast did not end in a general massacre; for that liquor had devils in it and made maggots writhe in our brains. But no harm came of our vast drunkenness, and thereafter we dwelled at peace with our barbarous neighbours. They taught us many things, and learned many more from us. But they taught us iron-workings, into which they had been forced by the lack of copper in those hills, and we quickly excelled them.

We went freely among their villages--mud-walled clusters of huts in hilltop clearings, overshadowed by giant trees--and we allowed them to come at will among our camps--straggling lines of hide tents on the plateau where the battle had been fought. Our young men cared not for their squat beady-eyed women, and our rangy clean-limbed girls with their tousled yellow heads were not drawn to the hairy-breasted savages. Familiarity over a period of years would have reduced the repulsion on either side, until the two races would have flowed together to form one hybrid people, but long before that time the AEsir rose and departed, vanishing into the mysterious hazes of the haunted south. But before that exodus there came to pass the horror of the Worm.

I hunted with Grom and he led me into brooding, uninhabited valleys and up into silence-haunted hills where no men had set foot before us. But there was one valley, off in the mazes of the south-west, into which he would not go. Stumps of shattered columns, relics of a forgotten civilization, stood among the trees on the valley floor. Grom showed them to me, as we stood on the cliffs that flanked the mysterious vale, but he would not go down into it, and he dissuaded me when I would have gone alone. He would not speak plainly of the danger that lurked there, but it was greater than that of serpent or tiger, or the trumpeting elephants which occasionally wandered up in devastating droves from the south.

Of all beasts, Grom told me in the gutturals of his tongue, the Picts feared only Satha, the great snake, and they shunned the jungle where he lived. But there was another thing they feared, and it was connected in some manner with the Valley of Broken Stones, as the Picts called the crumbling pillars. Long ago, when his ancestors had first come into the country, they had dared that grim vale, and a whole clan of them had perished, suddenly, horribly and unexplainably. At least Grom did not explain. The horror had come up out of the earth, somehow, and it was not good to talk of it, since it was believed that It might be summoned by speaking of It--whatever It was.

But Grom was ready to hunt with me anywhere else; for he was the greatest hunter among the Picts, and many and fearful were our adventures. Once I killed, with the iron sword I had forged with my own hands, that most terrible of all beasts--old sabre-tooth, which men today call a tiger because he was more like a tiger than anything else. In reality he was almost as much like a bear in build, save for his unmistakably feline head. Sabre-tooth was massive-limbed, with a low-hung, great, heavy body, and he vanished from the earth because he was too terrible a fighter, even for that grim age. As his muscles and ferocity grew, his brain dwindled until at last even the instinct of self-preservation vanished. Nature, who maintains her balance in such things, destroyed him because, had his super-fighting powers been allied with an intelligent brain, he would have destroyed all other forms of life on earth. He was a freak on the road of evolution organic development gone mad and run to fangs and talons, to slaughter and destruction.

I killed sabre-tooth in a battle that would make a saga in itself, and for months afterwards I lay semi-delirious with ghastly wounds that made the toughest warriors shake their heads. The Picts said that never before had a man killed a sabre-tooth single-handed. Yet I recovered, to the wonder of all.

While I lay at the doors of death there was a secession from the tribe. It was a peaceful secession, such as continually occurred and contributed greatly to the peopling of the world by yellow-haired tribes. Forty-five of the young men took themselves mates simultaneously and wandered off to found a clan of their own. There was no revolt; it was a racial custom which bore fruit in all the later ages, when tribes sprung from the same roots met, after centuries of separation, and cut one another's throats with joyous abandon. The tendency of the Aryan and the pre-Aryan was always towards disunity, clans splitting off the main stem, and scattering.

So these young men, led by one Bragi, my brother-in-arms, took their girls and venturing to the south-west, took up their abode in the Valley of Broken Stones. The Picts expostulated, hinting vaguely of a monstrous doom that haunted the vale, but the AEsir laughed. We had left our own demons and weirds in the icy wastes of the far blue north, and the devils of other races did not much impress us.

When my full strength was returned, and the grisly wounds were only scars, I girt on my weapons and strode over the plateau to visit Bragi's clan. Grom did not accompany me. He had not been in the AEsir camp for several days. But I knew the way. I remembered well the valley, from the cliffs of which I had looked down and seen the lake at the upper end, the trees thickening into forest at the lower extremity. The sides of the valley were high sheer cliffs, and a steep broad ridge at either end cut it off from the surrounding country. It was towards the lower or southwestern end that the valley floor was dotted thickly with ruined columns, some towering high among the trees, some fallen into heaps of lichen-clad stones. What race reared them none knew. But Grom had hinted fearsomely of a hairy, apish monstrosity dancing loathsomely under the moon to a demoniac piping that induced horror and madness.

I crossed the plateau whereon our camp was pitched, descended the slope, traversed a shallow vegetation-choked valley, climbed another slope, and plunged into the hills. A half-day's leisurely travel brought me to the ridge on the other side of which lay the valley of the pillars. For many miles I had seen no sign of human life. The settlements of the Picts all lay

many miles to the east. I topped the ridge and looked down into the dreaming valley with its still blue lake, its brooding cliffs and its broken columns jutting among the trees. I looked for smoke. I saw none, but I saw vultures wheeling in the sky over a cluster of tents on the lake shore.

I came down the ridge warily and approached the silent camp. In it I halted, frozen with horror. I was not easily moved. I had seen death in many forms, and had fled from or taken part in red massacres that spilled blood like water and heaped the earth with corpses. But here I was confronted with an organic devastation that staggered and appalled me. Of Bragi's embryonic clan, not one remained alive, and not one corpse was whole. Some of the hide tents still stood erect. Others were mashed down and flattened out, as if crushed by some monstrous weight, so that at first I wondered if a drove of elephants had stampeded across the camp. But no elephants ever wrought such destruction as I saw strewn on the bloody ground. The camp was a shambles, littered with bits of flesh and fragments of bodies--hands, feet, heads, pieces of human debris. Weapons lay about, some of them stained with a greenish slime like that which spurts from a crushed caterpillar.

No human foe could have committed this ghastly atrocity. I looked at the lake, wondering if nameless amphibian monsters had crawled from the calm waters whose deep blue told of unfathomed depths. Then I saw a print left by the destroyer. It was a track such as a titanic worm might leave, yards broad, winding back down the valley. The grass lay flat where it ran, and bushes and small trees had been crushed down into the earth, all horribly smeared with blood and greenish slime.

With berserk fury in my soul I drew my sword and started to follow it, when a call attracted me. I wheeled, to see a stocky form approaching me from the ridge. It was Grom the Pict, and when I think of the courage it must have taken for him to have overcome all the instincts planted in him by traditional teachings and personal experience, I realize the full depths of his friendship for me.

Squatting on the lake shore, spear in his hands, his black eyes ever roving fearfully down the brooding tree-waving reaches of the valley, Grom told me of the horror that had come upon Bragi's clan under the moon. But first he told me of it, as his sires had told the tale to him.

Long ago the Picts had drifted down from the north-west on a long, long trek, finally reaching these jungle-covered hills, where, because they were weary, and because the game and fruit were plentiful and there were no hostile tribes, they halted and built their mud-walled villages.

Some of them, a whole clan of that numerous tribe, took up their abode in the Valley of the Broken Stones. They found the columns and a great ruined temple back in the trees, and in that temple there was no shrine or altar, but the mouth of a shaft that vanished deep into the black earth, and in which there were no steps such as a human being would make and use. They built their village in the valley, and in the night, under the moon, horror came upon them and left only broken walls and bits of slime-smeared flesh.

In those days the Picts feared nothing. The warriors of the other clans gathered and sang their war-songs and danced their war-dances, and followed a broad track of blood and slime to the shaft-mouth in the temple. They howled defiance and hurled down boulders which were never heard to strike bottom. Then began a thin demoniac piping, and up from the well pranced a hideous anthropomorphic figure dancing to the weird strains of a pipe it held in its monstrous hands. The horror of its aspect froze the fierce Picts with amazement, and close behind it a vast white bulk heaved up from the subterranean darkness. Out of the shaft came a slavering mad nightmare which arrows pierced but could not check, which swords carved but could not slay. It fell slobbering upon the warriors, crushing them to crimson pulp, tearing them to bits as an octopus might tear small fishes, sucking their blood from their mangled limbs and devouring them even as they screamed and struggled. The survivors fled, pursued to the very ridge, up which, apparently, the monster could not propel its quaking mountainous bulk.

After that they did not dare the silent valley. But the dead came to their shamans and old men in dreams and told them strange and terrible secrets. They spoke of an ancient, ancient race of semi-human beings which once inhabited that valley and reared those columns for their own weird inexplicable purposes. The white monster in the pits was their god, summoned up from the nighted abysses of mid-earth uncounted fathoms below the black mould by sorcery unknown to the sons of men. The hairy anthropomorphic being was its servant, created to serve the god, a formless elemental spirit drawn up from below and cased in flesh, organic but beyond the understanding of humanity. The Old Ones had long vanished into the limbo from whence they crawled in the black dawn of the universe, but their bestial god and his inhuman slave lived on. Yet both were organic after a fashion, and could be wounded, though no human weapon had been found potent enough to slay them.

Bragi and his clan had dwelled for weeks in the valley before the horror struck. Only the night before, Grom, hunting above the cliffs, and by that token daring greatly, had been paralyzed by a high-pitched demon piping, and then by a mad clamour of human screaming. Stretched face down in the dirt, hiding his head in a tangle of grass, he had not dared to move, even when the shrieks died away in the slobbering, repulsive sounds of a hideous feast. When dawn broke he had crept shuddering to the cliffs to look down into the valley, and the sight of the devastation, even when seen from afar, had driven him in yammering flight far into the hills. But it had occurred to him, finally, that he should warn the rest of the tribe, and returning, on his way to the camp on the plateau, he had seen me entering the valley.

So spoke Grom, while I sat and brooded darkly, my chin on my mighty fist. I cannot frame in modern words the clan feeling that in those days was a living vital part of every man and woman. In a world where talon and fang were lifted on every hand, and the hands of all men raised against an individual, except those of his own clan, tribal instinct was more than the phrase it is today. It was as much a part of a man as was his heart or his right hand. This was necessary, for only thus banded together in unbreakable groups could mankind have survived in the terrible environments of the primitive world. So now the personal grief I felt for Bragi and the clean-limbed young men and laughing white-skinned girls was drowned in a deeper sea of grief and fury that was cosmic in its depth and intensity. I sat grimly, while the Pict squatted anxiously beside me, his gaze roving from me to the menacing deeps of the valley where the accursed columns loomed like broken teeth of cackling hags among the waving leafy reaches.

I, Niord, was not one to use my brain over-much. I lived in a physical world, and there were the old men of the tribe to do my thinking. But I was one of a race destined to become dominant mentally as well as physically, and I was no mere muscular animal. So as I sat there, there came dimly and then clearly a thought to me that brought a short fierce laugh from my lips.

Rising, I bade Grom aid me, and we built a pyre on the lake shore of dried wood, the ridge-poles of the tents, and the broken shafts of spears. Then we collected the grisly fragments that had been parts of Bragi's band, and we laid them on the pile, and struck flint and steel to it.

The thick sad smoke crawled serpent-like into the sky, and, turning to Grom, I made him guide me to the jungle where lurked that scaly horror, Satha, the great serpent. Grom gaped at me; not the greatest hunters among the Picts sought out the mighty crawling one. But my will was like a wind that swept him along my course, and at last he led the way. We left the valley by the upper end, crossing the ridge, skirting the tall cliffs, and plunged into the fastnesses of the south, which was peopled only by the grim denizens of the jungle. Deep into the jungle we went, until we came to a low-lying expanse, dank and dark beneath the great creeper-festooned trees, where our feet sank deep into the spongy silt, carpeted by rotting vegetation, and slimy moisture oozed up beneath their pressure. This, Grom told me, was the realm haunted by Satha, the great serpent.

Let me speak of Satha. There is nothing like him on earth today, nor has there been for countless ages. Like the meat-eating dinosaur, like old sabre-tooth, he was too terrible to exist. Even then he was a survival of a grimmer age when life and its forms were cruder and more hideous. There were not many of his kind then, though they may have existed in great numbers in the reeking ooze of the vast jungle-tangled swamps still further south. He was larger than any python of modern ages, and his fangs dripped with poison a thousand times more deadly than that of a king cobra.

He was never worshipped by the pure-blood Picts, though the blacks that came later deified him, and that adoration persisted in the hybrid race that sprang from the negroes and their white conquerors. But to other peoples he was the nadir of evil horror, and tales of him became twisted into demonology; so in later ages Satha became the veritable devil of the white races, and the Stygians first worshipped, and then, when they became Egyptians, abhorred him under the name of Set, the Old Serpent, while to the Semites he became Leviathan and Satan. He was terrible enough to be a god, for he was a crawling death. I had seen a bull elephant fall dead in his tracks from Satha's bite. I had seen him, had glimpsed him writhing his horrific way through the dense jungle, had seen him take his prey, but I had never hunted him. He was too grim, even for the slayer of old sabre-tooth.

But now I hunted him, plunging further and further into the hot, breathless reek of his jungle, even when friendship for me could not drive Grom further. He urged me to paint my body and sing my death-song before I advanced further, but I pushed on unheeding.

In a natural runway that wound between the shouldering trees, I set a trap. I found a large tree, soft and spongy of fibre, but thick-boled and heavy, and I hacked through its base close to the ground with my great sword, directing its fall so that when it toppled, its top crashed into the branches of a smaller tree, leaving it leaning across the runway, one end resting on the earth, the other caught in the small tree. Then I cut away the branches on the underside, and cutting a slim, tough sapling I trimmed it and stuck it upright like a prop-pole under the leaning tree. Then, cutting away the tree which supported it, I left the great trunk poised precariously on the prop-pole, to which I fastened a long vine, as thick as my wrist.

Then I went alone through that primordial twilight jungle until an overpowering fetid odour assailed my nostrils, and from the rank vegetation in front of me Satha reared up his hideous head, swaying lethally from side to side, while his forked tongue jetted in and out, and his great yellow terrible eyes burned icily on me with all the evil wisdom of the black elder world that was when man was not. I backed away, feeling no fear, only an icy sensation along my spine, and Satha came sinuously after me, his shining 80-foot barrel rippling over the rotting vegetation in mesmeric silence. His wedge-shaped head was bigger than the head of the hugest stallion, his trunk was thicker than a man's body, and his scales shimmered with a thousand changing scintillations. I was to Satha as a mouse is to a king cobra, but I was fanged as no mouse ever was. Quick as I was, I knew I could not avoid the lightning stroke of that great triangular head; so I dared not let him come too close. Subtly I fled down the runway, and behind me the rush of the great supple body was like the sweep of wind through the grass.

He was not far behind me when I raced beneath the dead-fall, and as the great shining length glided under the trap, I gripped the vine with both hands and jerked desperately. With a crash the great trunk fell across Satha's scaly back, some 6 feet back of his wedge-shaped head.

I had hoped to break his spine but I do not think it did, for the great body coiled and knotted, the mighty tail lashed and thrashed, mowing down the bushes as if with a giant flail. At the instant of the fall, the huge head had whipped about and struck the tree with a terrific impact, the mighty fangs shearing through bark and wood like scimitars. Now, as if aware he fought an inanimate foe, Satha turned on me, standing out of his reach. The scaly neck writhed and arched, the mighty jaws gaped, disclosing fangs a foot in length, from which dripped venom that might have burned through solid stone.

I believe, what of his stupendous strength, that Satha would have writhed from under the trunk, but for a broken branch that had been driven deep into his side, holding him like a barb. The sound of his hissing filled the jungle and his eyes glared at me with such concentrated evil that I shook despite myself. Oh, he knew it was I who had trapped him! Now I came as close as I dared, and with a sudden powerful cast of my spear transfixed his neck just below the gaping jaws, nailing him to the tree-trunk. Then I dared greatly, for he was far from dead, and I knew he would in an instant tear the spear from the wood and be free to strike. But in that instant I ran in, and swinging my sword with all my great power, I hewed off his terrible head.

The heavings and contortions of Satha's prisoned form in life were naught to the convulsions of his headless length in death. I retreated, dragging the gigantic head after me with a crooked pole, and at a safe distance from the lashing, flying tail, I set to work. I worked with naked death then, and no man ever toiled more gingerly than did I. For I cut out the poison sacs at the base of the great fangs, and in the terrible venom I soaked the heads of eleven arrows, being careful that only the bronze points were in the liquid, which else had corroded away the wood of the tough shafts. While I was doing this, Grom, driven by comradeship and Curiosity, came stealing nervously through the jungle, and his mouth gaped as he looked on the head of Satha.

For hours I steeped the arrowheads in the poison, until they were caked with a horrible green scum, and showed tiny flecks of corrosion where the venom had eaten into the solid bronze. I wrapped them carefully in broad, thick, rubber-like leaves, and then, though night had fallen and the hunting beasts were roaring on every hand, I went back through the jungled hills, Grom with me, until at dawn we came again to the high cliffs that loomed above the Valley of Broken Stones.

At the mouth of the valley I broke my spear, and I took all the unpoisoned shafts from my quiver, and snapped them. I painted my face and limbs as the AEsir painted themselves only when they went forth to certain doom, and I sang my death-song to the sun as it rose over the cliffs, my yellow mane blowing in the morning wind.

Then I went down into the valley, bow in hand.

Grom could not drive himself to follow me. He lay on his belly in the dust and howled like a dying dog.

I passed the lake and the silent camp where the pyre-ashes still smouldered, and came under the thickening trees beyond. About me the columns loomed, mere shapeless heads from the ravages of Staggering aeons. The trees grew more dense, and under their vast leafy branches the very light was dusky and evil. As in twilight shadow I saw the ruined temple, cyclopean walls staggering up from masses of decaying masonry and fallen blocks of stone. About 600 yards in front of it a great column reared up in an open glade, 80 or 90 feet in height. It was so worn and pitted by weather and time that any child of my tribe could have climbed it, and I marked it and changed my plan.

I came to the ruins and saw huge crumbling walls upholding a domed roof from which many stones had fallen, so that it seemed like the lichen-grown ribs of some mythical monster's skeleton arching above me. Titanic columns flanked the open doorway through which ten elephants could have stalked abreast. Once there might have been inscriptions and hieroglyphics on the pillars and walls, but they were long worn away. Around the great room, on the inner side, ran columns in better state of preservation. On each of these columns was a flat pedestal, and some dim instinctive memory vaguely resurrected a shadowy scene wherein black drums roared madly, and on these pedestals monstrous beings squatted loathsomely in inexplicable rituals rooted in the black dawn of the universe.

There was no altar only the mouth of a great well-like shaft in the stone floor, with strange obscene carvings all about the rim. I tore great pieces of stone from the rotting floor and cast them down the shaft which slanted down into utter darkness. I heard them bound along the side, but I did not hear them strike bottom. I cast down stone after stone, each with a searing curse, and at last I heard a sound that was not the dwindling rumble of the falling stones. Up from the well floated a weird demon-piping that was a symphony of madness. Far down in the darkness I glimpsed the faint fearful glimmering of a vast white bulk.

I retreated slowly as the piping grew louder, falling back through the broad doorway. I heard a scratching, scrambling noise, and up from the shaft and out of the doorway between the colossal columns came a prancing incredible figure. It went erect like a man, but it was covered with fur, that was shaggiest where its face should have been. If it had ears, nose and a mouth I did not discover them. Only a pair of staring red eyes leered from the furry mask. Its misshapen hands held a strange set of pipes, on which it blew weirdly as it pranced towards me with many a grotesque caper and leap.

Behind it I heard a repulsive obscene noise as of a quaking unstable mass heaving up out of a well. Then I nocked an arrow, drew the cord and sent the shaft singing through the furry breast of the dancing monstrosity. It went down as though struck by a thunderbolt, but to my horror the piping continued, though the pipes had fallen from the malformed hands. Then I turned and ran fleetly to the column, up which I swarmed before I looked back. When I reached the pinnacle I looked, and because of the shock and surprise of what I saw, I almost fell from my dizzy perch.

Out of the temple the monstrous dweller in the darkness had come, and I, who had expected a horror yet cast in some terrestrial mould, looked on the spawn of nightmare. From what subterranean hell it crawled in the long ago I know not, nor what black age it represented. But it was not a beast, as humanity knows beasts. I call it a worm for lack of a better term. There is no earthly language that has a name for it. I can only say that it looked somewhat more like a worm than it did an octopus, a serpent or a dinosaur.

It was white and pulpy, and drew its quaking bulk along the ground, worm-fashion. But it had wide flat tentacles, and fleshy feelers, and other adjuncts the use of which I am unable to explain. And it had a long proboscis which it curled and uncurled like an elephant's trunk. Its forty eyes, set in a horrific circle, were composed of thousands of facets of as many scintillant colours which changed and altered in never-ending transmutation. But through all interplay of hue and glint, they retained their evil intelligence intelligence there was behind those flickering facets, not human nor yet bestial, but a night-born demoniac intelligence such as men in dreams vaguely sense throbbing titanically in the black gulfs outside our material universe. In size the monster was mountainous; its bulk would have dwarfed a mastodon.

But even as I shook with the cosmic horror of the thing, I drew a feathered shaft to my ear and arched it singing on its way. Grass and bushes were crushed flat as the monster came towards me like a moving mountain and shaft after shaft I sent with terrific force and deadly precision. I could not miss so huge a target. The arrows sank to the feathers or clear out of sight in the unstable bulk, each bearing enough poison to have stricken dead a bull elephant. Yet on it came, swiftly, appallingly, apparently heedless of both the shafts and the venom in which they were steeped. And all the time the hideous music played a maddening accompaniment, whining thinly from the pipes that lay untouched on the ground.

My confidence faded; even the poison of Satha was futile against this uncanny being. I drove my last shaft almost straight downward into the quaking white mountain, so close was the monster under my perch. Then suddenly its colour altered. A wave of ghastly blue surged over it, and the vast bulk heaved in earthquake-like convulsions. With a terrible plunge it struck the lower part of the column, which crashed to falling shards of stone. But even with the impact, I leaped far out and fell through the empty air full upon the monster's back.

The spongy skin yielded and gave beneath my feet, and I drove my sword hilt deep, dragging it through the pulpy flesh, ripping a horrible yard-long wound, from which oozed a green slime. Then a flip of a cable-like-tentacle flicked me from the titan's back and spun me 300 feet through the air to crash among a cluster of giant trees.

The impact must have splintered half the bones in my frame, for when I sought to grasp my sword again and crawl anew to the combat, I could not move hand or foot, could only writhe helplessly with my broken back. But I could see the monster and I knew that I had won, even in defeat. The mountainous bulk was heaving and billowing, the tentacles were lashing madly, the antennae writhing and knotting, and the nauseous whiteness had changed to a pale and grisly green. It turned ponderously and lurched back towards the temple, rolling like a crippled ship in a heavy swell. Trees crashed and splintered as it lumbered against them.

I wept with pure fury because I could not catch up my sword and rush in to die glutting my berserk madness in mighty strokes. But the worm-god was death-stricken and needed not my futile sword. The demon pipes on the ground kept up their infernal tune, and it was like the fiend's death-dirge. Then as the monster veered and floundered, I saw it catch up the corpse of its hairy slave. For an instant the apish form dangled in mid-air, gripped round by the trunk-like proboscis, then was dashed against the temple wall with a force that reduced the hairy body to a mere shapeless pulp. At that the pipes screamed out horribly, and fell silent for ever.

The titan staggered on the brink of the shaft; then another change came over it--a frightful transfiguration the nature of which I cannot yet describe. Even now when I try to think of it clearly, I am only chaotically conscious of a blasphemous, unnatural transmutation of form and substance, shocking and indescribable. Then the strangely altered bulk tumbled into the shaft to roll down into the ultimate darkness from whence it came, and I knew that it was dead. And as it vanished into the well, with a rending, grinding groan the ruined walls quivered from dome to base. They bent inward and buckled with deafening reverberation, the columns splintered, and with a cataclysmic crash the dome itself came thundering down. For an instant the air seemed veiled with flying debris and stone-dust, through which the treetops lashed madly as in a storm or an earthquake convulsion. Then all was clear again and I stared, shaking the blood from my eyes. Where the temple had stood there lay only a colossal pile of shattered masonry and broken stones, and every column in the valley had fallen, to lie in crumbling shards.

In the silence that followed I heard Grom wailing a dirge over me. I bade him lay my sword in my hand, and he did so, and bent close to hear what I had to say, for I was passing swiftly.

"Let my tribe remember," I said, speaking slowly. "Let the tale be told from village to village, from camp to camp, from tribe to tribe, so that men may know that not man nor beast nor devil may prey in safety on the golden-haired people of Asgard. Let them build me a cairn where I lie and lay me therein with my bow and sword at hand, to guard this valley for ever; so if the ghost of the god I slew comes up from below, my ghost will ever be ready to give it battle."

And while Grom howled and beat his hairy breast, death came to me in the Valley of the Worm.

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THE GARDEN OF FEAR

by Robert E. Howard

Once I was Hunwulf, the Wanderer. I cannot explain my knowledge of this fact by any occult or esoteric means, nor shall I try. A man remembers his past life; I remember my past _lives_. Just as a normal individual recalls the shapes that were him in childhood, boyhood and youth, so I recall the shapes that have been James Allison in forgotten ages. Why this memory is mine I cannot say, any more than I can explain the myriad other phenomena of nature which daily confront me and every other mortal. But as I lie waiting for death to free me from my long disease, I see with a clear, sure sight the grand panorama of lives that trail out behind me. I see the men who have been me, and I see the beasts that have been me.

For my memory does not end at the coming of Man. How could it, when the beast so shades into Man that there is no clearly divided line to mark the boundaries of bestiality? At this instant I see a dim twilight vista, among the gigantic trees of a primordial forest that never knew the tread of a leather-shod foot. I see a vast, shaggy, shambling bulk that lumbers clumsily yet swiftly, sometimes upright, sometimes on all fours. He delves under rotten logs for grubs and insects, and his small ears twitch continually. He lifts his head and bares yellow fangs. He is primordial, bestial, anthropoid; yet I recognize his kinship with the entity now called James Allison. Kinship? Say rather oneness. I am he; he is I. My flesh is soft and white and hairless; his is dark and tough and shaggy. Yet we were one, and already in his feeble, shadowed brain are beginning to stir and tingle the man-thoughts and the man dreams, crude, chaotic, fleeting, yet the basis for all the high and lofty visions men have dreamed in all the following ages.

Nor does my knowledge cease there. It goes back, back, down immemorial vistas I dare not follow, to abysses too dark and awful for the human mind to plumb. Yet even there I am aware of my identity, my individuality. I tell you the individual is never lost, neither in the black pit from which we once crawled, blind, squalling and noisome, or in that eventual Nirvana in which we shall one day sink--which I have glimpsed afar off, shining as a blue twilight lake among the mountains of the stars.

But enough. I would tell you of Hunwulf. Oh, it was long, long ago! How long ago I dare not say. Why should I seek for paltry human comparisons to describe a realm indescribably, incomprehensibly distant? Since that age the earth had altered her contours not once but a dozen times, and whole cycles I of mankind have completed their destinies.

I was Hunwulf, a son of the golden-haired Aesir, who, from the icy plains of shadowy Asgard, sent I blue-eyed tribes around the world in century-long drifts to leave their trails in strange places. On one of those southward drifts I was born, for I never saw the homeland of my people, where the bulk of the Nordheimer still dwelt in their horse-hide tents among the snows.

I grew to manhood on that long wandering, to the fierce, sinewy, untamed manhood of the Aesir, who knew no gods but Ymir of the frost-rimmed beard, and whose axes are stained with the blood of many nations. My thews were like woven steel cords. My yellow hair fell in a lion-like mane to my mighty shoulders. My loins were girt with leopard skin. With either hand I could wield my heavy flint-headed axe. Year by year my tribe drifted southward, sometimes swinging in long arcs to east or west, sometimes lingering for months or years in fertile valleys or plains where the grass-eaters swarmed, but always forging slowly and inevitably southward. Sometimes our way led through vast and breathless solitudes that had never

known a human cry; sometimes strange tribes disputed our course, and our trail passed over bloodstained ashes of butchered villages. And amidst this wandering, hunting and slaughtering, I came to full manhood and the love of Gudrun.

What shall I say of Gudrun? How describe color to the blind? I can say that her skin was whiter than milk, that her hair was living gold with the flame of the sun caught in it, that the supple beauty other body would shame the dream that shaped the Grecian goddesses. But I cannot make you realize the fire and wonder that was Gudrun. You have no basis for comparison; you know womanhood only by the women of your epoch, who, beside her are like candles beside the glow of the full moon. Not for a millennium of millenniums have women like Gudrun walked the earth. Cleopatra, Thais, Helen of Troy, they were but pallid shadows of her beauty, frail mimicries of the blossom that blooms to full glory only in the primordial.

For Gudrun I forsook my tribe and my people, and went into the wilderness, an exile and an outcast, with blood on my hands. She was of my race, but not of my tribe: a waif whom we found as a child wandering in a dark forest, lost from some wandering tribe of our blood. She grew up in the tribe, and when she came to the full ripeness of her glorious young womanhood, she was given to Heimdul the Strong, the mightiest hunter of the tribe.

But the dream of Gudrun was madness in my soul, a flame that burned eternally, and for her I slew Heimdul, crushing his skull with my flint-headed axe ere he could bear her to his horse-hide tent. And then follows our long flight from the vengeance of the tribe. Willingly she went with me, for she loved me with the love of the Aesir women, which is a devouring flame that destroys weakness. Oh, it was a savage age, when life was grim and bloodstained, and the weak died quickly. There was nothing mild or gentle about us, our passions were those of the tempest, the surge and impact of battle, the challenge of the lion. Our loves were as terrible as our hates.

And so I carried Gudrun from the tribe, and the killers were hot on our trail. For a night and a day they pressed us hard, until we swam a rising river, a roaring, foaming torrent that even the men of the Aesir dared not attempt. But in the madness of our love and recklessness we buffetted our way across, beaten and torn by the frenzy of the flood, and reached the farther bank alive.

Then for many days we traversed upland forests haunted by tigers and leopards, until we came to a great barrier of mountains, blue ramparts climbing awesomely to the sky. Slope piled upon slope.

In those mountains we were assailed by freezing winds and hunger, and by giant condors which swept down upon us with a thunder of gigantic wings. In grim battles in the passes I shot away all my arrows and splintered my flintheaded spear, but at last we crossed the bleak backbone of the range and descending the southern slopes, came upon a village of mud huts among the cliffs inhabited by a peaceful, brown-skinned people who spoke a strange tongue and had strange customs. But they greeted us with the sign of peace, and brought us into their village, where they set meat and barley-bread and fermented milk before us, and squatted in a ring about us while we ate, and a woman slapped softly on a bowl-shaped tom-tom to do us honor.

We had reached their village at dusk, and night fell while we feasted. On all sides rose the cliffs and peaks shouldering massively against the stars. The little cluster of mud huts and the tiny fires were drowned and lost in the immensity of the night. Gudrun felt the loneliness, the crowding desolation of that darkness, and she pressed close to me, her shoulder against my breast. But my axe was close at my hand, and I had never known the sensation of fear.

The little brown people squatted before us, men and women, and tried to talk to us with motions of their slender hands. Dwelling always in one place, in comparative security, they lacked both the strength and the uncompromising ferocity of the nomadic Aesir. Their hands fluttered with friendly gestures in the firelight.

I made them understand that we had come from the north, had crossed the backbone of the great mountain range, and that on the morrow it was our intention to descend into the green tablelands which we had glimpsed southward of the peaks. When they understood my meaning they set up a great cry shaking their heads violently, and beating madly on the drum. They were all so eager to impart something to me, and all waving their hands at once, that they bewildered rather than enlightened me. Eventually they did make me understand that they did not wish me to descend the mountains. Some menace lay to the south of the village, but whether of man or beast, I could not learn.

It was while they were all gesticulating and my whole attention was centered on their gestures, that the blow fell. The first intimation was a sudden thunder of wings in my ears; a dark shape rushed out of the night, and a great pinion dealt me a buffet over the head as I turned. I was knocked sprawling, and in that instant I heard Gudrun scream as she was torn from my side. Bounding up, quivering with a furious eagerness to rend and slay, I saw the dark shape vanish again into the darkness, a white, screaming, writhing figure trailing from its talons.

Roaring my grief and fury I caught up my axe and charged into the dark--then halted short, wild, desperate, knowing not which way to turn.

The little brown people had scattered, screaming, knocking sparks from their fires as they rushed over them in their haste to gain their huts, but now they crept out fearfully, whimpering like wounded dogs. They gathered around me and plucked at me with timid hands and chattered in their tongue while I cursed in sick impotency, knowing they wished to tell me something which I could not understand.

At last I suffered them to lead me back to the fire, and there the oldest man of the tribe brought forth a strip of cured hide, a clay pot of pigments, and a stick. On the hide he painted a crude picture of a winged thing carrying a white woman--oh, it was very crude, but I made out his meaning. Then all pointed southward and cried out loudly in their own tongue; and I knew that the menace they had warned me against was the thing that had carried off Gudrun. Until then I supposed that it had been one of the great mountain condors which had carried her away, but the picture the old man drew, in black paint, resembled a winging man more than anything else.

Then, slowly and laboriously, he began to trace something I finally recognized as a map--oh, yes, even in those dim days we had our primitive maps, though no modern man would be able to comprehend them so greatly different was our symbolism.

It took a long time; it was midnight before the old man had finished and I understood his tracings. But at last the matter was made clear. If I followed the course traced on the map, down the long narrow valley where stood the village, across a plateau, down a series of rugged slopes and along another valley, I would come to the place where lurked the being which had stolen my woman. At that spot the old man drew what looked like a mis-shapen hut, with many strange markings all about it in red pigments. Pointing to these, and again to me, he shook his head, with those loud cries that seemed to indicate peril among these people.

Then they tried to persuade me not to go, but afire with eagerness I took the piece of hide and pouch of food they thrust into my hands (they were indeed a strange people for that age), grasped my axe and set off in the moonless darkness. But my eyes were keener than a modern mind can comprehend, and my sense of direction was as a wolfs. Once the map was fixed in my mind, I could have thrown it away and come unerring to the place I sought but I folded it and thrust it into my girdle.

I traveled at my best speed through the starlight, taking no heed of any beasts that might be seeking their prey--cave bear or saber-toothed tiger. At times I heard gravel slide under stealthy padded paws; I glimpsed fierce yellow eyes burning in the darkness, and caught sight of shadowy, skulking forms. But I plunged on recklessly, in too desperate a mood to give the path to any beast however fearsome.

I traversed the valley, climbed a ridge and came out on a broad plateau, gashed with ravines and strewn with boulders. I crossed this and in the darkness before dawn commenced my climb down the treacherous slopes. They seemed endless, falling away in a long steep incline until their feet were lost in darkness. But I went down recklessly, not pausing to unsling the rawhide rope I carried about my shoulders, trusting to my luck and skill to bring me down without a broken neck.

And just as dawn was touching the peaks with a white glow, I dropped into a broad valley, walled by stupendous cliffs. At that point it was wide from east to west, but the cliffs converged toward the lower end, giving the valley the appearance of a great fan, narrowing swiftly toward the south.

The floor was level, traversed by a winding stream. Trees grew thinly; there was no underbrush, but a carpet of tall grass, which at that time of year were somewhat dry. Along the stream where the green lush grew, wandered mammoths, hairy mountains of flesh and muscle.

I gave them a wide berth, giants too mighty for me to cope with, confident in their power, and afraid of only one thing on earth. They bent forward their great ears and lifted their trunks menacingly when I approached too near, but they did not attack me. I ran swiftly among the trees, and the sun was not yet above the eastern ramparts which its rising edged with golden flame, when I came to the point where the cliffs converged. My night-long climb had not affected my iron muscles. I felt no weariness; my fury burned unabated. What lay beyond the cliffs I could not know; I ventured no conjecture. I had room in my brain only for red wrath and killing-lust.

The cliffs did not form a solid wall. That is, the extremities of the converging palisades did not meet, leaving a notch or gap a few hundred feet wide, and emerged into a second valley, or rather into a continuance of the same valley which broadened out again beyond the pass.

The cliffs slanted away swiftly to east and west, to form a giant rampart that marched clear around the valley in the shape of a vast oval. It formed a blue rim all around the valley without a break except for a glimpse of the clear sky that seemed to mark another notch at the southern end. The inner valley was shaped much like a great bottle, with two necks.

The neck by which I entered was crowded with trees, which grew densely for several hundred yards, when they gave way abruptly to a field of crimson flowers. And a few hundred yards beyond the edges of the trees, I saw a strange structure.

I must speak of what I saw not alone as Hunwulf, but as James Allison as well. For Hunwulf only vaguely comprehended the things he saw, and, as Hunwulf, he could not describe them at all. I, as Hunwulf, knew nothing of architecture. The only man-built dwelling I had ever seen had been the horse-hide tents of my people, and the thatched mud huts of the barley people--and other people equally primitive.

So as Hunwulf I could only say that I looked upon a great hut the construction of which was beyond my comprehension. But I, James Allison, know that it was a tower, some seventy feet in height, of a curious green stone, highly polished, and of a substance that created the illusion of semi-translucency. It was cylindrical, and, as near as I could see, without doors or windows. The main body of the building was perhaps sixty feet in height, and from its center rose a smaller tower that completed its full stature. This tower, being much inferior in girth to the main body of the structure, and thus surrounded by a sort of gallery, with a crenellated parapet, and was furnished with both doors, curiously arched, and windows, thickly barred as I could see, even from where I stood.

That was all. No evidence of human occupancy. No sign of life in all the valley. But it was evident that this castle was what the old man of the mountain village had been trying to draw, and I was certain that in it I would find Gudrun--if she still lived.

Beyond the tower I saw the glimmer of a blue lake into which the stream, following the curve of the western wall, eventually flowed. Lurking amid the trees I glared at the tower and at the flowers surrounding it on all sides, growing thick along the walls and extending for hundreds of yards in all directions. There were trees at the other end of the valley, near the lake; but no trees grew among the flowers.

They were not like any plants I had ever seen. They grew close together, almost touching each other. They were some four feet in height, with only one blossom on each stalk, a blossom larger than a man's head, with broad, fleshy petals drawn close together. These petals were a livid crimson, the hue of an open wound. The stalks were thick as a man's wrist, colorless, almost transparent. The poisonously green leaves were shaped like spearheads, drooping on long snaky stems. Their whole aspect was repellent, and I wondered what their denseness concealed.

For all my wild-born instincts were roused in me. I felt lurking peril, just as I had often sensed the ambushed lion before my external senses recognized him. I scanned the dense blossoms closely, wondering if some great serpent lay coiled among them. My nostrils expanded as I quested for a scent, but the wind was blowing away from me. But there was something decidedly unnatural about that vast garden. Though the north wind swept over it, not a blossom stirred, not a leaf rustled; they hung motionless, sullen, like birds of prey with drooping heads, and I had a strange feeling that they were watching me like living things.

It was like a landscape in a dream: on either hand the blue cliffs lifting against the cloud-fleeced sky; in the distance the dreaming lake; and that fantastic green tower rising in the midst of that livid crimson field.

And there was something else: in spite of the wind that was blowing away from me, I caught a scent, a charnel-house reek of death and decay and corruption that rose from the blossoms.

Then suddenly I crouched closer in my covert. There was life and movement on the castle. A figure emerged from the tower, and coming to the parapet, leaned upon it and looked out across the valley. It was a man, but such a man as I had never dreamed of, even in nightmares.

He was tall, powerful, black with the hue of polished ebony; but the feature which made a human nightmare of him was the batlike wings which folded on his shoulders. I knew they were wings: the fact was obvious and indisputable.

I, James Allison, have pondered much on that phenomenon which I witnessed through the eyes of Hunwulf. Was that winged man merely a freak, an isolated example of distorted nature, dwelling in solitude and immemorial desolation? Or was he a survival of a forgotten race, which had risen, reigned and vanished before the coming of man as we know him? The little brown people of the hills might have told me, but we had no speech in common. Yet I am inclined to the latter theory. Winged men are not uncommon in mythology; they are met with in the folklore of many nations and many races. As far back as man may go in myth, chronicle and legend, he finds tales of harpies and winged gods, angels and demons. Legends are distorted shadows of pre-existent realities, I believe that once a race of winged black men ruled a pre-Adamite world, and that I, Hunwulf, met the last survivor of that race in the valley of the red blossoms.

These thoughts I think as James Allison, with my modern knowledge which is as imponderable as my modern ignorance.

I, Hunwulf, indulged in no such speculations. Modern skepticism was not a part of my nature, nor did I seek to rationalize what seemed not to coincide with a natural universe. I acknowledged no gods but Ymir and his daughters, but I did not doubt the existence--as demons--of other deities, worshipped by other races. Supernatural beings of all sorts fitted into my conception of life and the universe. I no more doubted the existence of dragons, ghosts, fiends and devils than I doubted the existence of lions and buffaloes and elephants. I accepted this freak of nature as a supernatural demon and did not worry about its origin or source. Nor was I thrown into a panic of superstitious fear. I was a son of Asgard, who feared neither man nor devil, and I had more faith in the crushing power of my flint axe than in the spells of priests or the incantations of sorcerers.

But I did not immediately rush into the open and charge the tower. The wariness of the wild was mine, and I saw no way to climb the castle. The winged man needed no doors on the side, because he evidently entered at the top, and the slick surface of the walls seemed to defy the most skillful climber. Presently a way of getting upon the tower occurred to me, but I hesitated, waiting to see if any other winged people appeared, though I had an unexplainable feeling that he was the only one of his kind in the valley--possibly in the world. While I crouched among the trees and watched, I saw him lift his elbows from the parapet and stretch lithely, like a great cat. Then he strode across the circular gallery and entered the tower. A muffled cry rang out on the air which caused me to stiffen, though even so I realized that it was not the cry of a woman. Presently the black master of the castle emerged, dragging a smaller figure with him--a figure which writhed and struggled and cried out piteously. I saw that it was a small brown man, much like those of the mountain village. Captured, I did not doubt, as Gudrun had been captured.

He was like a child in the hands of his huge foe. The black man spread broad wings and rose over the parapet, carrying his captive as a condor might carry a sparrow. He soared out over the field of blossoms, while I crouched in my leafy retreat, glaring in amazement.

The winged man, hovering in mid-air, voiced a strange weird cry; and it was answered in horrible fashion. A shudder of awful life passed over the crimson field beneath him. The great red blossoms trembled, opened, spreading their fleshy petals like the mouths of serpents. Their stalks seemed to elongate, stretching upward eagerly. Their broad leaves lifted and vibrated with a curious lethal whirring, like the singing of a rattlesnake. A faint but flesh-crawling hissing sounded over all the valley. The blossoms gasped, straining upward. And with a fiendish laugh, the winged man dropped his writhing captive.

With a scream of a lost soul the brown man hurtled downward, crashing among the flowers. And with a rustling hiss, they were on him. Their thick flexible stalks arched like the necks of serpents, their petals closed on his flesh. A hundred blossoms clung to him like the tentacles of an octopus, smothering and crushing him down. His shrieks of agony came muffled; he was completely hidden by the hissing, threshing flowers. Those beyond reach swayed and writhed furiously as if seeking to tear up their roots in their eagerness to join their brothers. All over the field the great red blossoms leaned and strained toward the spot where the grisly battle went on. The shrieks sank lower and lower and lower, and ceased. A dread silence reigned over the valley. The black man flapped his way leisurely back to the tower, and vanished within it.

Then presently the blossoms detached themselves one by one from their victim who lay very white and still. Aye, his whiteness was more than that of death; he was like a wax image, a staring effigy from which every drop of blood had been sucked. And a startling transmutation was evident in the flowers directly about him. Their stalks no longer colorless; they were swollen and dark red, like transparent bamboos filled to the bursting with fresh blood.

Drawn by an insatiable curiosity, I stole from the trees and glided to the very edge of the red field. The blossoms hissed and bent toward me, spreading their petals like the hood of a roused cobra. Selecting one farthest from its brothers, I severed the stalk with a stroke of my axe, and the thing tumbled to the ground, writhing like a beheaded serpent.

When its struggles ceased I bent over it in wonder. The stalk was not hollow as I had supposed--that is, hollow like a dry bamboo. It was traversed by a network of thread-like veins, some empty and some exuding a colorless sap. The stems which held the leaves to the stalk were remarkably tenacious and pliant, and the leaves themselves were edged with curved spines, like sharp hooks.

Once those spines were sunk in the flesh, the victim would be forced to tear up the whole plant by the roots if he escaped.

The petals were each as broad as my hand, and as thick as a prickly pear, and on the inner side covered with innumerable tiny mouths, not larger than the head of a pin. In the center, where the pistil should be, there was a barbed spike, of a substance like thorn, and narrow channels between the four serrated edges.

From my investigations of this horrible travesty of vegetation, I looked up suddenly, just in time to see the winged man appear again on the parapet. He did not seem particularly surprised to see me. He shouted in his unknown tongue and made a mocking gesture, while I stood statue-like, gripping my axe. Presently he turned and entered the tower as he had done before; and as before, he emerged with a captive. My fury and hate were almost submerged by the flood of joy that Gudrun was alive.

In spite of her supple strength, which was that of a she-panther, the black man handled Gudrun as easily as he had handled the brown man. Lifting her struggling white body high above his head, he displayed her to me and yelled tauntingly. Her golden hair streamed over her white shoulders as she fought vainly, crying to me in the terrible extremity of her fright and horror. Not lightly was a woman of the Aesir reduced to cringing terror. I measured the depths of her captor's diabolism by her frenzied cries.

But I stood motionless. If it would have saved her, I would have plunged into that crimson morass of hell, to be hooked and pierced and sucked white by those fiendish flowers. But that would help her none. My death would merely leave her without a defender. So I stood silent while she writhed and whimpered, and the black man's laughter sent red waves of madness surging across my brain. Once he made as if to cast her down among the flowers, and my iron control almost snapped and sent me plunging into that red sea of hell. But it was only a gesture. Presently he dragged her back to the tower and tossed her inside. Then he turned back to the parapet, rested his elbows upon it, and fell to watching me. Apparently he was playing with us as a cat plays with a mouse before he destroys it.

But while he watched, I turned my back and strode into the forest. I, Hunwulf, was not a thinker, as modern men understand the term. I lived in an age where emotions were translated by the smash of a flint axe rather than by emanations of the intellect. Yet I was not the senseless animal the black man evidently supposed me to be. I had a human brain, whetted by the eternal struggle for existence and supremacy.

I knew I could not cross that red strip that banded the castle, alive. Before I could take a half dozen steps a score of barbed spikes would be thrust into my flesh, their avid mouths sucking the flood from my veins to feed their demoniac lust. Even my tigerish strength would not avail to hew a path through them.

The winged man did not follow. Looking back, I saw him still lounging in the same position. When I, as James Allison, dream again the dreams of Hunwulf, that, image is etched in my mind, that gargoyle figure with elbows propped on the parapet, like a medieval devil brooding on the battlements of hell.

I passed through the straits of the valley and came into the vale beyond where the trees thinned and the mammoths lumbered along the stream. Beyond the herd I stopped and drawing a pair of flints into my pouch, stooped and struck a spark in the dry grass. Running swiftly from chosen place to place, I set a dozen fires, in a great semi-circle. The north wind caught them, whipped them into eager life, drove them before it. In a few moments a rampart of flame was sweeping down the valley.

The mammoths ceased their feeding, lifted their great ears and bellowed alarm. In all the world they feared only fire. They began to retreat southward, the cows herding the calves before them, bulls trumpeting like the blast of Judgement Day. Roaring like a storm the fire rushed on, and the mammoths broke and stampeded, a crushing hurricane of flesh, a thundering earthquake of hurtling bone and muscle. Trees splintered and went down before them, the ground shook under their headlong tread. Behind them came the racing fire and on the heels of the fire came I, so closely that the smouldering earth burnt the moose-hide sandals off my feet.

Through the narrow neck they thundered, levelling the dense thickets like a giant scythe. Trees were torn up by the roots; it was as if a tornado had ripped through the pass.

With a deafening thunder of pounding feet and trumpeting, they stormed across the sea of red blossoms. Those devilish plants might have even pulled down and destroyed a single mammoth; but under the impact of the whole herd, they were no more than common flowers. The maddened titans crashed through and over them, battering them to shreds, hammering, stamping them into the earth which grew soggy with their juice.

I trembled for an instant, fearing the brutes would not turn aside for the castle, and dubious of even it being able to withstand that battering ram concussion. Evidently the winged man shared my fears, for he shot up from the tower and raced off through the sky toward the lake. But one of the bulls butted head-on into the wall, was shunted off the smooth curving surface, caromed into the one next to him, and the herd split and roared by the tower on either hand, so closely their hairy sides rasped against it. They thundered on through the red field toward the distant lake.

The fire, reaching the edge of the trees, was checked; the smashed sappy fragments of the red flowers would not burn. Trees, fallen or standing, smoked and burst into flame, and burning branches showered around me as I ran through the trees and out into the gigantic swath the charging herd had cut through the livid field.

As I ran I shouted to Gudrun and she answered me. Her voice was muffled and accompanied by a hammering on something. The winged man had locked her in a tower.

As I came under the castle wall, treading on remnants of red petals and snaky stalks, I unwound my rawhide rope, swung it, and sent its loop shooting upward to catch on one of the merlons of the crenellated parapet. Then I went up it, hand over hand, gripping the rope between my toes, bruising my knuckles and elbows against the sheer wall as I swung about.

I was within five feet of the parapet when I was galvanized by the beat of wings about my head. The black man shot out of the air and landed on the gallery. I got a good look at him as he leaned over the parapet. His features were straight and regular; there was no suggestion of the negroid about him. His eyes were slanted slits, and his teeth gleamed in a savage grin of hate and triumph. Long, long he had ruled the valley of the red blossoms, levelling tribute of human lives from the miserable tribes of the hills, for writhing victims to feed the carnivorous half-bestial flowers which were his subjects and protectors. And now I was in his power, my fierceness, and craft gone for naught. A stroke of the crooked dagger in his hand and I would go hurtling to my death. Somewhere Gudrun, seeing my peril, was screaming like a wild thing, and then a door crashed with a splintering of wood.

The black man, intent upon his gloating, laid the keen edge of his dagger on the rawhide strand--then a strong white arm locked about his neck from behind, and he was jerked violently backward. Over his shoulder I saw the beautiful face of Gudrun, her hair standing on end, her eyes dilated with terror and fury.

With a roar he turned in her grasp, tore loose her clinging arms and hurled her against the tower with such force that she lay half stunned. Then he turned again to me, but in that instant I had swarmed up and over the parapet, and leaped upon the gallery, unslinging my axe.

For an instant he hesitated, his wings half-lifted, his hand poising on his dagger, as if uncertain whether to fight or take to the air. He was a giant in stature, with muscles standing out in corded ridges all over him, but he hesitated, as uncertain as a man when confronted by a wild beast.

I did not hesitate. With a deep-throated roar I sprang, swinging my axe with all my giant strength. With a strangled cry he threw up his arms; but down between them the axe plunged and blasted his head to red ruin.

I wheeled toward Gudrun; and struggling to her knees, she threw her white arms about me in a desperate clasp of love and terror, staring awedly to where lay the winged lord of the valley, the crimson pulp that had been his head drowned in a puddle of blood and brains.

I had often wished that it were possible to draw these various lives of mine together in one body, combining the experiences of Hunwulf with the knowledge of James Allison. Could that be so, Hunwulf would have gone through the ebony door which Gudrun in her desperate strength had shattered, into that weird chamber he glimpsed through the ruined panels, with fantastic furnishing, and shelves heaped with rolls of parchment. He would have unrolled those scrolls and pored over their characters until he deciphered them, and read, perhaps, the chronicles of that weird race whose last survivor he had just slain. Surely the tale was stranger than an opium dream, and marvelous as the story of lost Atlantis.

But Hunwulf had no such curiosity. To him the tower, the ebony furnished chamber and the rolls of parchment were meaningless, inexplicable emanations of sorcery, whose significance lay only in their diabolism. Though the solution of mystery lay under his fingers, he was a far removed from it as James Allison, millenniums yet unborn.

To me, Hunwulf, the castle was but a monstrous trap, concerning which I had but one emotion, and that a desire to escape from it as quickly as possible.

With Gudrun clinging to me I slid to the ground, then with a dextrous flip I freed my rope and wound it; and after that we went hand and hand along the path made by the mammoths, now vanishing in the distance, toward the blue lake at the southern end of the valley and the notch in the cliffs beyond it.

Contents

WITCH FROM HELL'S KITCHEN

By Robert E. Howard

To the house whence no one issues,
To the road from whence there is no return,
To the house whose inhabitants are deprived of light,
The place where dust is their nourishment, their food clay,
They have no light, dwelling in dense darkness,
And they are clothed, like birds, in a garment of feathers,
Where, over gate and bolt, dust is scattered.
-Babylonian legend of Ishtar

"HAS HE seen a night-spirit, is he listening to the whispers of them who dwell in darkness?"

Strange words to be murmured in the feast-hall of Naram-ninub, amid the strain of lutes, the patter of fountains, and the tinkle of women's laughter. The great hall attested the wealth of its owner, not only by its vast dimensions, but by the richness of its adornment. The glazed surface of the walls offered a bewildering variegation of colors-blue, red, and orange enamels set off by squares of hammered gold. The air was heavy with incense, mingled with the fragrance of exotic blossoms from the gardens without. The feasters, silk-robed nobles of Nippur, lounged on satin cushions, drinking wine poured from alabaster vessels, and caressing the painted and bejeweled playthings which Naramninub's wealth had brought from all parts of the East.

There were scores of these; their white limbs twinkled as they danced, or shone like ivory among the cushions where they sprawled. A jeweled tiara caught in a burnished mass of night-black hair, a gem-crusted armlet of massive gold, earrings of carven jade-these were their only garments. Their fragrance was dizzying. Shameless in their dancing, feasting and lovemaking, their light laughter filled the hall in waves of silvery sound.

On a broad cushion-piled dais reclined the giver of the feast, sensuously stroking the glossy locks of a lithe Arabian who had stretched herself on her supple belly beside him. His appearance of sybaritic languor was belied by the vital sparkling of his dark eves as he surveyed his guests. He was thick-bodied, with a short blue-black beard: a Semite one of the many drifting yearly into Shumir.

With one exception his guests were Shumirians, shaven of chin and head. Their bodies were padded with rich living, their features smooth and placid. The exception among them stood out in startling contrast. Taller than they, he had none of their soft sleekness. He was made with the economy of relentless Nature. His physique was of the primitive, not of the civilized athlete. He was an incarnation of Power, raw, hard, wolfish-in the sinewy limbs, the corded neck, the great arch of the breast, the broad hard shoulders. Beneath his tousled golden mane his eyes were like blue ice. His strongly chiseled features reflected the wildness his frame suggested. There was about him nothing of the measured leisure of the other guests, but a ruthless directness in his every action. Whereas they sipped, he drank in great gulps. They nibbled at tid-bits, but he seized whole joints in his fingers and tore at the meat with his teeth. Yet his brow was shadowed, his expression moody. His magnetic eyes were introspective. Wherefore Prince Ibi-Engur lisped again in Naram-ninub's ear: "Has the lord, Pyrrhas, heard the whispering of night-things?"

Naram-ninub eyed his friend in some worriment. "Come, my lord," said he, "you are strangely distraught. Has any here done aught to offend you?"

Pyrrhas roused himself as from some gloomy meditation and shook his head. "Not so, friend; if I seem distracted it is because of a shadow that lies over my own mind." His accent was barbarous, but the timbre of his voice was strong and vibrant.

The others glanced at him in interest. He was Eannatum's general of mercenaries, an Argive whose saga was epic.

"Is it a woman, lord Pyrrhas?" asked Prince Enakalli with a laugh. Pyrrhas fixed him with his gloomy stare and the prince felt a cold wind blowing on his spine.

"Aye, a woman," muttered the Argive. "One who haunts my dreams and floats like a shadow between me and the moon. In my dreams I feel her teeth in my neck, and I wake to hear the flutter of wings and the cry of an owl."

A silence fell over the group on the dais. Only in the great hall below rose the babble of mirth and conversation and the tinkling of lutes, and a girl laughed loudly, with a curious note in her laughter.

"A curse is upon him," whispered the Arabian girl. Naram-ninub silenced her with a gesture, and was about to speak, when Ibi-Engur lisped: "My lord Pyrrhas, this has an uncanny touch, like the vengeance of a god. Have you done aught to offend a deity?"

Naram-ninub bit his lip in annoyance. It was well known that in his recent campaign against Erech, the Argive had cut down a priest of Anu in his shrine. Pyrrhas' maned head jerked up and he glared at Ibi-Engur as if undecided whether to attribute the remark to malice or lack of tact. The prince began to pale, but the slim Arabian rose to her knees and caught at Naramninub's arm.

"Look at Belibna!" She pointed at the girl who had laughed so wildly an instant before.

Her companions were drawing away from this girl apprehensively. She did not speak to them, or seem to see them. She tossed her jeweled head and her shrill laughter rang through the feast-hall. Her slim body swayed back and forth, her bracelets clanged and jangled together as she tossed up her white arms. Her dark eves gleamed with a wild light, her red lips curled with her unnatural mirth.

"The hand of Arabu is on her," whispered the Arabian uneasily.

"Belibna?" Naram-ninub called sharply. His only answer was another burst of wild laughter, and the girl cried stridently: "To the home of darkness, the dwelling of Irhalla; to the road whence there is no return; oh, Apsu, bitter is thy wine!" Her voice snapped in a terrible scream, and bounding from among her cushions, she leaped up on the dais, a dagger in her hand. Courtesans and guests shrieked and scrambled madly out of her way. But it was at Pyrrhas the girl rushed, her beautiful face a mask of fury. The Argive caught her wrist, and the abnormal strength of madness was futile against the barbarian's iron thews. He tossed her from him, and down the cushion-strewn steps, where she lay in a crumpled heap, her own dagger driven into her heart as she fell.

The hum of conversation which had ceased suddenly, rose again as the guards dragged away the body, and the painted dancers came back to their cushions. But Pyrrhas turned and taking his wide crimson cloak from a slave, threw it about his shoulders.

"Stay, my friend," urged Naram-ninub. "Let us not allow this small matter to interfere with our revels. Madness is common enough."

Pyrrhas shook his head irritably. "Nay, I'm weary of swilling and gorging. I'll go to my own house."

"Then the feasting is at an end," declared the Semite, rising and clapping his hands. "My own litter shall bear you to the house the lung has given you-nay, I forgot you scorn the ride on other men's backs. Then I shall myself escort you home. My lords, will you--accompany us?"

"Walk, like common men?" stuttered Prince Ur-ilishu. "By Enlil, I will come. It will be a rare novelty. But I must have a slave to bear the train of my robe, lest it trail in the dust of the street. Come, friends, let us see the lord Pyrrhas home, by Ishtar!"

"A strange man," Ibi-Engur lisped to Libit-ishbi, as the party emerged from the spacious palace, and descended the broad tiled stair, guarded by bronze lions. "He walks the streets, unattended, like a very tradesman."

"Be careful," murmured the other. "He is quick to anger, and he stands high in the favor of Eannatum."

"Yet even the favored of the king had best beware of offending the god Ann," replied Ibi-Engur in an equally guarded voice.

The party were proceeding leisurely down the broad white street, gaped at by the common folk who bobbed their shaven heads as they passed. The sun was not long up, but the people of Nippur were well astir. There was much coming and going between the booths where the merchants spread their wares: a shifting panorama, woven of craftsmen, tradesmen, slaves, harlots, and soldiers in copper helmets. There went a merchant from his warehouse, a staid figure in sober woolen robe and white mantle; there hurried a slave in a linen tunic; there minced a painted hoyden whose short slit skirt displayed her sleek flank at every step. Above them the blue of the sky whitened with the heat of the mounting sun. The glazed surfaces of the buildings shimmered. They were flatroofed, some of them three or four stories high. Nippur was a city of sun-dried brick, but its facings of enamel made it a riot of bright color.

Somewhere a priest was chanting: "Oh, Babbat, righteousness lifteth up to thee its head-"

Pyrrhas swore under his breath. They were passing the great temple of Enlil, towering up three hundred feet in the changeless blue sky.

"The towers stand against the sky like part of it," he swore, raking back a damp lock from his forehead. "The sky is enameled, and this is a world made by man."

"Nay, friend," demurred Naram-ninub. "Ea built the world from the body of Tiamat."

"I say men built Shumir!" exclaimed Pyrrhas, the wine he had drunk shadowing his eves. "A flat land--a very banquetboard of a land--with rivers and cities painted upon it, and a sky of blue enamel over it. By Ymir, I was born in a land the gods built! There are great blue mountains, with valleys lying like long shadows between, and snow peaks glittering in the sun. Rivers rush foaming down the cliffs in everlasting tumult, and the broad leaves of the trees shake in the strong winds."

"I, too, was born in a broad land, Pyrrhas," answered the Semite. "By night the desert lies white and awful beneath the moon, and by day it stretches in brown infinity beneath the sun. But it is in the swarming cities of men, these hives of bronze and gold and enamel and humanity, that wealth and glory lie."

Pyrrhas was about to speak, when a loud wailing attracted his attention. Down the street came a procession, bearing a carven and painted litter on which lay a figure hidden by flowers. Behind came a train of young women, their scanty garments rent, their black hair flowing wildly. They beat their naked bosoms and cried: "Ailanu! Thammuz is dead!" The throngs in the street took up the shout. The litter passed, swaying on the shoulders of the bearers; among the high-piled flowers shone the painted eyes of a carven image. The cry of the worshipers echoed down the street, dwindling in the distance.

Pyrrhas shrugged his mighty shoulders. "Soon they will be leaping and dancing and shouting, 'Adonis is living!', and the wenches who howl so bitterly now will give themselves to men in the streets for exultation. How many gods are there, in the devil's name?"

Naram-ninub pointed to the great zikkurat of Enlil, brooding over all like the brutish dream of a mad god.

"See ye the seven tiers: the lower black, the next of red enamel, the third blue, the fourth orange, the fifth yellow, while the sixth is faced with silver, and the seventh with pure gold which flames in the sunlight? Each stage in the temple symbolizes a deity: the sun, the moon, and the five planets Enlil and his tribe have set in the skies for their emblems. But Enlil is greater than all, and Nippur is his favored city."

"Greater than Anu?" muttered Pyrrhas, remembering a flaming shrine and a dying priest that gasped an awful threat.

"Which is the greatest leg of a tripod?" parried Naramninub.

Pyrrhas opened his mouth to reply, then recoiled with a curse, his sword flashing out. Under his very feet a serpent reared up, its forked tongue flickering like a jet of red lightning.

"What is it, friend?" Naram-ninub and the princes stared at him in surprise.

"What is it?" He swore. "Don't you see that snake under your very feet? Stand aside--and give me a clean scaring at it."

His voice broke off and his eyes clouded with doubt.

"It's gone," he muttered.

"I saw nothing," said Naram-ninub, and the others shook their heads, exchanging wondering glances.

The Argive passed his hand across his eyes, shaking his head.

"Perhaps it's the wine," he muttered. "Yet there was an adder, I swear by the heart of Ymir. I am accursed."

The others drew away from him, glancing at him strangely.

Them had always been a restlessness in the soul of Pyrrhas the Argive, to haunt his dreams and drive him out on his long wanderings. It had brought him from the blue mountains of his race, southward into the fertile valleys and seafringing plains where rose the huts of the Mycenaeans; thence into the isle of Crete, where, in a rude town of rough stone and wood, a swart fishing people bartered with the ships of Egypt; by those ships he had gone into Egypt, where men toiled beneath the lash to rear the first pyramids, and where, in the ranks of the white-skinned mercenaries, the Shardana, he learned the arts of war. But his wanderlust drove him again across the sea, to a mudwalled trading village on the coast of Asia, called Troy, whence he drifted southward into the pillage and carnage of Palestine where the original dwell--in the land were trampled under by the barbaric Canaanites out of the East. So by devious ways he came at last to the plains of Shumir, where city fought city, and the priests of a myriad rival gods intrigued and plotted, as they had done since the dawn of Time, and as they did for centuries after, until the rise of an obscure frontier town called Babylon exalted its city-god Merodach above all others as Bel-Marduk, the conqueror of Tiamat.

The bare outline of the saga of Pyrrhas the Argive is weak and paltry; it can not catch the echoes of the thundering pageantry that rioted through that saga: the feasts, revels, wars, the crash and splintering of ships and the onset of chariots. Let it suffice to say that the honor of kings was given to the Argive, and that in all Mesopotamia here was no man so feared as this golden-haired barbarian whose war-skill and fury broke the hosts of Erech on the field, and the yoke of Erech from the neck of Nippur.

From a mountain but to a palace of jade and ivory Pyrrhas' saga had led him. Yet the dim half-animal dreams that had filled his slumber when he lay as a youth on a heap of wolfskins in his shaggy-headed father's but were nothing so strange and monstrous as the dreams that haunted him on the silken couch in the palace of turquoise-towered Nippur.

It was from these dreams that Pyrrhas woke suddenly. No lamp burned in his chamber and the moon was not yet up, but the starlight filtered dimly through the casement. And in this radiance something moved and took form. There was the vague outline of a lithe form, the gleam of an eye. Suddenly the night beat down oppressively hot and still. Pyrrhas heard the pound of his own blood through his veins. Why fear a woman lurking in his chamber? But no woman's form was ever so pantherishly supple; no woman's eyes ever burned so in the darkness. With a gasping snarl he leaped from his couch and his sword hissed as it cut the air-but only the air. Something like a mocking laugh reached his ears, but the ure was gone.

A girl entered hastily with a lamp.

"Amytis! I saw her! It was no dream, this time! She laughed at me from the window!"

Amytis trembled as she set the lamp on an ebony table. She was a sleek sensuous creature, with long-lashed, heavy-lidded eyes, passionate lips, and a wealth of lustrous black curly locks. As she stood there naked the voluptuousness of her figure would have stirred the most jaded debauchee. A gift from Eannatum, she hated Pyrrhas, and he knew it, but found an angry gratification in possessing her. But now, her hatred was drowned in her terror.

"It was Lilitu!" she stammered. "She has marked you for her own! She is the night-spirit, the mate of Ardat Lili. They dwell in the House of Arabu. You are accursed!"

His hands were bathed with sweat; molten ice seemed to be flowing sluggishly through his veins instead of blood.

"Where shall I turn? The priests hate and fear me since I burned Anu's temple."

"There is a man who is not bound by the priest-craft, and could aid you." She blurted out.

"Then tell me!" He was galvanized, trembling with eager impatience. "His name, girl! His name!"

But at this sign of weakness, her malice returned; she had blurted out what was in her mind, in her fear of the supernatural. Now all the vindictiveness in her was awake again.

"I have forgotten," she answered insolently, her eyes glowing with spite.

"Slut!" Gasping with the violence of his rage, he dragged her across a couch by her thick locks. Seizing his swordbelt he wielded it with savage force, holding down the writhing naked body with his free hand. Each stroke was like the impact of a drover's whip. So mazed with fury was he, and she so incoherent with pain, that he did not at first realize that she was shrieking a name at the top of her voice. Recognizing this at last, he cast her from him, to fall in a whimpering heap on the mat-covered floor. Trembling and panting from the excess of his passion, he threw aside the belt and glared down at her.

"Gimil-ishbi, eh?"

"Yes!" she sobbed, groveling on the floor in her excruciating anguish. "He was a priest of Enlil, until he turned diabolist and was banished. Ahhh, I faint! I swoon! Mercy! Mercy!"

"And where shall I find him?" he demanded.

"In the mound of Enzu, to the west of the city. Oh, Enlil, I am flayed alive! I perish!"

Turning from her, Pyrrhas hastily donned his garments and armor, without calling for a slave to aid him. He went forth, passed among his sleeping servitors without waking them, and secured the best of his horses. There were perhaps a score in all in Nippur, the property of the king and his wealthier nobles; they had been bought from the wild tribes far to the north, beyond the Caspian, whom in a later age men called Scythians. Each steed represented an actual fortune. Pyrrhas bridled the great beast and strapped on the saddle--merely a cloth pad, ornamented and richly worked.

The soldiers at the gate gaped at him as he drew rein and ordered them to open the great bronze portals, but they bowed and obeyed without question. His crimson cloak flowed behind him as he galloped through the gate.

"Enlil!" swore a soldier. "The Argive has drunk overmuch of Naram-ninub's Egyptian wine."

"Nay," responded another; "did you see his face that it was pale, and his hand that it shook on the rein? The gods have touched him, and perchance he rides to the House of Arabu."

Shaking their helmeted heads dubiously, they listened to the hoof-beats dwindling away in the west.

North, south and east from Nippur, farm-hues, villages and palm groves clustered the plain, threaded by the net-works of canals that connected the rivers. But westward the land lay bare and silent to the Euphrates, only charred expanses telling of former villages. A few moons ago raiders had swept out of the desert in a wave that engulfed the vineyards and huts and burst against the staggering walls of Nippur. Pyrrhas remembered the fighting along the walls, and the fighting on the plain, when his sally at the head of his phalanxes had broken the besiegers and driven them in headlong flight back across the Great River. Then the plain had been red with blood and black with smoke. Now it was already veiled in green again as the grain put forth its shoots, uncared for by man. But the toilers who had planted that grain had gone into the land of dusk and darkness.

Already the overflow from more populous districts was seeping; back into the man-made waste. A few months, a year at most, and the land would again present the typical aspect of the Mesopotamian plain, swarming with villages, checked with tiny fields that were more like gardens than farms. Man would cover the scars man had made, and there would be forgetfulness, till the raiders swept again out of the desert. But now the plain lay bare and silent, the canals choked, broken and empty.

Here and there rose the remnants of palm groves, the crumbling ruins of villas and country palaces. Further out, barely visible under the stars, rose the mysterious hillock known as the mound of Enzu--the moon. It was not a natural hill, but whose hands had reared it and for what reason none knew. Before Nippur was built it had risen above the plain, and the nameless fingers that shaped it had vanished in the dust of time. To it Pyrrhas turned his horse's head.

And in the city he had left, Amytis furtively left his palace and took a devious course to a certain secret destination. She walked rather stiffly, limped, and frequently paused to tenderly caress her person and lament over her injuries. But limping, cursing, and weeping, she eventually reached her destination, and stood before a man whose wealth and power was great in Nippur. His glance was an interrogation.

"He has gone to the Mound of the Moon, to speak with Gimil-ishbi," she said.

"Lilitu came to him again tonight," she shuddered, momentarily forgetting her pain and anger. "Truly he is accursed."

"By the priests of Anu?" His eyes narrowed to slits.

"So he suspects."

"And you?"

"What of me? I neither know nor care."

"Have you ever wondered why I pay you to spy upon him?" he demanded.

She shrugged her shoulders. "You pay me well; that is enough for me."

"Why does he go to Gimil-ishbi?"

"I told him the renegade might aid him against Lilitu."

Sudden anger made the man's face-.darkly sinister.

"I thought you hated him."

She shrank from the menace in the voice. "I spoke of the diabolist before I thought, and then he forced me to speak his name curse him, I will not sit with ease for weeks!" Her resentment rendered her momentarily speechless.

The man ignored her, intent on his own somber meditations. At last he rose with sudden determination.

"I have waited too long," he muttered, like one speaking his thoughts aloud. "The fiends play with him while I bite my nails, and those who conspire with me grow restless and suspicious. Enlil alone knows what counsel Gimil-ishbi will give. When the moon rises I will ride forth and seek the Argive on the plain. A stab unaware--he will not suspect until my sword is through him. A bronze blade is surer than the powers of Darkness. I was a fool to trust even a devil."

Amytis gasped with horror and caught at the velvet hangings for support.

"You? You?" Her lips framed a question too terrible to voice.

"Aye!" He accorded her a glance of grim amusement. With a gasp of terror she darted through the curtained door, her smarts forgotten in her fright.

Whether the cavern was hollowed by man or by Nature, none ever knew. At least its walls, floor and ceiling were symmetrical and composed of blocks of greenish stone, found nowhere else in that level land. Whatever its cause and origin, man occupied it now. A lamp hung from the rock roof, casting a weird light over the chamber and the bald pate of the man who sat crouching over a parchment scroll on a stone table before him. He looked up as a quick sure footfall sounded on the stone steps that led down into his abode. The next instant a tall figure stood framed in the doorway.

The man at the stone table scanned this figure with avid interest. Pyrrhas wore a hauberk of black leather and copper scales; his brazen greaves glinted in the lamplight. The wide crimson cloak, flung loosely about him, did not enmesh the long hilt that jutted from its folds. Shadowed by his horned bronze helmet, the Argive's eyes gleamed icily. So the warrior faced the sage.

Gimil-ishbi was very old. There was no leaven of Semitic blood in his withered veins. His bald head was round as a vulture's skull, and from it his great nose jutted like the beak of a vulture. His eyes were oblique, a rarity even in a pure-blooded Shumirian, and they were bright and black as beads. Whereas Pyrrhas' eyes were all depth, blue deeps and changing clouds and shadows, Gimilishbi's eyes were opaque as jet, and they never changed. His mouth was a gash whose smile was more terrible than its snarl.

He was clad in a simple black tunic, and his feet, in their cloth sandals, seemed strangely deformed. Pyrrhas felt a curious twitching between his shoulder-blades as he glanced at those feet, and he drew his eyes away, and back to the sinister face.

"Deign to enter my humble abode, warrior," the voice was soft and silky, sounding strange from those harsh thin lips. "I would I could offer you food and drink, but I fear the food I eat and the wine I drink would find little favor in your sight." He laughed softly as at an obscure jest.

"I come not to eat or to drink," answered Pyrrhas abruptly, striding up to the table. "I come to buy a charm against devils."

"To buy?"

The Argive emptied a pouch of gold coins on the stone surface; they glistened dully in the lamplight. Gimil-ishbi's laugh was like the rustle of a serpent through dead grass.

"What is this yellow dirt to me? You speak of devils, and you bring me dust the wind blows away."

"Dust?" Pyrrhas scowled. Gimil-ishbi laid his hand on the shining heap and laughed; somewhere in the night an owl moaned. The priest lifted his hand. Beneath it lay a pile of yellow dust that gleamed dully in the lamplight. A sudden wind rushed down the steps, making the lamp flicker, whirling up the golden heap; for an instant the air was dazzled and spangled with the shining particles. Pyrrhas swore; his armor was sprinkled with yellow, dust; it sparkled among the scales of his hauberk.

"Dust that the wind blows away," mumbled the priest. "Sit down, Pyrrhas of Nippur, and let us converse with each other."

Pyrrhas glanced about the narrow chamber; at the even stacks of clay tablets along the walls, and the rolls of papyrus above them. Then he seated himself on the stone bench opposite the priest, hitching his sword-belt so that his hilt was well to the front.

"You are far from the cradle of your race," said Gimil-ishbi. "You are the first golden-haired rover to tread the plains of Shumir."

"I have wandered in many lands," muttered the Argive, "but may the vultures pluck my bones if I ever saw a race so devil-ridden as this, or a land ruled and harried by so many gods and demons."

His gaze was fixed in fascination on Gimil-ishbi's hands; they were long, narrow, white and strong, the hands of youth. Their contrast to the priest's appearance of great age otherwise, was vaguely disquieting.

"To each city its gods and their priests," answered Gimil-ishbi; "and all fools. Of what account are gods whom the fortunes of men lift or lower? Behind all gods of men, behind the primal trinity of Ea, Ann and Enlil, lurk the elder gods, unchanged by the wars or ambitions of men. Men deny what they do not see. The priests of Eridu, which is sacred to Ea and light, are no blinder than them of Nippur, which is consecrated to Enlil, whom they deem the lord of Darkness. But he is only the god of the darkness of which men dream, not the real Darkness that lurks behind all dreams, and veils the real and awful deities. I glimpsed this truth when I was a priest of Enlil, wherefore they cast me forth. Ha! They would stare if they knew how many of their worshipers creep forth to me by night, as you have crept."

"I creep to no man!" the Argive bristled instantly. "I came to buy a charm. Name your price, and be damned to you."

"Be not wroth," smiled the priest. "Tell me why you have come."

"If you are so cursed wise you should know already," growled the Argive, unmollified. Then his gaze clouded as he cast back over his tangled trail. "Some magician has cursed me." he muttered. "As I rode back from my triumph over Erech, my scar-horse screamed and shied at Something none saw but he. Then my dreams grew strange and monstrous. In the darkness of my chamber, wings rustled and feet padded stealthily. Yesterday a woman at a feast went mad and tried to knife me. Later an adder sprang out of empty air and struck at me. Then, this night, she men call Lilitu came to my chamber and mocked me with awful laughter-"

"Lilitu?" the priest's eyes lit with a brooding fire; his skull-face worked in a ghastly smile. "Verily, warrior, they plot thy ruin in the House of Arabu. Your sword can not prevail against her, or against her mate Ardat Lili. In the gloom of midnight her teeth will find your throat. Her laugh will blast your ears, and her burning kisses will wither you like a dead leaf blowing in the hot winds of the desert. Madness and dissolution will be your lot, and you will descend to the House of Arabu whence none returns."

Pyrrhas moved restlessly, cursing incoherently beneath his breath.

"What can I offer you besides gold?" he growled.

"Much!" the black eyes shone; the mouth-gash twisted in inexplicable glee. "But I must name my own price, after I have given you aid."

Pyrrhas acquiesced with an impatient gesture.

"Who are the wisest men in the world?" asked the sage abruptly.

"The priests of Egypt, who scrawled on yonder parchments," answered the Argive.

Gimil-ishbi shook his head; his shadow fell on the wall like that of a great vulture, crouching over a dying victim.

"None so wise as the priests of Tiamat, who fools believe died long ago under the sword of Ea. Tiamat is deathless; she reigns in the shadows; she spreads her dark wings over her worshipers."

"I know them not," muttered Pyrrhas uneasily.

"The cities of men know them not; but the waste-places know them, the reedy marshes, the stony deserts, the hills, and the caverns. To them steal the winged ones from the House of Arabu."

"I thought none came from that House," said the Argive.

"No human returns thence. But the servants of Tiamat come and go at their pleasure."

Pyrrhas was silent, reflecting on the place of the dead, as believed in by the Shumirians; a vast cavern, dusty, dark and silent, through which wandered the souls of the dead forever, shorn of all human attributes, cheerless and loveless, remembering their former lives only to hate all living men, their deeds and dreams.

"I will aid you," murmured the priest. Pyrrhas lifted his helmeted head and stared at him. Gimil-ishbi's eyes were no more human than the reflection of firelight on subterranean pools of inky blackness. His lips sucked in as if he gloated over all woes and miseries of mankind: Pyrrhas hated him as a man hates the unseen serpent in the darkness.

"Aid me and name your price," said the Argive.

Gimil-ishbi closed his hands and opened them, and in the palms lay a gold cask, the lid of which fastened with a jeweled catch. He sprung the lid, and Pyrrhas saw the cask was filled with grey dust. He shuddered without knowing why.

"This ground dust was once the skull of the first king of Ur," said Gimil-ishbi. "When he died, as even a necromancer must, he concealed his body with all his art!! But I found his crumbling bones, and in the darkness above them, I fought with his soul as a man fights with a python in the night. My spoil was his skull, that held darker secrets than those that lie in the pits of Egypt."

"With this dead dust shall you trap Lilitu. Go quickly to an enclosed place-a cavern or a chamber-nay, that ruined villa which lies between this spot and the city will serve. Strew the dust in thin lines across threshold and window; leave not a spot as large as a man's hand unguarded. Then lie down as if in slumber. When Lilitu enters, as she will, speak the words I shall teach you. Then you are her master, until you free her again by repeating the conjure backwards. You can not slay her, but you can make her swear to leave you in peace. Make her swear by the dugs of Tiamat. Now lean close and I will whisper the words of the spell."

Somewhere in the night a nameless bird cried out harshly; the sound was more human than the whispering of the priest, which was no louder than the gliding of an adder through slimy ooze. He drew back, his gash-mouth twisted in a grisly smile. The Argive sat for an instant like a statue of bronze. Their shadows fell together on the wall with the appearance of a crouching vulture facing a strange horned monster.

Pyrrhas took the cask and rose, wrapping his crimson cloak about his somber figure, his horned helmet lending an illusion of abnormal height.

"And the price?"

Gimil-ishbi's hands became claws, quivering with lust.

"Blood! A life!"

"Whose life?"

"Any life! So blood flows, and there is fear and agony, a spirit ruptured from its quivering flesh! I have one price for all-a human life! Death is my rapture; I would glut my soul on death! Man, maid, or infant. You have sworn. Make good your oath! A life! A human life!"

"Aye, a life!" Pyrrhas' sword cut the air in a flaming arc and Gimil-ishbi's vulture head fell on the stone table. The body reared upright, spouting black blood, then slumped across the stone. The head rolled across the surface and thudded dully on the floor. The features stared up, frozen in a mask of awful surprise.

Outside there sounded a frightful scream as Pyrrhas' stallion broke its halter and raced madly away across the plain.

From the dim chamber with its tablets of cryptic cuneiforms and papyri of dark hieroglyphics, and from the remnants of the mysterious priest, Pyrrhas fled. As he climbed the carven stair and emerged into the starlight he doubted his own reason.

Far across the level plain the moon was rising, dull red; darkly lurid. Tense heat and silence held the land. Pyrrhas felt cold sweat thickly beading his flesh; his blood was a sluggish current of ice in his veins; his tongue clove to his palate. His armor weighted him and his cloak was like a clinging snare. Cursing incoherently he tore it from him; sweating and shaking he ripped off his armor, piece by piece, and cast it away. In the grip of his abysmal fears he had reverted to the primitive. The veneer of civilization vanished. Naked but for loin-cloth and girded sword he strode across the plain, carrying the golden cask under his arm.

No sound disturbed the waiting silence as he came to the ruined villa whose walls reared drunkenly among heaps of rubble. One chamber stood above the general ruin, left practically untouched by some whim of chance. Only the door had been wrenched from its bronze hinges. Pyrrhas entered. Moonlight followed him in and made a dim radiance inside the portal. There were three windows, gold-barred. Sparingly he crossed the threshold with a thin grey line. Each casement he served in like manner. Then tossing aside the empty cask, he stretched himself on a bare dais that stood in deep shadow. His unreasoning horror was under control. He who had been the hunted was now the hunter. The trap was set, and he waited for his prey with the patience of the primitive.

He had not long to wait. Something threshed the air outside and the shadow of great wings crossed the moon lit portal. There was an instant of tense silence in which Pyrrhas heard the thunderous impact of his own heart against his ribs. Then a shadowy form framed itself in the open door. A fleeting instant it was visible, then it vanished from view. The thing had entered; the night-fiend was in the chamber.

Pyrrhas' hand clenched on his sword as he heaved up suddenly from the dais. His voice crashed in the stillness as he thundered the dark enigmatic conjurement whispered to him by the dead priest. He was answered by a frightful scream; there was a quick stamp of bare feet, then a heavy fail, and something was threshing and writhing in the shadows on the floor. As Pyrrhas cursed the masking darkness, the moon thrust a crimson rim above a casement, like a goblin peering into a window, and a molten flood of light crossed the floor. In the pale glow the Argive saw his victim.

But it was no were-woman that writhed there. It was a thing like a man, lithe, naked, dusky-skinned. It differed not in the attributes of humanity except for the disquieting suppleness of its limbs, the changeless glitter of its eyes. It grovelled as in mortal agony, foaming at the mouth and contorting its body into impossible positions.

With a blood-mad yell Pyrrhas ran at the figure and plunged his sword through the squirming body. The point rang on the tiled floor beneath it, and an awful howl burst from the frothing lips, but that was the only apparent effect of the thrust. The Argive wrenched forth his sword and glared astoundedly to see no stain on the steel, no wound on the dusky body. He wheeled as the cry of the captive was re-echoed from without.

Just outside the enchanted threshold stood a woman, naked, supple, dusky, with wide eyes blazing in a soulless face. The being on the floor ceased to writhe, and Pyrrhas' blood turned to ice.

"Lilitu!"

She quivered at the threshold, as if held by an invisible boundary. Her eyes were eloquent with hate; they yearned awfully for his blood and his life. She spoke, and the effect of a human voice issuing from that beautiful unhuman mouth was more terrifying than if a wild beast had spoken in human tongue.

"You have trapped my mate! You dare to torture Ardat Lili, before whom the gods tremble! Oh, you shall howl for this! You shall be torn bone from bone, and muscle from muscle, and vein from vein! Loose, him! Speak the words and set him free, lest even this doom be denied you!"

"Words!" he answered with bitter savagery. "You have hunted me like a hound. Now you can not cross that line without falling into my hands as your mate has fallen. Come into the chamber, bitch of darkness, and let me caress you as I caress your lover-thus! and thus! and thus!"

Ardat Lili foamed and howled at the bite of the keen steel, and Lilitu screamed madly in protest, beating with her hands as at an invisible barrier.

"Cease! Cease! Oh, could I but come at you! How I would leave you a blind, mangled cripple! Have done! Ask what you will, and I will perform it!"

"That is well," grunted the Argive grimly. "I can not take this creature's life, but it seems I can hurt him, and unless you give me satisfaction, I will give him more pain than ever he guesses exists in the world."

"Ask! Ask!" urged the were-woman, twisting with impatience.

"Why have you haunted me? What have I done to earn your hate?"

"Hate?" she tossed her head. "What are the sons of men that we of Shuala should hate or love? When the doom is loosed, it strikes blindly."

"Then who, or what, loosed the doom of Lilitu upon me?"

"One who dwells in the House of Arabu."

"Why, in Ymir's name?" swore Pyrrhas. "Why should the dead hate me?" He halted, remembering a priest who died gurgling curses.

"The dead strike at the bidding of the living. Someone who moves in the sunlight spoke in the night to one who dwells in Shuala."

"Who?"

"I do not know."

"You lie, you slut! It is the priests of Anu, and you would shield them. For that lie your lover shall howl to the kiss of the steel--"

"Butcher!" shrieked Lilitu. "Hold your hand! I swear by the dugs of Tiamat my mistress, I do not know what you ask. What are the priests of Anu that I should shield them? I would rip up all their bellies-as I would yours, could I come at you! Free my mate, and I will lead you to the House of Darkness itself, and you may wrest the truth from the awful mouth of the dweller himself, if you dare!"

"I will go," said Pyrrhas, "but I leave Ardat Lili here as hostage. If you deal falsely with me, he will writhe on this enchanted floor throughout all eternity."

Lilitu wept with fury, crying: "No devil in Shuala is crueller than you. Haste, in the name of Apsu!"

Sheathing his sword, Pyrrhas stepped across the threshold. She caught his wrist with fingers like velvet-padded steel, crying something in a strange inhuman tongue. Instantly the moon-lit sky and plain were blotted out in a rush of icy blackness. There was a sensation of hurtling through a void of intolerable coldness, a roaring in the Argive's ears as of titan winds. Then his feet struck solid ground; stability followed that chaotic instant, that had been like the instant of dissolution that joins or separates two states of being, alike in stability, but in kind more alien than day and night. Pyrrhas knew that in that instant he had crossed an unimaginable gulf, and that he stood on shores never before touched by living human feet.

Lilitu's fingers grasped his wrist, but he could not see her. He stood in darkness of a quality which he had never encountered. It was almost tangibly soft, all-pervading and all-engulfing. Standing amidst it, it was not easy even to imagine sunlight and bright rivers and grass singing in the wind. They belonged to that other world - a world lost and forgotten in the dust of a million centuries. The world of life and light was a whim of chance-a bright spark glowing momentarily in a universe of dust and shadows. Darkness and silence were the natural state of the cosmos, not light and the noises of Life. No wonder the dead hated the living, who disturbed the grey stillness of Infinity with their tinkling laughter.

Lilitu's fingers drew him through abysmal blackness. He had a vague sensation as of being in a titanic cavern, too huge for conception. He sensed walls and roof, though he did not see them and never reached them; they seemed to recede as he advanced, yet there was always the sensation of their presence. Sometimes his feet stirred what he hoped was only dust. There was a dusty scent throughout the darkness; he smelled the odors of decay and mould.

He saw lights moving like glow-worms through the dark. Yet they were not lights, as he knew radiance. They were most like spots of lesser gloom, that seemed to glow only by contrast with the engulfing blackness which they emphasized without illuminating. Slowly, laboriously they crawled through the eternal night. One approached the companions closely and Pyrrhas' hair stood up and he grasped his sword. But Lilitu took no heed as she hurried him on. The dim spot glowed close to him for an instant; it vaguely illumined a shadowy countenance, faintly human, yet strangely birdlike.

Existence became a dim and tangled thing to Pyrrhas, wherein he seemed to journey for a thousand years through the blackness of dust and decay, drawn and guided by the hand of the were-woman. Then he heard her breath hiss through her teeth, and she came to a halt.

Before them shimmered another of those strange globes of light. Pyrrhas could not tell whether it illumined a man or a bird. The creature stood upright like a man, but it was clad in grey feathers-at least they were more like feathers than anything else. The features were no more human than they were birdlike.

"This is the dweller in Shuala which put upon you the curse of the dead," whispered Lilitu. "Ask him the name of him who hates you on earth."

"Tell me the name of mine enemy!" demanded Pyrrhas, shuddering at the sound of his own voice, which whispered drearily and uncannily through the unechoing darkness.

The eyes of the dead burned redly and it came at him with a rustle of pinions, a long gleam of light springing into its lifted hand. Pyrrhas recoiled, clutching at his word, but Lilitu hissed: "Nay, use this!" and he felt a hilt thrust into his fingers. He was grasping a scimitar with a blade curved in the shape of the crescent moon, that shone like an arc of white fire.

He parried the bird-thing's stroke, and sparks showered in the gloom, burning him like bits of flame. The darkness clung to him like a black cloak; the glow of the feathered monster bewildered and baffled him. It was like fighting a shadow in the maze of a nightmare. Only by the fiery gleam of his enemy's blade did he keep the touch of it. Thrice it sang death in his ears as he deflected it by the merest fraction, then his own crescent-edge cut the darkness and grated on the other's shoulder-joint. With a strident screech the thing dropped its weapon and slumped down, a milky liquid spurting from the gaping wound. Pyrrhas lifted his scimitar again, when the creature gasped in a voice that was no more human than the grating of wind-blown boughs against one another: "Naram-ninub, the great-grandson of my greatgrandson! By black arts he spoke and commanded me across the gulfs!"

"Naram-ninub!" Pyrrhas stood frozen in amazement; the scimitar was torn from his hand. Again Lilitu's fingers locked on his wrist. Again the dark was drowned in deep blackness and howling winds blowing between the spheres.

He staggered in the moonlight without the ruined villa, reeling with the dizziness of his transmutation. Beside him Lilitu's teeth shone between her curling red lips. Catching the thick locks clustered on her neck, he shook her savagely, as he would have shaken a mortal woman.

"Harlot of Hell! What madness has your sorcery instilled in my brain?"

"No madness!" she laughed, striking his hand-aside. "You have journeyed to the House of Arabu, and you have returned. You have spoken with and overcome with the sword of Apsu, the shade of a man dead for long centuries."

"Then it was no dream of madness! But Naram-ninub--" he halted in confused thought. "Why, of all the men of Nippur, he has been my staunchest friend!"

"Friend?" she mocked. "What is friendship but a pleasant pretense to while away an idle hour?"

"But why. in Ymir's name?"

"What are the petty intrigues of men to me?" she exclaimed angrily. "Yet now I remember that men from Erech, wrapped in cloaks steal by night to Naramninub's palace."

"Ymir!" like a sudden blaze of light Pyrrhas saw reason in merciless clarity. "He would sell Nippur to Erech, and first he must put me out of the way, because the hosts of Nippur cannot stand before me! Oh, dog, let my knife find your heart!"

"Keep faith with me!" Lilitu's importunities drowned his fury. "I have kept faith with you. I have led you where never living man has trod, and brought you forth unharmed. I have betrayed the dwellers in darkness and done that for which Tiamat will bind me naked on a white-hot grid for seven times seven days. Speak the words and free Ardat Lili!"

Still engrossed in Naram-ninub's treachery, Pyrrhas spoke the incantation. With a loud sigh of relief, the were-man rose from the tiled floor and came into the moonlight. The Argive stood with his hand on his sword and his head bent, lost in moody thought. Lilitu's eyes flashed a quick meaning to her mate. Lithely they began to steal toward the abstracted man. Some primitive instinct brought his head up with a jerk. They were closing in on him, their eyes burning in the moonlight, their fingers reaching for him. Instantly he realized his mistake; he had forgotten to make them swear truce with him; no oath bound them from his flesh.

With feline screeches they struck in, but quicker yet he bounded aside and raced toward the distant city. Too hotly eager for his blood to resort to sorcery, they gave chase. Fear winged his feet, but close behind him he heard the swift patter of their feet, their eager panting. A sudden drum of hoofs sounded in front of him, and bursting through a tattered grove of skeleton palms, he almost caromed against a rider, who rode like the wind, a long silvery glitter in his hand. With a startled oath the horseman wrenched his steed back on its haunches. Pyrrhas saw looming over him a powerful body in scale mail, a pair of blazing eyes that glared at him from under a domed helmet, a short black beard.

"You dog!" he yelled furiously. "Damn you, have you come to complete with your sword what your black magic began?"

The steed reared wildly as he leaped at its head and caught its bridle. Cursing madly and fighting for balance, Naram-ninub slashed at his attacker's head, but Pyrrhas parried the stroke and thrust upward murderously. The sword-point glanced from the corselet and plowed along the Semite's jaw-bone. Naram-ninub screamed and fell from the plunging steed, spouting blood. His leg-bone snapped as he pitched heavily to earth, and his cry was echoed by a gloating howl from the shadowed grove.

Without dragging the rearing horse to earth, Pyrrhas sprang to its back and wrenched it about. Naram-ninub was groaning and writhing on the ground, and as Pyrrhas looked, two shadows darted from the darkened grove and fastened themselves on his prostrate form. A terrible scream burst from his lips, echoed by more awful laugher. Blood on the night air; on it the night-things would feed, wild as mad dogs, making no difference between men.

The Argive wheeled away, toward the city, then hesitated, shaken by a fierce revulsion. The level land lay quiescent beneath the moon, and the brutish pyramid of Enlil stood up in in the stars. Behind him lay his enemy, glutting the fangs of the horrors he himself had called up from the Pits. The road was open to Nippur, for his return.

His return?-to a devil-ridden people crawling beneath the heels of priest and king; to a city rotten with intrigue and obscene mysteries; to an alien race that mistrusted him, and a mistress that hated him.

Wheeling his horse again, he rode westward toward the open lands, flinging his arms wide in a gesture of renunciation and the exultation of freedom. The weariness of life dropped from him like a cloak. His mane floated in the wind, arid over the plains of Shumir shouted a sound they had never heard before-the gusty, elemental, reasonless laughter of a free barbarian.

Contents

THE SHADOW KINGDOM

By Robert E. Howard

1. A King Comes Riding

The blare of the trumpets grew louder, like a deep golden tide surge, like the soft booming of the evening tides against the silver beaches of Valusia. The throng shouted, women flung roses from the roofs as the rhythmic chiming of silver hosts came clearer and the first of the mighty array swung into view in the broad white street that curved round the golden-spired Tower of Splendor.

First came the trumpeters, slim youths, clad in scarlet, riding with a flourish of long, slender golden trumpets; next the bowmen, tall men from the mountains; and behind these the heavily armed footmen, their broad shields clashing in unison, their long spears swaying in perfect rhythm to their stride. Behind them came the mightiest soldiery in all the world, the Red Slayers, horsemen, splendidly mounted, armed in red from helmet to spur. Proudly they sat their steeds, looking neither to right nor to left, but aware of the shouting for all that. Like bronze statues they were, and there was never a waver in the forest of spears that reared above them.

Behind those proud and terrible ranks came the motley files of the mercenaries, fierce, wild-looking warriors, men of Mu and of Kaa-u and of the hills of the east and the isles of the west. They bore spears and heavy swords, and a compact group that marched somewhat apart were the bowmen of Lemuria. Then came the light foot of the nation, and more trumpeters brought up the rear.

A brave sight, and a sight which aroused a fierce thrill in the soul of Kull, king of Valasia. Not on the Topaz Throne at the front of the regal Tower of Splendor sat Kull, but in the saddle, mounted on a great stallion, a true warrior king. His mighty arm swung up in reply to the salutes as the hosts passed. His fierce eyes passed the gorgeous trumpeters with a casual glance, rested longer on the following soldiery; they blazed with a ferocious light as the Red Slayers halted in front of him with a clang of arms and a rearing of steeds, and tendered him the crown salute. They narrowed slightly as the mercenaries strode by. They saluted no one, the mercenaries. They walked with shoulders flung back, eyeing Kull boldly and straightly, albeit with a certain appreciation; fierce eyes, unblinking; savage eyes, staring from beneath shaggy manes and heavy brows.

And Kull gave back a like stare. He granted much to brave men, and there were no braver in all the world, not even among the wild tribesmen who now disowned him. But Kull was too much the savage to have any great love for these. There were too many feuds. Many were age-old enemies of Kull's nation, and though the name of Kull was now a word accursed among the mountains and valleys of his people, and though Kull had put them from his mind, yet the old hates, the ancient passions still lingered. For Kull was no Valusian but an Atlantean.

The armies swung out of sight around the gemblazing shoulders of the Tower of Splendor and Kull reined his stallion about and started toward the palace at an easy gait, discussing the review with the commanders that rode with him, using not many words, but saying much.

"The army is like a sword," said Kull, "and must not be allowed to rust." So down the street they rode, and Kull gave no heed to any of the whispers that reached his hearing from the throngs that still swarmed the streets.

"That is Kull, see! Valka! But what a king! And what a man! Look at his arms! His shoulders!"

And an undertone of more sinister whispering:

"Kull! Ha, accursed usurper from the pagan isles." "Aye, shame to Valusia that a barbarian sits on the Throne of Kings."

Little did Kull heed. Heavy-handed had he seized the decaying throne of ancient Valusia and with a heavier hand did he hold it, a man against a nation.

After the council chamber, the social palace where Kull replied to the formal and laudatory phrases of the lords and ladies, with carefully hidden grim amusement at such frivolities; then the lords and ladies took their formal departure and Kull leaned back upon the ermine throne and contemplated matters of state until an attendant requested permission from the great king to speak, and announced an emissary from the Pictish embassy.

Kull brought his mind back from the dim mazes of Valusian statecraft where it had been wandering, and gazed upon the Pict with little favor. The man gave back the gaze of the king without flinching. He was a lean-hipped, massive-chested warrior of middle height, dark, like all his race, and strongly built. From strong, immobile features gazed dauntless and inscrutable eyes.

"The chief of the Councilors, Ka-nu of the tribe right hand of the king of Pictdom, sends greetings and says:" "There is a throne at the feast of the rising moon for Kull, king of kings, lord of lords, emperor of Valusia."

"Good," answered Kull. "Say to Ka-nu the An cient, ambassador of the western isles, that the king of Valusia will quaff wine with him when the moon floats over the hills of Zalgara."

Still the Pict lingered. "I have a word for the king, not"-with a contemptuous flirt of his hand--"for these slaves."

Kull dismissed the attendants with a word, watching the Pict warily.

The man stepped nearer, and lowered his voice:

"Come alone to feast tonight, lord king. Such was the word of my chief."

The king's eyes narrowed, gleaming like gray sword steel, coldly.

"Alone?"

"Aye."

They eyed each other silently, their mutual tribal enmity seething beneath their cloak of formality. Their mouths spoke the cultured speech, the conventional court phrases of a highly polished race, a race not their own, but from their eyes gleamed the primal traditions of the elemental savage. Kull might be the king of Valusia and the Pict might be an emissary to her courts, but there in the throne hall of kings, two tribesmen glowered at each other, fierce and wary, while ghosts of wild wars and world-ancient feuds whispered to each.

To the king was the advantage and he enjoyed it to its fullest extent. Jaw resting on hand, he eyed the Pict, who stood like an image of bronze, head flung back, eyes unflinching.

Across Kull's lips stole a smile that was more a sneer.

"And so I am to come-alone?" Civilization had taught him to speak by innuendo and the Pict's dark eyes glittered, though he made no reply. "How am I to know that you come from Ka-nu?"

"I have spoken," was the sullen response.

"And when did a Pict speak truth?" sneered Kull, fully aware that the Picts never lied, but using this means to enrage the man.

"I see your plan, king," the Pict answered imperturbably. "You wish to anger me. By Valka, you need go no further! I am angry enough. And I challenge you to meet me in single battle, spear, sword or dagger, mounted or afoot. Are you king or man?"

Kull's eyes glinted with the grudging admiration a warrior must needs give a bold foeman, but he did not fail to use the chance of further annoying his antagonist.

"A king does not accept the challenge of a nameless savage," he sneered, "nor does the emperor of Valusia break the Truce of Ambassadors. You have leave to go. Say to Ka-nu I will come alone."

The Pict's eyes flashed murderously. He fairly shook in the grasp of the primitive blood-lust; then, turning his back squarely upon the king of Valusia, he strode across the Hall of Society and vanished through the great door.

Again Kull leaned back upon the ermine throne and meditated.

So the chief of the Council of Picts wished him to come alone? But for what reason? Treachery? Grimly Kull touched the hilt of his great sword. But scarcely. The Picts valued too greatly the alliance with Valusia to break it for any feudal reason. Kull might be a warrior of Atlantis and hereditary enemy of all Picts, but too, he was king of Valusia, the most potent

ally of the Men of the West.

Kull reflected long upon the strange state of affairs that made him ally of ancient foes and foe of ancient friends. He rose and paced restlessly across the hall, with the quick, noiseless tread of a lion. Chains of friendship, tribe and tradition had he broken to satisfy his ambition. And, by Valka, god of the sea and the land, he had realized that ambition! He was king of Valusia-a fading, degenerate Valusia, a Valusia living mostly in dreams of bygone glory, but still a mighty land and the greatest of the Seven Empires. Valusia-Land of Dreams, the tribesmen named it, and sometimes it seemed to Kull that he moved in a dream. Strange to him were the intrigues of court and palace, army and people. All was like a masquerade, where men and women hid their real thoughts with a smooth mask. Yet the seizing of the throne had been easy-a bold snatching of opportunity, the swift whirl of swords, the slaying of a tyrant of whom men had wearied unto death, short, crafty plotting with ambitious statesmen out of favor at court- and Kull, wandering adventurer, Atlantean exile, had swept up to the dizzy heights of his dreams: he was lord of Valusia, king of kings. Yet now it seemed that the seizing was far easier than the keeping. The sight of the Pict had brought back youthful associations to his mind, the free, wild savagery of his boyhood. And now a strange feeling of dim unrest, of unreality, stole over him as of late it had been doing. Who was he, a straightforward man of the seas and the mountain, to rule a race strangely and terribly wise with the mysticisms of antiquity? An ancient race-

"I am Kull!" said he, flinging back his head as a lion flings back his mane. "I am Kull!"

His falcon gaze swept the ancient hall. His selfconfidence flowed back. . . . And in a dim nook of the hall a tapestry moved-slightly.

2. Thus Spake the Silent Halls of Valusia

The moon had not risen, and the garden was lighted with torches aglow in silver cressets when Kull sat down on the throne before the table of Ka-nu, ambassador of the western isles. At his right hand sat the ancient Pict, as much unlike an emissary of that fierce race as a man could be. Ancient was Ka-nu and wise in statecraft, grown old in the game. There was no elemental hatred in the eyes that looked at Kull appraisingly; no Tribal traditions hindered his judgments. Long associations with the statesmen of the civilized nations had swept away such cobwebs. Not: who and what is this man? was the question ever foremost in Ka-nu's mind, but: can I use this man, and how? Tribal prejudices he used only to further his own schemes.

And Kull watched Ka-nu, answering his conversation briefly, wondering if civilization would make of him a thing like the Pict. For Ka-nu was soft and paunchy. Many years had stridden across the sky-rim since Ka- nu had wielded a sword. True, he was old, but Kull had seen men older than he in the forefront of battle. The Picts were a long-lived race. A beautiful girl stood at Ka-nu's elbow, refilling his goblet, and she was kept busy. Meanwhile Ka-nu kept up a running fire of jests and comments, and Kull, secretly contemptuous of his garrulity, nevertheless missed none of his shrewd humor.

At the banquet were Pictish chiefs and statesmen, the latter jovial and easy in their manner, the warriors formally courteous, but plainly hampered by their tribal affinities. Yet Kull, with a tinge of envy, was cognizant of the freedom and ease of the affair as contrasted with like affairs of the Valusian court. Such freedom prevailed in the rude camps of Atlantis-Kull shrugged his shoulders. After all, doubtless Ka-nu, who had seemed to have forgotten he was a Pict as far as time- hoary custom and prejudice went, was right and he, Kull, would better become a Valusian in mind as in name.

At last when the moon had reached her zenith, Ka-nu, having eaten and drunk as much as any three men there, leaned back upon his divan with a comfortable sigh and said, "Now, get you gone, friends, for the king and I would converse on such matters as concern not children. Yes, you too, my pretty; yet first let me kiss those ruby lips-so; no, dance away, my rose-bloom."

Ka-nu's eyes twinkled above his white beard as he surveyed Kull, who sat erect, grim and uncompromising.

"You are thinking, Kull," said the old statesman, suddenly, "that Ka- nu is a useless old reprobate, fit for nothing except to guzzle wine and kiss wenches!"

In fact, this remark was so much in line with his actual thoughts, and so plainly put, that Kull was rather startled, though he gave no sign.

Ka-nu gurgled and his paunch shook with his mirth. "Wine is red and women are soft," he remarked tolerantly. "But-ha! ha!-think not old Ka-nu allows either to interfere with business."

Again he laughed, and Kull moved restlessly. This seemed much like being made sport of, and the king's scintllant eyes began to glow with a feline light.

Ka-nu reached for the wine-pitcher, filled his beaker and glanced questoningly at Kull, who shook his head irritably.

"Aye," said Ka-nu equably, "it takes an old head to stand strong drink. I am growing old, Kull, so why should you young men begrudge me such pleasures as we oldsters must find? Ah me, I grow ancient and withered, friendless and cheerless."

But his looks and expressions failed far of bearing out his words. His rubicund countenance fairly glowed, and his eyes sparkled, so that his white beard seemed incongruous. Indeed, he looked remarkably elfin, reflected Kull, who felt vaguely resentful. The old scoundrel had lost all of the primitive virtues of his race and of Kull's race, yet he seemed more pleased in his aged days than otherwise.

"Hark ye, Kull," said Ka-nu, raising an admonitory finger, "'tis a chancy thing to laud a young man, yet I must speak my true thoughts to gain your confidence."

"If you think to gain it by flattery-"

"Tush. Who spake of flattery? I flatter only to disguard."

There was a keen sparkle in Ka-nu's eyes, a cold glimmer that did not match his lazy smile. He knew men, and he knew that to gain his end he must smite straight with this tigerish barbarian, who, like a wolf scenting a snare, would scent out unerringly any falseness in the skein of his wordweb.

"You have power, Kull," said he, choosing his words with more care than he did in the council rooms of the nation, "to make yourself mightiest of all kings, and restore some of the lost glories of Valusia. So. I care little for Valusia-though the women and wine be excellent-save for the fact that the stronger Valusia is, the stronger is the Pict nation. More, with an Atlantean on the throne, eventually Atlantis will become united-"

Kull laughed in harsh mockery. Ka-nu had touched an old wound.

"Atlantis made my name accursed when I went to seek fame and fortune among the cities of the world. We-they-are age-old foes of the Seven Empires, greater foes of the allies of the Empires, as you should know."

Ka-nu tugged his beard and smiled enigmatically.

"Nay, nay. Let it pass. But I know whereof I speak. And then warfare will cease, wherein there is no gain; I see a world of peace and prosperity-man loving his fellow man-the good supreme. All this can you accomplish-if you live!"

"Ha!" Kull's lean hand closed on his hilt and he half rose, with a sudden movement of such dynamic speed that Ka-nu, who fancied men as some men fancy blooded horses, felt his old blood leap with a sudden thrill. Valka, what a warrior! Nerves and sinews of steel and fire, bound together with the perfect co-ordination, the fighting instinct, that makes the terrible warrior.

But none of Ka-nu's enthusiasm showed in his mildly sarcastic tone.

"Tush. Be seated. Look about you. The gardens are deserted, the seats empty, save for ourselves. You fear not me?"

Kull sank back, gazing about him warily.

"There speaks the savage," mused Ka-nu. "Think you if I planned treachery I would enact it here where suspicion would be sure to fall upon me? Tut. You young tribesmen have much to learn. There were my chiefs who were not at ease because you were born among the hills of Atlantis, and you despise me in your secret mind because I am a Pict. Tush. I see you as Kull, king of Valusia, not as Kull, the reckless Atlantean, leader of the raiders who harried the western isles. So you should see in me, not a Pict but an international man, a figure of the world. Now to that figure, hark! If you were slain tomorrow who would be king?"

"Kaanuub, baron of Blaal."

"Even so. I object to Kaanuub for many reasons, yet most of all for the fact that he is but a figurehead."

"How so? He was my greatest opponent, but I did not know that he championed any cause but his own."

"The night can hear," answered Ka-nu obliquely. "There are worlds within worlds. But you may trust me and you may trust Brule, the Spear-slayer. Look!" He drew from his robes a bracelet of gold representing a winged dragon coiled thrice, with three horns of ruby on the head.

"Examine it closely. Brule will wear it on his arm when he comes to you tomorrow night so that you may know him. Trust Brule as you trust yourself, and do what he tells you to. And in proof of trust, look ye!"

And with the speed of a striking hawk, the ancient snatched something from his robes, something that flung a weird green light over them, and which he replaced in an instant.

"The stolen gem!" exclaimed Kull recoiling. "The green jewel from the Temple of the Serpent! Valka! You! And why do you show it to me?"

"To save your life. To prove my trust. If I betray your trust, deal with me likewise. You hold my life in your hand. Now I could not be false to you if I would, for a word from you would be my doom."

Yet for all his words the old scoundrel beamed merrily and seemed vastly pleased with himself.

"But why do you give me this hold over you?" asked Kull, becoming more bewildered each second.

"As I told you. Now, you see that I do not intend to deal you false, and tomorrow night when Brule comes to you, you will follow his advice without fear of treachery. Enough. An escort waits outside to ride to the palace with you, lord."

Kull rose. "But you have told me nothing."

"Tush. How impatient are youths!" Ka-nu looked more like a mischievous elf than ever. "Go you and dream of thrones and power and kingdoms, while I dream of wine and soft women and roses. And fortune ride with you, King Kull."

As he left the garden, Kull glanced back to see Ka-nu still reclining lazily in his seat, a merry ancient, beaming on all the world with jovial fellowship.

A mounted warrior waited for the king Just without the garden and Kull was slightly surprised to see that it was the same that had brought Ka-nu's invitation. No word was spoken as Kull swung into the saddle nor as they clattered along the empty streets.

The color and the gayety of the day had given way to the eerie stillness of night. The city's antiquity was more than ever apparent beneath the bent, silver moon. The huge pillars of the mansions and palaces towered up into the stars. The broad stairways, silent and deserted, seemed to climb endlessly until they vanished in the shadowy darkness of the upper realms. Stairs to the stars, thought Kull, his imaginative mind inspired by the weird grandeur of the scene.

Clang! clang! clang! sounded the silver hoofs on the broad, moon- flooded streets, but otherwise there was no sound. The age of the city, its incredible antiquity, was almost oppressive to the king; it was as if the great silent buildings laughed at him, noiselessly, with unguessable mockery. And what secrets did they hold?

"You are young," said the palaces and the temples and the shrines, "but we are old. The world was wild with youth when we were reared. You and your tribe shall pass, but we are invincible, indestructible. We towered above a strange world, ere Atlantis and Lemuria rose from the sea; we still shall reign when the green waters sigh for many a restless fathom above the spires of Lemuria and the hills of Atlantis and when the isles of the Western Men are the mountains of a strange land.

"How many kings have we watched ride down these streets before Kull of Atlantis was even a dream in the mind of Ka, bird of Creation? Ride on, Kull of Atlantis; greater shall follow you; greater came before you. They are dust; they are forgotten; we stand; we know; we are. Ride, ride on, Kull of Atlantis; Kull the king, Kull the fool!"

And it seemed to Kull that the clashing hoofs took up the silent refrain to beat it into the night with hollow re-echoing mockery; "Kull-the-king! Kull-the-fool!"

Glow, moon; you light a king's way! Gleam, stars; you are torches in the train of an emperor! And clang, silver-shod hoofs; you herald that Kull rides through Valusia.

Ho! Awake, Valusia! It is Kull that rides, Kull the king!

"We have known many kings," said the silent halls of Valusia.

And so in a brooding mood Kull came to the palace, where his bodyguard, men of the Red Slayers, came to take the rein of the great stallion and escort Kull to his rest. There the Pict, still sullenly speechless, wheeled his steed with a savage wrench of the rein and fled away in the dark like a phantom; Kull's heightened imagination pictured him speeding through the silent streets like a goblin out of the Elder World.

There was no sleep for Kull that night, for it was nearly dawn and he spent the rest of the night hours pacing the throne-room, and pondering over what had passed. Ka-nu had told him nothing, yet he had put himself in Kull's complete power. At what had he hinted when he had said the baron of Blaal was naught but a figurehead? And who was this Brule who was to come to him by night, wearing the mystic armlet of the dragon? And why? Above all, why had Ka-nu shown him the green gem of terror, stolen long ago from the temple of the Serpent, for which the world would rock in wars were it known to the weird and terrible keepers of that temple, and from whose vengeance not even Ka- nu's ferocious tribesmen might be able to save him? But Ka-nu knew he was safe, reflected Kull, for the statesman was too shrewd to expose himself to risk without profit. But was it to throw the king off his guard and pave the way to treachery? Would Ka-nu dare let him live now? Kull shrugged his shoulders.

3. They That Walk the Night

The moon had not risen when Kull, hand to hilt, stepped to a window. The windows opened upon the great inner gardens of the royal palace, and the breezes of the night, bearing the scents of spice trees, blew the filmy curtains about. The king looked out. The walks and groves were deserted; carefully trimmed trees were bulky shadows; fountains near by flung their slender sheen of silver in the starlight and distant fountains rippled steadily. No guards walked those gardens, for so closely were the outer walls guarded that it seemed impossible for any invader to gain access to them.

Vines curled up the walls of the palace, and even as Kull mused upon the ease with which they might be climbed, a segment of shadow detached itself from the darkness below the window and a bare, brown arm curved up over the sill. Kull's great sword hissed halfway from the sheath; then the King halted. Upon the muscular forearm gleamed the dragon armlet shown him by Ka-nu the night before.

The possessor of the arm pulled himself up over the sill and into the room with the swift, easy motion of a climbing leopard.

"You are Brule?" asked Kull, and then stopped in surprise not unmingled with annoyance and suspicion; for the man was he whom Kull had taunted in the Hall of Society; the same who had escorted him from the Pictish embassy.

"I am Brule, the Spear-slayer," answered the Pict in a guarded voice; then swiftly, gazing closely in Kull's face, he said, barely above a whisper:

"Ka nama kaa lajerama!"

Kull started. "Ha! What mean you?"

"Know you not?"

"Nay, the words are unfamiliar; they are of no language I ever heard- and yet, by Valka!-somewhere-I have heard-"

"Aye," was the Pict's only comment. His eyes swept the room, the study room of the palace. Except for a few tables, a divan or two and great shelves of books of parchment, the room was barren compared to the grandeur of the rest of the palace.

"Tell me, king, who guards the door?"

"Eighteen of the Red Slayers. But how come you, stealing through the gardens by night and scaling the walls of the palace?"

Brule sneered. "The guards of Valusia are blind buffaloes. I could steal their girls from under their noses. I stole amid them and they saw me not nor heard me. And the walls-I could scale them without the aid of vines. I have hunted tigers on the foggy beaches when the sharp east breezes blew the mist in from seaward and I have climbed the steeps of the western sea mountain. But come-nay, touch this armlet."

He held out his arm and, as Kull complied wonderingly, gave an apparent sigh of relief.

"So. Now throw off those kingly robes; for there are ahead of you this night such deeds as no Atlantean ever dreamed of."

Brule himself was clad only in a scanty loin-cloth through which was thrust a short, curved sword.

"And who are you to give me orders?" asked Kull, slightly resentful.

"Did not Ka-nu bid you follow me in all things?" asked the Pict irritably, his eyes flashing momentarily. "I have no love for you, lord, but for the moment I have put the thought of feuds from my mind. Do you likewise. But come."

Walking noiselessly, he led the way across the room to the door. A slide in the door allowed a view of the outer corridor, unseen from without, and the Pict bade Kull look.

"What see you?"

"Naught but the eighteen guardsmen."

The Pict nodded, motioned Kull to follow him across the room. At a panel in the opposite wall Brule stopped and fumbled there a moment. Then with a light movement he stepped back, drawing his sword as he did so. Kull gave an exclamation as the panel swung silently open, revealing a dimly lighted passageway.

"A secret passage!" swore Kull softly. "And I knew nothing or it! By Valka, someone shall dance for this!"

"Silence!" hissed the Pict.

Brule was standing like a bronze statue as if straining every nerve for the slightest sound; something about his attitude made Kull's hair prickle slightly, not from fear but from some eery anticipation. Then beckoning, Brule stepped through the secret doorway which stood open behind them. The passage was bare, but not dust-covered as should have been the case with an unused secret corridor. A vague, gray light filtered through somewhere, but the source of it was not apparent. Every few feet Kull saw doors, invisible, as he knew, from the outside, but easily apparent from within.

"The palace is a very honeycomb," he muttered. "Aye. Night and day you are watched, king, by many eyes."

The king was impressed by Brule's manner. The Pict went forward slowly, warily, half crouching, blade held low and thrust forward. When he spoke it was in a whisper and he continually flung glances from side to side.

The corridor turned sharply and Brule warily gazed past the turn.

"Look!" he whispered. "But remember! No word! No sound-on your life!"

Kull cautiously gazed past him. The corridor changed just at the bend to a flight of steps. And then Kull recoiled. At the foot of those stairs lay the eighteen Red Slayers who were that night stationed to watch the long's study room. Brule's grip upon his mighty arm and Brule's fierce whisper at his shoulder alone kept Kull from leaping down those stairs.

"Silent, Kull! Silent, in Valka's name!" hissed the Pict. "These corridors are empty now, but I risked much in showing you, that you might then believe what I had to say. Back now to the room of study." And he retraced his steps, Kull following; his mind in a turmoil of bewilderment.

"This is treachery," muttered the long, his steel gray eyes a-smolder, "foul and swift! Mere minutes have passed since those men stood at guard."

Again in the room of study Brule carefully closed the secret panel and motioned Kull to look again through the slit of the outer door. Kull gasped audibly. For without stood the eighteen guardsmen!

"This is sorcery!" he whispered, half-drawing his sword. "Do dead men guard the long?"

"Aye!" came Brule's scarcely audible reply; there was a strange expression in the Pick's scuitillant eyes. They looked squarely into each other's eyes for an instant, Kull's brow wrinkled in a puzzled scowl as he strove to read the Pict's inscrutable face. Then Brule's lips, barely moving, formed the words; "The-snake-that-speaks!".

"Silent!" whispered Kull, laying his hand over Brule's mouth. "That is death to speak! That is a name accursed!"

The Pict's fearless eyes regarded him steadily.

"Look, again. King Kull. Perchance the guard was changed."

"Nay, those are the same men. In Valka's name, this is sorcery-this is insanity! I saw with my own eyes the bodies of those men, not eight minutes agone. Yet there they stand."

Brule stepped back, away from the door, Kull mechanically following.

"Kull, what know ye of the traditions of this race ye rule?"

"Much-and yet, little. Valusia is so old-" "Aye," Brule's eyes lighted strangely, "we are but barbarians-infants compared to the Seven Empires. Not even they themselves know how old they are. Neither the memory of man nor the annals of the historians reach back far enough to tell us when the first men came up from the sea and built cities on the shore. But Kull, men were not always ruled by men!" The king started. Their eyes met. "Aye, there is a legend of my people-" "And mine!" broke in Brule. "That was before we of the isles were allied with Valusia. Aye, in the reign of Lion-fang, seventh war chief of the Picts, so many years ago no man remembers how many. Across the sea we came, from the isles of the sunset, skirting the shores of Atlantis, and falling upon the beaches of Valusia with fire and sword. Aye, the long white beaches resounded with the clash of spears, and the night was like day from the flame of the burning castles. And the king, the king of Valusia, who died on the red sea sands that dim day-" His voice trailed off; the two stared at each other, neither speaking; then each nodded.

"Ancient is Valusia!" whispered Kull. "The hills of Atlantis and Mu were isles of the sea when Valusia was young."

The night breeze whispered through the open window. Not the free, crisp sea air such as Brule and Kull knew and reveled in, in their land, but a breath like a whisper from the past, laden with musk, scents of forgotten things, breathing secrets that were hoary when the world was young.

The tapestries rustled, and suddenly Kull felt like a naked child before the inscrutable wisdom of the mystic past. Again the sense of unreality swept upon him. At the back of his soul stole dim, gigantic phantoms, whispering monstrous things. He sensed that Brule experienced similar thoughts. The Pict's eyes were fixed upon his face with a fierce intensity. Their glances met. Kull felt warmly a sense of comradeship with this member of an enemy tribe. Like rival leopards turning at bay against hunters, these two savages made common cause against the inhuman powers of antiquity. Brule again led the way back to the secret door. Silently they entered and silently they proceeded down the dim corridor, taking the opposite direction from that in which they previously traversed it. After a while the Pict stopped and pressed close to one of the secret doors, bidding Kull look with him through the hidden slot.

"This opens upon a little-used stair which leads to a corridor running past the study-room door."

They gazed, and presently, mounting the stair silently, came a silent shape.

"Tu! Chief councilor!" exclaimed Kull. "By night and with bared dagger! How, what means this, Brule?"

"Murder! And foulest treachery!" hissed Brule. "Nay"-as Kull would have flung the door aside and leaped forth-"we are lost if you meet him here, for more lurk at the foot of those stairs. Come!"

Half running, they darted back along the passage. Back through the secret door Brule led, shutting it carefully behind them, then across the chamber to an opening into a room seldom used. There he swept aside some tapestries in a dim corner nook and, drawing Kull with him, stepped behind them. Minutes dragged. Kull could hear the breeze in the other room

blowing the window curtains about, and it seemed to him like the murmur of ghosts. Then through the door, stealthily, came Tu, chief councilor of the king. Evidently he had come through the study room and, finding it empty, sought his victim where he was most likely to be.

He came with upraised dagger, walking silently. A moment he halted, gazing about the apparently empty room, which was lighted dimly by a single candle. Then he advanced cautiously, apparently at a loss to understand the absence of the king. He stood before the hiding place- and "Slay!" hissed the Pict.

Kull with a single mighty leap hurled himself into the room. Tu spun, but the blinding, tigerish speed of the attack gave him no chance for defense or counterattack. Sword steel flashed in the dim light and grated on bone as Tu toppled backward, Kull's sword standing out between his shoulders.

Kull leaned above him, teeth bared in the killer's snarl, heavy brows ascowl above eyes that were like the gray ice of the cold sea. Then he released the hilt and recoiled, shaken, dizzy, the hand of death at his spine.

For as he watched, Tu's face became strangely dim and unreal; the features mingled and merged in a seemingly impossible manner. Then, like a fading mask of fog, the face suddenly vanished and in its stead gaped and leered a monstrous serpent's head! "Valka!" gasped Kull, sweat beading his forehead, and again; "Valka!"

Brule leaned forward, face immobile. Yet his glittering eyes mirrored something of Kull's horror.

"Regain your sword, lord king," said he. "There are yet deeds to be done."

Hesitantly Kull set his hand to the hilt. His flesh crawled as he set his foot upon the terror which lay at their feet, and as some jerk of muscular reaction caused the frightful mouth to gape suddenly, he recoiled, weak with nausea. Then, wrathful at himself, he plucked forth his sword and gazed more closely at the nameless thing that had been known as Tu, chief councilor. Save for the reptilian head, the thing was the exact counterpart of a man.

"A man with the head of a snake!" Kull murmured. "This, then, is a priest of the serpent god?"

"Aye. Tu sleeps unknowing. These fiends can take any form they will. That is, they can, by a magic charm or the like, fling a web of sorcery about their faces, as an actor dons a mask, so that they resemble anyone they wish to."

"Then the old legends were true," mused the king; "the grim old tales few dare even whisper, lest they die as blasphemers, are no fantasies. By Valka, I had thought-I had guessed- but it seems beyond the bounds of reality. Ha! The guardsmen outside the door-"

"They too are snake-men. Hold! What would you do?"

"Slay them!" said Kull between his teeth.

"Strike at the skull if at all," said Brule. "Eighteen wait without the door and perhaps a score more in the corridors. Hark ye, king, Ka- nu learned of this plot. His spies have pierced the inmost fastnesses of the snake priests and they brought hints of a plot. Long ago he discovered the secret passageways of the palace, and at his command I studied the map thereof and came here by night to aid you, lest you die as other kings of Valusia have died. I came alone for the reason that to send more would have roused suspicion. Many could not steal into the palace as I did. Some of the foul conspiracy you have seen. Snake-men guard your door, and that one, as Tu, could pass anywhere else in the palace; in the morning, if the priests failed, the real guards would be holding their places again, nothing knowing, nothing remembering; there to take the blame if the priests succeeded. But stay you here while I dispose of this carrion."

So saying, the Pict shouldered the frightful thing stolidly and vanished with it through another secret panel. Kull stood alone, his mind a-whirl. Neophytes of the mighty serpent, how many lurked among his cities? How might he tell the false from the true? Aye, how many of his trusted councilors, his generals, were men? He could be certain-of whom?

The secret panel swung inward and Brule entered.

"You were swift."

"Aye!" The warrior stepped forward, eyeing the floor. "There is gore upon the rug. See?"

Kull bent forward; from the corner of his eye he saw a blur of movement, a glint of steel. Like a loosened bow he whipped erect, thrusting upward. The warrior sagged upon the sword, his own clattering to the floor. Even at that instant Kull reflected grimly that it was appropriate that the traitor should meet his death upon the sliding, upward thrust used so much by his race. Then, as Brule slid from the sword to sprawl motionless on the floor, the face began to merge and fade, and as Kull caught his breath, his hair a-prickle, the human features vanished and there the jaws of a great snake gaped hideously, the terrible beady eyes venomous even in death.

"He was a snake priest all the time!" gasped the king. "Valka! What an elaborate plan to throw me off my guard! Ka-nu there, is he a man? Was it Ka-nu to whom I talked in the gardens? Almighty Valka!" as his flesh crawled with a horrid thought; "are the people of Valusia men or are they all serpents?"

Undecided he stood, idly seeing that the thing named Brule no longer wore the dragon armlet. A sound made him wheel.

Brute was coming through the secret door.

"Hold!" Upon the arm upthrown to halt the king's hovering sword gleamed the dragon armlet. "Valka!" The Pict stopped short. Then a grim smile curled his lips.

"By the gods of the seas! These demons are crafty past reckoning. For it must be that one lurked in the corridors, and seeing me go carrying the carcass of that other, took my appearance. So. I have another to do away with."

"Hold!" there was the menace of death in Kull's voice; "I have seen two men turn to serpents before my eyes. How may I know if you are a true man?"

Brule laughed. "For two reasons. King Kull. No snake-man wears this"- he indicated the dragon armlet-"nor can any say these words," and again Kull heard the strange phrase; "Ka nama kaa lajerama."

"Ka nama kaa lajerama" Kull repeated mechanically. "Now, where, in Valka's name, have I heard that? I have not! And yet-and yet-"

"Aye, you remember, Kull," said Brule. "Through the dim corridors of memory those words lurk; though you never heard them in this life, yet in the bygone ages they were so terribly impressed upon the soul mind that never dies, that they will always strike dim chords in your memory, though you be reincarnated for a million years to come. For that phrase has come secretly down the grim and bloody eons, since when, uncounted centuries ago, those words were watchwords for the race of men who battled with the grisly beings of the Elder Universe. For none but a real man of men may speak them, whose jaws and mouth are shaped different from any other creature. Their meaning has been forgotten but not the words themselves."

"True," said Kull. "I remember the legends Valka!" He stopped short, staring, for suddenly, like the silent swinging wide of a mystic door, misty, unfathomed reaches opened in the recesses of his consciousness and for an instant he seemed to gaze back through the vastness that spanned life and life; seeing through the vague and ghostly fogs dim shapes reliving dead centuries-men in combat with hideous monsters, vanquishing a planet of frightful terrors. Against a gray, ever- shifting background moved strange nightmare forms, fantasies of lunacy and fear; and man, the jest of the gods, the blind, wisdom-less striver from dust to dust, following the long bloody trail of his destiny, knowing not why, bestial, blundering, like a great murderous child, yet feeling somewhere a spark of divine fire . . . Kull drew a hand across his brow, shaken; these sudden glimpses into the abysses of memory always startled him.

"They are gone," said Brule, as if scanning his secret mind; "the bird-women, the harpies, the bat-men, the flying fiends, the wolf- people, the demons, the goblins-all save such as this being that lies at our feet, and a few of the wolf-men. Long and terrible was the war, lasting through the bloody centuries, since first the first men, risen from the mire of apedom, turned upon those who then ruled the world."

"And at last mankind conquered, so long ago that naught but dim legends come to us through the ages. The snake-people were the last to go, yet at last men conquered even them and drove them forth into the waste lands of the world, there to mate with true snakes until some day, say the sages, the horrid breed shall vanish utterly. Yet the Things returned in crafty guise as men grew soft and degenerate, forgetting ancient wars. Ah, that was a grim and secret war! Among the men of the Younger Earth stole the frightful monsters of the Elder Planet, safeguarded by their horrid wisdom and mysticisms, taking all forms and shapes, doing deeds of horror secretly. No man knew who was true man and who false. No man could trust any man. Yet by means of their own craft they formed ways by which the false might be known from the true. Men took for a sign and a standard the figure of the flying dragon, the winged dinosaur, a monster of past ages, which was the greatest foe of the serpent. And men used those words which I spoke to you as a sign and symbol, for as I said, none but a true man can repeat them. So mankind triumphed. Yet again the fiends came after the years of forgetfulness had gone by-for man is still an ape in that he forgets what is not ever before his eyes. As priests they came; and for that men in their luxury and might had by then lost faith in the old religions and worships, the snake-men, in the guise of teachers of a new and truer cult, built a monstrous religion about the worship of the serpent god. Such is their power that it is now death to repeat the old legends of the snake-people, and people bow again to the serpent god in new form; and blind fools that they are, the great hosts of men see no connection between this power and the power men overthrew eons ago. As priests the snake-men are content to rule-and yet-" He stopped.

"Go on." Kull felt an unaccountable stirring of the short hair at the base of his scalp.

"Kings have reigned as true men in Valusia," the Pict whispered, "and yet, slain in battle, have died serpents-as died he who fell beneath the spear of Lionfang on the red beaches when we of the isles harried the Seven Empires. And how can this be. Lord Kull? These kings were born of women and lived as men! This-the true kings died in secret-as you would have died tonight-and priests of the Serpent reigned in their stead, no man knowing."

Kull cursed between his teeth. "Aye, it must be. No one has ever seen a priest of the Serpent and lived, that is known. They live in utmost secrecy."

"The statecraft of the Seven Empires is a mazy, monstrous thing," said Brule. "There the true men know that among them glide the spies of the Serpent, and the men who are the Serpent's allies-such as Kaanuub, baron of Blaal-yet no man dares seek to unmask a suspect lest vengeance befall him. No man trusts his fellow and the true statesmen dare not speak to each other what is in the minds of all. Could they be sure, could a snake-man or plot be unmasked before them all, then would the power of the Serpent be more than half broken; for all would then ally and make common cause, sifting out the traitors. Ka-nu alone is of sufficient shrewdness and courage to cope with them, and even Ka-nu learned only enough of their plot to tell me what would happen- what has happened up to this time. Thus far I was prepared; from now on we must trust to our luck and our craft. Here and now I think we are safe; those snake-men without the door dare not leave their post lest true men come here unexpectedly. But tomorrow they will try something else, you may be sure. Just what they will do, none can say, not even Ka-nu; but we must stay at each other's sides. King Kull, until we conquer or both be dead. Now come with me while I take this carcass to the hiding-place where I took the other being."

Kull followed the Pict with his grisly burden through the secret panel and down the dim corridor. Their feet, trained to the silence of the wilderness, made no noise. Like phantoms they glided through the ghostly light, Kull wondering that the corridors should be deserted; at every turn he expected to run full upon some frightful apparition. Suspicion surged back upon him; was this Pict leading him into ambush? He fell back a pace or two behind Brule, his ready sword hovering at the Pict's unheeding back. Brule should die first if he meant treachery. But if the Pict was aware of the king's suspicion, he showed no sign. Stolidly he tramped along, until they came to a room, dusty and long unused, where moldy tapestries hung heavy. Brule drew aside some of these and concealed the corpse behind them.

Then they turned to retrace their steps, when suddenly Brule halted with such abruptness that he was closer to death than he knew; for Kull's nerves were on edge.

"Something moving in the corridor," hissed the Pict. "Ka-nu said these ways would be empty, yet-"

He drew his sword and stole into the corridor, Kull following warily.

A short way down the corridor a strange, vague glow appeared that came toward them. Nerves a-leap, they waited, backs to the corridor wall; for what they knew not, but Kull heard Brule's breath hiss through his teeth and was reassured as to Brule's loyalty.

The glow merged into a shadowy form. A shape vaguely like a man it was, but misty and illusive, like a wisp of fog, that grew more tangible as it approached, but never fully material A face looked at them, a pair of luminous great eyes, that seemed to hold all me tortures of a million centuries. There was no menace in that face, with its dim, worn features, but only a great pity-and that face-that face-

"Almighty gods!" breathed Kull, an icy hand at his soul; "Eallal, king of Valusia, who died a thousand years ago!"

Brule shrank back as far as he could, his narrow eyes widened in a blaze of pure horror, the sword shaking in his grip, unnerved for the first time that weird night. Erect and defiant stood Kull, instinctively holdng his useless sword at the ready; flesh acrawl, hair a-prickle, yet still a king of kings, as ready to challenge the powers of the unknown dead as the powers of the living.

The phantom came straight on, giving them no heed; Kull shrank back as it passed them, feeling an icy breath like a breeze from the arctic snow. Straight on went the shape with slow, silent footsteps, as if the chains of all the ages were upon those vague feet; vanishing about a bend of the corridor.

"Valka!" muttered the Pict, wiping the cold beads from his brow; "that was no man! That was a ghost!"

"Aye!" Kull shook his head wonderingly. "Did you not recognize the face? That was Eallal, who reigned in Valusia a thousand years ago and who was found hideously murdered in his throne-room-the room now known as the Accursed Room. Have you not seen his statue in the Fame Room of Kings?"

"Yes, I remember the tale now. Gods, Kull! that is another sign of the frightful and foul power of the snake priests-that king was slain by snake-people and thus his soul became their slave, to do their bidding throughout eternity! For the sages have ever maintained that if a man is slain by a snake-man his ghost becomes their slave."

A shudder shook Kull's gigantic frame. "Valka! But what a fate! Hark ye"-his fingers closed upon Brule's sinewy arm like steel-"hark ye! If I am wounded unto death by these foul monsters, swear that ye will smite your sword through my breast lest my soul be enslaved."

"I swear," answered Brule, his fierce eyes lighting. "And do ye the same by me, Kull."

Their strong right hands met in a silent sealing of their bloody bargain.

4. Masks

Kull sat upon his throne and gazed broodily out upon the sea of faces turned toward him. A courtier was speaking in evenly modulated tones, but the king scarcely heard him. Close by, Tu, chief councilor, stood ready at Kull's command, and each time the king looked at him, Kull shuddered inwardly. The surface of court life was as the unrippled surface of the sea between tide and tide. To the musing king the affairs of the night before seemed as a dream, until his eyes dropped to the arm of his throne. A brown, sinewy hand rested there, upon the wrist of which gleamed a dragon armlet; Brule stood beside his throne and ever the Pict's fierce secret whisper brought him back from the realm of unreality in which he moved.

No, that was no dream, that monstrous interlude. As he sat upon his throne in the Hall of Society and gazed upon the courtiers, the ladies, the lords, the statesmen, he seemed to see their faces as things of illusion, things unreal, existent only as shadows and mockeries of substance. Always he had seen their faces as masks, but before he had looked on them with contemptuous tolerance, thinking to see beneath the masks shallow, puny souls, avaricious, lustful, deceitful; now there was a grim undertone, a sinister meaning, a vague horror that lurked beneath the smooth masks. While he exchanged courtesies with some nobleman or councilor he seemed to see the smiling face fade like smoke and the frightful jaws of a serpent gaping there. How many of those he looked upon were horrid, inhuman monsters, plotting his death, beneath the smooth mesmeric illusion of a human face?

Valusia-land of dreams and nightmares-a kingdom of the shadows, ruled by phantoms who glided back and forth behind the painted curtains, mocking the futile king who sat upon the throne-himself a shadow.

And like a comrade shadow Brule stood by his side, dark eyes glittering from immobile face. A real man, Brule! And Kull felt his friendship for the savage become a thing of reality and sensed that Brule felt a friendship for him beyond the mere necessity of statecraft.

And what, mused Kull, were the realities of life? Ambition, power, pride? The friendship of man, the love of women-which Kull had never known-battle, plunder, what? Was it the real Kull who sat upon the throne or was it the real Kull who had scaled the hills of Atlantis, harried the far isles of the sunset, and laughed upon the green roaring tides of the Atlantean sea? How could a man be so many different men in a lifetime? For Kull knew that there were many Kulls and he wondered which was the real Kull. After all, the priests of the Serpent went a step further in their magic, for all men wore masks, and many a different mask with each different man or woman; and Kull wondered if a serpent did not lurk under every mask. So he sat and brooded in strange, mazy thought ways, and the courtiers came and went and the minor affairs of the day were completed, until at last the king and Brule sat alone in the Hall of Society save for the drowsy attendants.

Kull felt a weariness. Neither he nor Brule had slept the night before, nor had Kull slept the night before that, when in the gardens of Ka-nu he had had his first hint of the weird things to be. Last night nothing further had occurred after they had returned to the study room from the secret corridors, but they had neither dared nor cared to sleep. Kull, with the incredible vitality of a wolf, had aforetime gone for days upon days without sleep, in his wild savage days but now his mind was edged from constant thinking and from the nerve-breaking eeriness of the past night. He needed sleep, but sleep was furthest from his mind.

And he would not have dared sleep if he had thought of it. Another thing that had shaken him was the fact that though he and Brule had kept a close watch to see if, or when, the study-room guard was changed, yet it was changed without their knowledge; for the next morning those who stood on guard were able to repeat the magic words of Brule, but they remembered nothing out of the ordinary. They thought that they had stood at guard all night, as usual, and Kull said nothing to the contrary. He believed them true men, but Brule had advised absolute secrecy, and Kull also thought it best.

Now Brule leaned over the throne, lowering his voice so not even a lazy attendant could hear: "They will strike soon, I think, Kull. A while ago Ka-nu gave me a secret sign. The priests know that we know of their plot, of course, but they know not, how much we know. We must be ready for any sort of action. Ka-nu and the Pictish chiefs will remain within hailing distance now until this is settled one way or another. Ha, Kull, if it comes to a pitched battle, the streets and the castles of Valusia will run red!"

Kull smiled grimly. He would greet any sort of action with a ferocious joy. This wandering in a labyrinth of illusion and magic was extremely irksome to his nature. He longed for the leap and clang of swords, for the joyous freedom of battle.

Then into the Hall of Society came Tu again, and the rest of the councilors.

"Lord king, the hour of the council is at hand and we stand ready to escort you to the council room."

Kull rose, and the councilors bent the knee as he passed through the way opened by them for his passage, rising behind him, and following. Eyebrows were raised as the Pict strode defiantly behind the king, but no one dissented. Brule's challenging gaze swept the smooth faces of the councilors with the defiance of an intruding savage.

The group passed through the halls and came at last to the council chamber. The door was closed, as usual, and the councilors arranged themselves in the order of their rank before the dais upon which stood the king. Like a bronze statue Brule took up his stand behind Kull.

Kull swept the room with a swift stare. Surely no chance of treachery here. Seventeen councilors there were, all known to him; all of them had espoused his cause when he ascended the throne.

"Men of Valusia-" he began in the conventional manner, then halted, perplexed. The councilors had risen as a man and were moving toward him. There was no hostility in their looks, but their actions were strange for a council room. The foremost was close to him when Brule sprang forward, crouched like a leopard.

"Ka. nama. kaa lajerama!" his voice crackled through the sinister silence of the room and the foremost councilor recoiled, hand flashing to his robes; and like a spring released, Brule moved and the man pitched headlong and lay still while his face faded and became the head of a mighty snake.

"Slay, Kull!" rasped the Pict's voice. "They be all serpent men!"

The rest was a scarlet maze. Kull saw the familiar faces dim like fading fog and in their places gaped horrid reptilian visages as the whole band rushed forward. His mind was dazed but his giant body faltered not.

The singing of his sword filled the room, and the onrushing flood broke in a red wave. But they surged forward again, seemingly willing to fling their lives away in order to drag down the king. Hideous jaws gaped at him; terrible eyes blazed into his unblinkingly; a frightful fetid scent pervaded the atmosphere-the serpent scent that Kull had known in southern jungles. Swords and daggers leaped at him and he was dimly aware that they wounded him. But Kull was in his element; never before had he faced such grim foes but it mattered little; they lived, their veins held blood that could be spilt and they died when his great sword cleft their skulls or drove through their bodies. Slash, thrust, thrust and swing. Yet had Kull died there but for the man who crouched at his side, parrying and thrusting. For the king was clear berserk, fighting in the terrible Atlantean way, that seeks death to deal death; he made no effort to avoid thrusts and slashes, standing straight up and ever plunging forward, no thought in his frenzied mind but to slay. Not often did Kull forget his fighting craft in his primitive fury, but now some chain had broken in his soul, flooding his mind with a red wave of slaughter-lust. He slew a foe at each blow, but they surged about him, and time and again Brule turned a thrust that would have slain, as he crouched beside Kull, parrying and warding with cold skill, slaying not as Kull slew with long slashes and plunges, but with short overhand blows and upward thrusts.

Kull laughed, a laugh of insanity. The frightful faces swirled about him in a scarlet blaze. He felt steel sink into his arm and dropped his sword in a flashing arc that cleft his foe to the breast-bone. Then the mists faded and the king saw that he and Brule stood alone above a sprawl of hideous crimson figures who lay still upon the floor.

"Valka! what a killing!" said Brule, shaking the blood from his eyes. "Kull, had these been warriors who knew how to use the steel, we had died here. These serpent priests know naught of swordcraft and die easier than any men I ever slew. Yet had there been a few more, I think the matter had ended otherwise."

Kull nodded. The wild berserker blaze had passed, leaving a mazed feeling of great weariness. Blood seeped from wounds on breast, shoulder, arm and leg. Brule, himself bleeding from a score of flesh wounds, glanced at him in some concern.

"Lord Kull, let us hasten to have your wounds dressed by the women."

Kull thrust him aside with a drunken sweep of his mighty arm.

"Nay, we'll see this through ere we cease. Go you, though, and have your wounds seen to-I command it."

The Pict laughed grimly. "Your wounds are more than mine, lord king-" he began, then stopped as a sudden thought struck him. "By Valka, Kull, this is not the council room!"

Kull looked about and suddenly other fogs seemed to fade. "Nay, this is the room where Eallal died a thousand years ago-since unused and named 'Accursed.'"

"Then by the gods, they tricked us after all!" exclaimed Brule in a fury, kicking the corpses at their feet. "They caused us to walk like fools into their ambush! By their magic they changed the appearance of all-"

"Then there is further deviltry afoot." said Kull, "for if there be true men in the councils of Valusia they should be in the real council room now. Come swiftly."

And leaving the room with its ghastly keepers they hastened througth halls that seemed deserted until they came to the real council room. Then Kull halted with a ghastly shudder. From the council room sounded a voice speaking, and the voice was his!

With a hand that shook he parted the tapestries and gazed into the room. There sat the councilors, counterparts of the men he and Brule had just slain, and upon the dais stood Kull, king of Valusia..

He stepped back, his mind reeling.

"This is insanity!" he whispered. "Am I Kull? Do I stand here or is that Kull yonder in very truth, arid am I but a shadow, a figment of thought?"

Brule's hand clutching his shoulder, shaking him fiercely, brought him to his senses.

"Valka's name, be not a fool! Can you yet be astounded after all we have seen? See you not that those are true men bewitched by a snake- man who has taken your form, as those others took their forms? By now you should have been slain, and yon monster reigning in your stead, unknown by those who bowed to you. Leap arid slay swiftly or else we are undone. The Red Slayers, true men, stand close on each hand and none but you can reach and slay him. Be swift!"

Kull shook off the onrushing dizziness, flung back his head in the old, defiant gesture. He took a long, deep breath as does a strong swimmer before diving into the sea; then, sweeping back the tapestries, made the dais in a single lion-like bound. Brule had spoken truly. There stood men of the Red Slavers, guardsmen trained to move quick as the striking leopard; any but Kull had died ere he could reach the usurper. But the sight of Kull, identical with the man upon the dais, held them in their tracks, their minds stunned for an instant, and that was long enough. He upon the dais snatchced for his sword, but even as his fingers closed upon the hilt, Kull's sword stood out behind his shoulders and the thing that men had thought the king pitched forward from the dais to lie silent upon the floor.

"Hold!" Kull's lifted hand and kingly voice stopped the rush that had started, and while they stood astounded he pointed to the thing which lay before them-whose face was fading into that of a snake. They recoiled, and from one door came Brule and from another came Ka-nu.

These grasped the king's bloody hand and Ka-nu spoke: "Men of Valusia, you have seen with your own eyes. This is the true Kull, the mightiest king to whom Valusia has ever bowed. The power of the Serpent is broken and ye be all true men. King Kull, have you commands?"

"Lift that carrion," said Kull, and men of the guard took up the thing.

"Now follow me," said the king, and he made his way to the Accursed Room. Brule, with a look of concern, offered the support of his arm but Kull shook him off.

The distance seemed endless to the bleeding king, but at last he stood at the door and laughed fiercely and grimly when he heard the horrified ejaculations of the councilors.

At his orders the guardsmen flung the corpse they carried beside the others, and motioning all from the room Kull stepped out last and closed the door.

A wave of dizziness left him shaken. The faces turned to him, pallid and wonderingly, swirled and mingled in a ghostly fog. He felt the blood from his wound trickling down his limbs and he knew that what he was to do, he must do quickly or not at all.

His sword rasped from its sheath.

"Brule, are you there?"

"Aye!" Brule's face looked at him through the mist, close to his shoulder, but Brule's voice sounded leagues and eons away.

"Remember our vow, Brule. And now, bid them stand back."

His left arm cleared a space as he flung up his sword. Then with all his waning power he drove it through the door into the jamb, driving the great sword to the hilt and sealing the room forever.

Legs braced wide, he swayed drunkenly, facing the horrified councilors. "Let this room be doubly accursed. And let those rotting skeletons lie there forever as a sign of the dying might of the Serpent. Here I swear that I shall hunt the serpent-men from land to land, from sea to sea, giving no rest until all be slain, that good triumph and the power of Hell be broken. This thing I swear-I-Kull- king-of-Valusia."

His knees buckled as the faces swayed and swirled. The councilors leaped forward, but ere they could reach him, Kull slumped to the floor, and lay still, face upward.

The councilors surged about the fallen king, chattering and shrieking. Ka-nu beat them back with his clenched fists, cursing savagely.

"Back, you fools! Would you stifle the little life that is yet in him? How, Brule, is he dead or will he live?"-to the warrior who bent above the prostrate Kull.

"Dead?" sneered Brule irritably. "Such a man as this is not so easily killed. Lack of sleep and loss of blood have weakened him-by Valka, he has a score of deep wounds, but none of them mortal. Yet have those gibbering fools bring the court women here at once."

Brule's eyes lighted with a fierce, proud light.

"Valka, Ka-nu, but here is such a man as I knew not existed in these degenerate days. He will be in the saddle in a few scant days and then may the serpentmen of the world beware of Kull of Valusia. Valka! but that will be a rare hunt! Ah, I see long years of prosperity for the world with such a king upon the throne of Valusia."

THE END

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THE MIRRORS OF TUZUN THUNE

By Robert E. Howard

There comes, even to kings, the time of great weariness. Then the gold of the throne is brass, the silk of the palace becomes drab. The gems in the diadem sparkle drearily like the ice of the white seas; the speech of men is as the empty rattle of a jester's bell and the feel comes of things unreal; even the sun is copper in the sky, and the breath of the green ocean is no longer fresh.

Kull sat upon the throne of Valusia and the hour of weariness was upon him. They moved before him in an endless, meaningless panorama: men, women, priests, events and shadows of events; things seen and things to be attained. But like shadows they came and went, leaving no trace upon his consciousness, save that of a great mental fatigue. Yet Kull was not tired. There was a longing in him for things beyond himself and beyond the Valusian court. An unrest stirred in him, and strange, luminous dreams roamed his soul. At his bidding there came to him Brule the Spearslayer, warrior of Pictland, from the islands beyond the West.

"Lord king, you are tired of the life of the court. Come with me upon my galley and let us roam the tides for a space."

"Nay." Kull rested his chin moodily upon his mighty hand. "I am weary beyond all these things. The cities hold no lure for me--and the borders are quiet. I hear no more the sea-songs I heard when I lay as a boy on the booming crags of Atlantis, and the night was alive with blazing stars. No more do the green woodlands beckon me as of old. There is a strangeness upon me and a longing beyond life's longings. Go!"

Brule went forth in a doubtful mood, leaving the king brooding upon his throne. Then to Kull stole a girl of the court and whispered:

"Great king, seek Tuzun Thune, the wizard. The secrets of life and death are his, and the stars in the sky the lands beneath the seas." Kull looked at the girl. Fine gold was her hair and her violet eyes were slanted strangely; she was beautiful, but her beauty meant little to Kull.

"Tuzun Thune," he repeated. "Who is he?"

"A wizard of the Elder Race. He lives here in Valusia, by the Lake of Visions in the House of a Thousand Mirrors. All things are known to him, lord king; he speaks with the dead and holds converse with the demons of the Lost Lands."

Kull arose.

"I will seek out this mummer; but no word of my going, do you hear?"

"I am your slave, my lord." And she sank to her knees meekly, but the smile of her scarlet mouth was cunning behind Kull's back and the gleam of her narrow eyes was crafty.

Kull came to the house of Tuzun Thune, beside the Lake of Visions. Wide and blue stretched the waters of the lake, and many a fine palace rose upon its banks; many swan-winged pleasure boats drifted lazily upon its hazy surface and evermore there came the sound of soft music.

Tall and spacious, but unpretentious, rose the House of a Thousand Mirrors. The great doors stood open, and Kull ascended the broad stair and entered, unannounced. There in a great chamber, whose walls were of mirrors, he came upon Tuzun Thune, the wizard. The man was ancient as the hills of Zalgara; like wrinkled leather was his skin, but his cold gray eyes were like sparks of sword steel.

"Kull of Valusia, my house is yours," said he, bowing with old-time courtliness and motioning Kull to a throne-like chair.

"You are a wizard, I have heard," said Kull bluntly, resting his chin upon his hand and fixing his sombre eyes upon the man's face. "Can you do wonders?"

The wizard stretched forth his hand; his fingers opened and closed like a bird's claws.

"Is that not a wonder--that this blind flesh obeys the thoughts of my mind? I walk, I breathe, I speakare they not all wonders?"

Kull meditated awhile, then spoke. "Can you summon up demons?"

"Aye. I can summon up a demon more savage than any in ghost land--by smiting you in the face."

Kull started, then nodded. "But the dead, can you talk to the dead?"

"I talk with the dead always--as I am talking now. Death begins with birth, and each man begins to die when he is born; even now you are dead, King Kull, because you were born."

"But you, you are older than men become; do wizards never die?"

"Men die when their times come. No later, no sooner. Mine has not come."

Kull turned these answers over in his mind.

"Then it would seem that the greatest wizard of Valusia is no more than an ordinary man, and I have been duped in coming here."

Tuzun Thune shook his head. "Men are but men, and the greatest men are they who soonest learn the simpler things. Nay, look into my mirrors, Kull."

The ceiling was a great many mirrors, and the walls were mirrors, perfectly joined, yet many mirrors of many sizes and shapes.

"Mirrors are the world, Kull," droned the wizard. "Gaze into my mirrors and be wise."

Kull chose one at random and looked into it intently. The mirrors upon the opposite wall were reflected there, reflecting others, so that he seemed to be gazing down a long, luminous corridor, formed by mirror behind mirror; and far down this corridor moved a tiny figure. Kull looked long ere he saw that the figure was the reflection of himself. He gazed and a queer feeling of pettiness came over him; it seemed that that tiny figure was the true Kull, representing the real proportions of himself. So he moved away and stood before another.

"Look closely, Kull. That is the mirror of the past," he heard the wizard say.

Gray fogs obscured the vision, great billows of mist, ever heaving and changing like the ghost of a great river; through these fogs Kull caught swift fleeting visions of horror and strangeness; beasts and men moved there and shapes neither men nor beasts; great exotic blossoms glowed through the grayness; tall tropic trees towered high over reeking swamps, where reptilian monsters wallowed, and bellowed; the sky was ghastly with flying dragons, and the restless seas rocked and roared and beat endlessly along the muddy beaches. Man was not, yet man was the dream of the gods, and strange were the nightmare forms that glided through the noisome jungles. Battle and onslaught were there, and frightful love. Death was there, for Life and Death go hand in hand. Across the slimy beaches of the world sounded the bellowing of the monsters, and incredible shapes loomed through the streaming curtain of the incessant rain. "This is of the future." Kull looked in silence. "See you--what?"

"A strange world," said Kull heavily. "The Seven Empires are crumbled to dust and are forgotten. The restless green waves roar for many a fathom above the eternal hills of Atlantis; the mountains of Lemuria of the West are the islands of an unknown sea. Strange savages roam the elder lands and new lands flung strangely from the deeps, defiling the elder shrines. Valusia is vanished and all the nations of today; they of tomorrow are strangers. They know us not."

"Time strides onward," said Tuzun Thune calmly. "We live today; what care we for tomorrow--or yesterday? The Wheel turns and nations rise and fall; the world changes, and times return to savagery to rise again through the long age. Ere Atlantis was, Valusia was, and ere Valusia was, the Elder Nations were. Aye, we, too, trampled the shoulders of lost tribes in our advance. You, who have come from the green sea hills of Atlantis to seize the ancient crown of Valusia, you think my tribe is old, we who held these lands ere the Valusians came out of the East, in the days before there were men in the sea lands. But men were here when the Elder Tribes rode out of the waste lands, and men before men, tribe before tribe. The nations pass and are forgotten, for that is the destiny of man."

"Yes," said Kull. "Yet is it not a pity that the beauty and glory of men should fade like smoke on a summer sea?"

"For what reason, since that is their destiny? I brood not over the lost glories of my race, nor do I labor for races to come. Live now, Kull, live now. The dead are dead; the unborn are not. What matters men's forgetfulness of you when you have forgotten yourself in the silent worlds of death? Gaze in my mirrors and be wise."

Kull chose another mirror and gazed into it.

"That is the mirror of deepest magic; what see ye, Kull?"

"Naught but myself."

"Look closely, Kull; is it in truth you?"

Kull stared into the great mirror, and the image that was his reflection returned his gaze.

"I come before this mirror," mused Kull, chin on fist, "and I bring this man to life. That is beyond my understanding, since first I saw him in the still waters of the lakes of Atlantis, till I saw him again in the gold-rimmed mirrors of Valusia. He is I, a shadow of myself, part of myself--I can bring him into being or slay him at my will; yet--" He halted, strange thoughts whispering through the vast dim recesses of his mind like shadowy bats flying through a great cavern--"yet where is he when I stand not in front of a mirror? May it be in man's power thus lightly to form and destroy a shadow of life and existence? How do I know that when I step back from the mirror he vanishes into the void of Naught?"

"Nay, by Valka, am I the man or is he? Which of us is the ghost of the other? Mayhap these mirrors are but windows through which we look into another world. Does he think the same of me? Am I no more than a shadow, a reflection of himself--to him, as he to me? And if I am the ghost, what sort of a world lives upon the other side of this mirror? What armies ride there and what kings rule? This world is all I know. Knowing naught of any other, how can I judge? Surely there are green hills there and booming seas and wide plains where men ride to battle. Tell me, wizard who is wiser than most men, tell me are there worlds beyond our worlds?"

"A man has eyes, let him see," answered the wizard. "Who would see must first believe."

The hours drifted by, and Kull still sat before the mirrors of Tuzun Thune, gazing into that which depicted himself. Sometimes it seemed that he gazed upon hard shallowness; at other times gigantic depths seemed to loom before him. Like the surface of the sea was the mirror of Tuzun Thune; hard as the sea in the sun's slanting beams, in the darkness of the stars, when no eye can pierce her deeps; vast and mystic as the sea when the sun smites her in such way that the watcher's breath is caught at the glimpse of tremendous abysses. So was the mirror in which Kull gazed.

At last the king rose with a sigh and took his departure still wondering. And Kull came again to the House of a Thousand Mirrors; day after day he came and sat for hours before the mirror. The eyes looked out at him, identical with his; yet Kull seemed to sense a difference--a reality that was not of him. Hour upon hour he would stare with strange intensity into the mirror; hour after hour the image gave back his gaze.

The business of the palace and of the council went neglected. The people murmured; Kull's stallion stamped restlessly in his stable, and Kull's warriors diced and argued aimlessly with one another. Kull heeded not. At times he seemed on the point of discovering some vast, unthinkable secret. He no longer thought of the image in the mirror as a shadow of himself; the thing, to him, was an entity, similar in outer appearance, yet basically as far from Kull himself as the poles are far apart. The image, it seemed to Kull, had an individuality apart from Kull's, he was no more dependent on Kull than Kull was dependent on him. And day by day Kull doubted in which world he really lived; was he the shadow, summoned at will by the other? Did he instead of the other live in a world of delusion, the shadow of the real world?

Kull began to wish that he might enter the personality beyond the mirror for a space, to see what might be seen; yet should he manage to go beyond that door could he ever return? Would he find a world identical with the one in which he moved? A world, of which his was but a ghostly reflection? Which was reality and which illusion?

At times Kull halted to wonder how such thoughts and dreams had come to enter his mind, and at times he wondered if they came of his own volition or--here his thoughts would become mazed. His meditations were his own; no man ruled his thoughts, and he would summon them at his pleasure; yet could he? Were they not as bats, coming and going, not at his pleasure but at the bidding or ruling of--of whom? The gods? The Women who wove the webs of Fate? Kull could come to no conclusion, for at each mental step he became more and more bewildered in a hazy fog of illusory assertions and refutations. This much he knew: that strange visions entered his mind, like flying unbidden from the whispering void of non-existence; never had he thought these thoughts, but now they ruled his mind, sleeping and waking, so that he seemed to walk in a daze at times; and his sleep was fraught with strange, monstrous dreams.

"Tell me, wizard," he said, sitting before the mirror, eyes fixed intently upon his image, "how can I pass yon door? For of a truth, I am not sure that that is the real world and this the shadow; at least, that which I see must exist in some form."

"See and believe," droned the wizard. "Man must believe to accomplish. Form is shadow, substance is illusion, materiality is dream; man is because he believes he is; what is man but a dream of the gods? Yet man can be that which he wishes to be; form and substance, they are but shadows. The mind, the ego, the essence of the god-dream--that is real, that is immortal. See and believe, if you would accomplish, Kull."

The king did not fully understand; he never fully understood the enigmatical utterances of the wizard; yet they struck somewhere in his being a dim responsive chord. So day after day he sat before the mirrors of Tuzun Thune. Ever the wizard lurked behind him like a shadow.

Then came a day when Kull seemed to catch glimpses of strange lands; there flitted across his consciousness dim thoughts and recognitions. Day by day he had seemed to lose touch with the world; all things had seemed each succeeding day more ghostly and unreal; only the man in the mirror seemed like reality. Now Kull seemed to be close to the doors of some mightier worlds; giant vistas gleamed fleetingly; the fogs of unreality thinned; "form is shadow, substance is illusion; they are but shadows" sounded as if from some far country of his consciousness. He remembered the wizard's words and it seemed to him that now he almost understood--form and substance, could not he change himself at will, if he knew the master key that opened this door? What worlds within what worlds awaited the bold explorer?

The man in the mirror seemed smiling at him closer, closer--a fog enwrapped all and the reflection dimmed suddenly--Kull knew a sensation of fading, of change, of merging...

"Kull!" the yell split the silence into a million vibratory fragments!

Mountains crashed and worlds tottered as Kull, hurled back by the frantic shout, made a superhuman effort, how or why he did not know.

A crash, and Kull stood in the room of Tuzun Thune before a shattered mirror, mazed and half blind with bewilderment. There before him lay the body of Tuzun Thune, whose time had come at last, and above him stood Brule the Spear-slayer, sword dripping red and eyes wide with a kind of horror.

"Valka!" swore the warrior. "Kull, it was time I came!"

"Aye, yet what happened?" The king groped for words.

"Ask this traitress," answered the Spear-slayer, indicating a girl who crouched in terror before the king; Kull saw that it was she who first sent him to Tuzun Thune. "As I came in I saw you fading into yon mirror as smoke fades into the sky, by Valka! Had I not seen I would not have believed you had almost vanished when my shout brought you back."

"Aye," muttered Kull, "I had almost gone beyond the door that time."

"This fiend wrought most craftily," said Brule. "KULL, do you not now see how he spun and flung over you a web of magic? Kaanuub of Blaal plotted with this wizard to do away with you, and this wench, a girl of the Elder Race, put the thought in your mind so that you would come here. Ka-na of the council learned of the plot today; I know not what you saw in that mirror, but with it Tuzun Thune enthralled your soul and almost by his witchery he changed your body to mist--"

"Aye." Kull was still mazed. "But being a wizard, having knowledge of all the ages and despising gold, glory, and position, what could Kaanuub offer Tuzun Thune that would make of him a foul traitor?"

"Gold, power, and position," grunted Brule. "The sooner you learn that men are men whether wizard, king, or thrall, the better you will rule, Kull. Now what of her?"

"Naught, Brule," as the girl whimpered and groveled at Kull's feet. "She was but a tool. Rise, child, and go your ways; none shall harm you."

Alone with Brule, Kull looked for the last time on the mirrors of Tuzun Thune.

"Mayhap he plotted and conjured, Brule; nay, I doubt you not, yet--was it his witchery that was changing me to thin mist, or had I stumbled on a secret? Had you not brought me back, had I faded in dissolution or had I found worlds beyond this?"

Brule stole a glance at the mirrors, and twitched his shoulders as if he shuddered. "Aye, Tuzun Thune stored the wisdom of all the hells here. Let us be gone, Kull, ere they bewitch me, too."

"Let us go, then," answered Kull, and side by side they went forth from the House of a Thousand Mirrors--where, mayhap, are prisoned the souls of men.

None look now in the mirrors of Tuzun Thune. The pleasure boats shun the shore where stands the wizard's house, and no one goes in the house or to the room where Tuzun Thune's dried and withered carcass lies before the mirrors of illusion. The place is shunned as a place accursed, and though it stands for a thousand years to come, no footsteps shall echo there. Yet Kull upon his throne meditates often upon the strange wisdom and untold secrets hidden there and wonders...

For there are worlds beyond worlds, as Kull knows, and whether the wizard bewitched him by words or by mesmerism, vistas did open to the kings gaze beyond that strange door, and Kull is less sure of reality since he gazed into the mirrors of Tuzun Thune.

THE END

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THE LOST RACE
By Robert E. Howard

Cororuc glanced about him and hastened his pace. He was no coward, but he did not like the place. Tall trees rose all about, their sullen branches shutting out the sunlight. The dim trail led in and out among them, sometimes skirting the edge of a ravine, where Cororuc could gaze down at the treetops beneath. Occasionally, through a rift in the forest, he could see away to the forbidding hills that hinted of the ranges much farther to the west, that were the mountains of Cornwall.

In those mountains the bandit chief, Buruc the Cruel, was supposed to lurk, to descend upon such victims as might pass that way. Cororuc shifted his grip on his spear and quickened his step. His haste was due not only to the menace of the outlaws, but also to the fact that he wished once more to be in his native land. He had been on a secret mission to the wild Cornish tribesmen; and though he had been more or less successful, he was impatient to be out of their inhospitable country. It had been a long, wearisome trip, and he still had nearly the whole of Britain to traverse. He threw a glance of aversion about him. He longed for the pleasant woodlands, with scampering deer, and chirping birds, to which he was used. He longed for the tall white cliff, where the blue sea lapped merrily. The forest through which he was passing seemed uninhabited. There were no birds, no animals; nor had he seen a sign of human habitation.

His comrades still lingered at the savage court of the Cornish king, enjoying his crude hospitality, in no hurry to be away. But Cororuc was not content. So he had left them to follow at their leisure and had set out alone.

Rather a fine figure of a man was Cororuc. Some six feet in height, strongly though leanly built, he was, with gray eyes, a pure Briton but not a pure Celt, his long yellow hair revealing, in him as in all his race, a trace of Belgae.

He was clad in skillfully dressed deerskin, for the Celts had not yet perfected the coarse cloth which they made, and most of the race preferred the hides of deer.

He was armed with a long bow of yew wood, made with no especial skill but an efficient weapon; a long bronze broadsword, with a buckskin sheath; a long bronze dagger and a small, round shield, rimmed with a band of bronze and covered with tough buffalo hide. A crude bronze helmet was on his head. Faint devices were painted in woad on his arms and cheeks.

His beardless face was of the highest type of Briton, clear, straightforward, the shrewd, practical determination of the Nordic mingling with the reckless courage and dreamy artistry of the Celt.

So Cororuc trod the forest path, warily, ready to flee or fight, but preferring to do neither just then.

The trail led away from the ravine, disappearing around a great tree. And from the other side of the tree, Cororuc heard sounds of conflict. Gliding warily forward, and wondering whether he should see some of the elves and dwarfs that were reputed to haunt those woodlands, he peered around the great tree.

A few feet from him he saw a strange tableau. Backed against another tree stood a large wolf, at bay, blood trickling from gashes about his shoulder; while before him, crouching for a spring, the warrior saw a great panther. Cororuc wondered at the cause of the battle. Not often the lords of the forest met in warfare. And he was puzzled by the snarls of the great cat. Savage, blood-lusting, yet they held a strange note of fear; and the beast seemed hesitant to spring in.

Just why Cororuc chose to take the part of the wolf, he himself could not have said. Doubtless it was just the reckless chivalry of the Celt in him, an admiration for the dauntless attitude of the wolf against his far more powerful foe. Be that as it may, Cororuc, characteristically forgetting his bow and taking the more reckless course, drew his sword and leaped in front of the panther. But he had no chance to use it. The panther, whose nerve appeared to be already somewhat shaken, uttered a startled screech and disappeared among the trees so quickly that Cororuc wondered if he had really seen a panther. He turned to the wolf, wondering if it would leap upon him. It was watching him, half crouching; slowly it stepped away from the tree, and still watching him, backed away a few yards, then turned and made off with a strange shambling gait. As the warrior watched it vanish into the forest, an uncanny feeling came over him; he had seen many wolves, he had hunted them and had been hunted by them, but he had never seen such a wolf before.

He hesitated and then walked warily after the wolf, following the tracks that were plainly defined in the soft loam. He did not hasten, being merely content to follow the tracks. After a short distance, he stopped short, the hairs on his neck seeming to bristle. Only the tracks of the hind feet showed: the wolf was walking erect.

He glanced about him. There was no sound; the forest was silent. He felt an impulse to turn and put as much territory between him and the mystery as possible, but his Celtic curiosity would not allow it. He followed the trail. And then it ceased altogether. Beneath a great tree the tracks vanished. Cororuc felt the cold sweat on his forehead. What kind of place was that forest? Was he being led astray and eluded by some inhuman, supernatural monster of the woodlands, who sought to ensnare him? And Cororuc backed away, his sword lifted, his courage not allowing him to run, but greatly desiring to do so. And so he came again to the tree where he had first seen the wolf. The trail he had followed led away from it in another direction and Cororuc took it up, almost running in his haste to get out of the vicinity of a wolf who walked on two legs and then vanished in the air.

The trail wound about more tediously than ever, appearing and disappearing within a dozen feet, but it was well for Cororuc that it did, for thus he heard the voices of the men coming up the path before they saw him. He took to a tall tree that branched over the trail, lying close to the great bole, along a wide-flung branch.

Three men were coming down the forest path.

One was a big, burly fellow, vastly over six feet in height, with a long red beard and a great mop of red hair. In contrast, his eyes were a beady black. He was dressed in deerskins, and armed with a great sword.

Of the two others, one was a lanky, villainous-looking scoundrel, with only one eye, and the other was a small, wizened man, who squinted hideously with both beady eyes.

Cororuc knew them, by descriptions the Cornishmen had made between curses, and it was in his excitement to get a better view of the most villainous murderer in Britain that he slipped from the tree branch and plunged to the ground directly between them.

He was up on the instant, his sword out. He could expect no mercy; for he knew that the red-haired man was Buruc the Cruel, the scourge of Cornwall.

The bandit chief bellowed a foul curse and whipped out his great sword. He avoided the Briton's furious thrust by a swift backward leap and then the battle was on. Buruc rushed the warrior from the front, striving to beat him down by sheer weight; while the lanky, one-eyed villain slipped around, trying to get behind him. The smaller man had retreated to the edge of the forest. The fine art of the fence was unknown to those early swordsmen. It was hack, slash, stab, the full weight of the arm behind each blow. The terrific blows crashing on his shield beat Cororuc to the ground, and the lanky, one-eyed villain rushed in to finish him. Cororuc spun about without rising, cut the bandit's legs from under him and stabbed him as he fell, then threw himself to one side and to his feet, in time to avoid Buruc's sword. Again, driving his shield up to catch the bandit's sword in midair, he deflected it and whirled his own with all his power. Buruc's head flew from his shoulders.

Then Cororuc, turning, saw the wizened bandit scurry into the forest. He raced after him, but the fellow had disappeared among the trees. Knowing the uselessness of attempting to pursue him, Cororuc turned and raced down the trail. He did not know if there were more bandits in that direction, but he did know that if he expected to get out of the forest at all, he would have to do it swiftly. Without doubt the villain who had escaped would have all the other bandits out, and soon they would be beating the woodlands for him.

After running for some distance down the path and seeing no sign of any enemy, he stopped and climbed into the topmost branches of a tall tree that towered above its fellows.

On all sides he seemed surrounded by a leafy ocean. To the west he could see the hills he had avoided. To the north, far in the distance, other hills rose; to the south the forest ran, an unbroken sea. But to the east, far away, he could barely see the line that marked the thinning out of the forest into the fertile plains. Miles and miles away, he knew not how many, but it meant more pleasant travel, villages of men, people of his own race. He was surprized that he was able to see that far, but the tree in which he stood was a giant of its kind.

Before he started to descend, he glanced about nearer at hand. He could trace the faintly marked line of the trail he had been following, running away into the east; and could make out other trails leading into it, or away from it. Then a glint caught his eye. He fixed his gaze on a glade some distance down the trail and saw, presently, a party of men enter and vanish. Here and there, on every trail, he caught glances of the glint of accouterments, the waving of foliage. So the squinting villain had already roused the bandits. They were all around him; he was virtually surrounded.

A faintly heard burst of savage yells, from back up the trail, startled him. So, they had already thrown a cordon about the place of the fight and had found him gone. Had he not fled swiftly, he would have been caught. He was outside the cordon, but the bandits were all about him. Swiftly he slipped from the tree and glided into the forest.

Then began the most exciting hunt Cororuc had ever engaged in; for he was the hunted and men were the hunters. Gliding, slipping from bush to bush and from tree to tree, now running swiftly, now crouching in a covert, Cororuc fled, ever eastward, not daring to turn back lest he be driven farther back into the forest. At times he was forced to turn his course; in fact, he very seldom fled in a straight course, yet always he managed to work farther eastward.

Sometimes he crouched in bushes or lay along some leafy branch, and saw bandits pass so close to him that he could have touched them. Once or twice they sighted him and he fled, bounding over logs and bushes, darting in and out among the trees; and always he eluded them.

It was in one of those headlong flights that he noticed he had entered a defile of small hills, of which he had been unaware, and looking back over his shoulder, saw that his pursuers had halted, within full sight. Without pausing to ruminate on so strange a thing, he darted around a great boulder, felt a vine or something catch his foot, and was thrown headlong. Simultaneously, something struck the youth's head, knocking him senseless.

When Cororuc recovered his senses, he found that he was bound, hand and foot. He was being borne along, over rough ground. He looked about him. Men carried him on their shoulders, but such men as he had never seen before. Scarce above four feet stood the tallest, and they were small of build and very dark of complexion. Their eyes were black; and most of them went stooped forward, as if from a lifetime spent in crouching and hiding; peering furtively on all sides. They were armed with small bows, arrows, spears and daggers, all pointed, not with crudely worked bronze but with flint and obsidian, of the finest workmanship. They were dressed in finely dressed hides of rabbits and other small animals, and a kind of coarse cloth; and many were tattooed from head to foot in ocher and woad. There were perhaps twenty in all. What sort of men were they? Cororuc had never seen the like.

They were going down a ravine, on both sides of which steep cliffs rose. Presently they seemed to come to a blank wall, where the ravine appeared to come to an abrupt stop. Here, at a word from one who seemed to be in command, they set the Briton down, and seizing hold of a large boulder, drew it to one side. A small cavern was exposed, seeming to vanish away into the earth; then the strange men picked up the Briton and moved forward.

Cororuc's hair bristled at the thought of being borne into that forbidding-looking cave. What manner of men were they? In all Britain and Alba, in Cornwall or Ireland, Cororuc had never seen such men. Small dwarfish men, who dwelt in the earth. Cold sweat broke out on the youth's forehead. Surely they were the malevolent dwarfs of whom the Cornish people had spoken, who dwelt in their caverns by day, and by night sallied forth to steal and burn dwellings, even slaying if the opportunity arose! You will hear of them, even today, if you journey in Cornwall.

The men, or elves, if such they were, bore him into the cavern, others entering and drawing the boulder back into place. For a moment all was darkness, and then torches began to glow, away off. And at a shout they moved on. Other men of the caves came forward, with the torches.

Cororuc looked about him. The torches shed a vague glow over the scene. Sometimes one, sometimes another wall of the cave showed for an instant, and the Briton was vaguely aware that they were covered with paintings, crudely done, yet with a certain skill his own race could not equal. But always the roof remained unseen. Cororuc knew that the seemingly small cavern had merged into a cave of surprizing size. Through the vague light of the torches the strange people moved, came and went, silently, like shadows of the dim past.

He felt the cords of thongs that bound his feet loosened. He was lifted upright.

"Walk straight ahead," said a voice, speaking the language of his own race, and he felt a spear point touch the back of his neck.

And straight ahead he walked, feeling his sandals scrape on the stone floor of the cave, until they came to a place where the floor tilted upward. The pitch was steep and the stone was so slippery that Cororuc could not have climbed it alone. But his captors pushed him, and pulled him, and he saw that long, strong vines were strung from somewhere at the top.

Those the strange men seized, and bracing their feet against the slippery ascent, went up swiftly. When their feet found level surface again, the cave made a turn, and Cororuc blundered out into a fire-lit scene that made him gasp.

The cave debouched into a cavern so vast as to be almost incredible. The mighty walls swept up into a great arched roof that vanished in the darkness. A level floor lay between, and through it flowed a river; an underground river. From under one wall it flowed to vanish silently under the other. An arched stone bridge, seemingly of natural make, spanned the current.

All around the walls of the great cavern, which was roughly circular, were smaller caves, and before each glowed a fire. Higher up were other caves, regularly arranged, tier on tier. Surely human men could not have built such a city.

In and out among the caves, on the level floor of the main cavern, people were going about what seemed daily tasks. Men were talking together and mending weapons, some were fishing from the river; women were replenishing fires, preparing garments; and altogether it might have been any other village in Britain, to judge from their occupations. But it all struck Cororuc as extremely unreal; the strange place, the small, silent people, going about their tasks, the river flowing silently through it all.

Then they became aware of the prisoner and flocked about him. There was none of the shouting, abuse and indignities, such as savages usually heap on their captives, as the small men drew about Cororuc, silently eying him with malevolent, wolfish stares. The warrior shuddered, in spite of himself.

But his captors pushed through the throng, driving the Briton before them. Close to the bank of the river, they stopped and drew away from around him.

Two great fires leaped and flickered in front of him and there was something between them. He focused his gaze and presently made out the object. A high stone seat, like a throne; and in it seated an aged man, with a long white beard, silent, motionless, but with black eyes that gleamed like a wolf's.

The ancient was clothed in some kind of a single, flowing garment. One claw-like hand rested on the seat near him, skinny, crooked fingers, with talons like a hawk's. The other hand was hidden among his garments.

The firelight danced and flickered; now the old man stood out clearly, his hooked, beak-like nose and long beard thrown into bold relief; now he seemed to recede until he was invisible to the gaze of the Briton, except for his glittering eyes.

"Speak, Briton!" The words came suddenly, strong, clear, without a hint of age. "Speak, what would ye say?"

Cororuc, taken aback, stammered and said, "Why, why--what manner people are you? Why have you taken me prisoner? Are you elves?"

"We are Picts," was the stern reply.

"Picts!" Cororuc had heard tales of those ancient people from the Gaelic Britons; some said that they still lurked in the hills of Siluria, but--

"I have fought Picts in Caledonia," the Briton protested; "they are short but massive and misshapen; not at all like you!"

"They are not true Picts," came the stern retort. "Look about you, Briton," with a wave of an arm, "you see the remnants of a vanishing race; a race that once ruled Britain from sea to sea."

The Briton stared, bewildered.

"Harken, Briton," the voice continued; "harken, barbarian, while I tell to you the tale of the lost race."

The firelight flickered and danced, throwing vague reflections on the towering walls and on the rushing, silent current.

The ancient's voice echoed through the mighty cavern.

"Our people came from the south. Over the islands, over the Inland Sea. Over the snow-topped mountains, where some remained, to slay any enemies who might follow. Down into the fertile plains we came. Over all the land we spread. We became wealthy and prosperous. Then two kings arose in the land, and he who conquered, drove out the conquered. So many of us made boats and set sail for the far-off cliffs that gleamed white in the sunlight. We found a fair land with fertile plains. We found a race of red-haired barbarians, who dwelt in caves. Mighty giants, of great bodies and small minds.

"We built our huts of wattle. We tilled the soil. We cleared the forest. We drove the red-haired giants back into the forest. Farther we drove them back until at last they fled to the mountains of the west and the mountains of the north. We were rich. We were prosperous.

"Then," and his voice thrilled with rage and hate, until it seemed to reverberate through the cavern, "then the Celts came. From the isles of the west, in their rude coracles they came. In the west they landed, but they were not satisfied with the west. They marched eastward and seized the fertile plains. We fought. They were stronger. They were fierce fighters and they were armed with weapons of bronze, whereas we had only weapons of flint.

"We were driven out. They enslaved us. They drove us into the forest. Some of us fled into the mountains of the west. Many fled into the mountains of the north. There they mingled with the red-haired giants we drove out so long ago, and became a race of monstrous dwarfs, losing all the arts of peace and gaining only the ability to fight.

"But some of us swore that we would never leave the land we had fought for. But the Celts pressed us. There were many, and more came. So we took to caverns, to ravines, to caves. We, who had always dwelt in huts that let in much light, who had always tilled the soil, we learned to dwell like beasts, in caves where no sunlight ever entered. Caves we found, of which this is the greatest; caves we made.

"You, Briton," the voice became a shriek and a long arm was outstretched in accusation, "you and your race! You have made a free, prosperous nation into a race of earth-rats! We who never fled, who dwelt in the air and the sunlight close by the sea where traders came, we must flee like hunted beasts and burrow like moles! But at night! Ah, then for our vengeance! Then we slip from our hiding places, ravines and caves, with torch and dagger! Look, Briton!"

And following the gesture, Cororuc saw a rounded post of some kind of very hard wood, set in a niche in the stone floor, close to the bank. The floor about the niche was charred as if by old fires.

Cororuc stared, uncomprehending. Indeed, he understood little of what had passed. That these people were even human, he was not at all certain. He had heard so much of them as "little people." Tales of their doings, their hatred of the race of man, and their maliciousness flocked back to him. Little he knew that he was gazing on one of the mysteries of the ages. That the tales which the ancient Gaels told of the Picts, already warped, would become even more warped from age to age, to result in tales of elves, dwarfs, trolls and fairies, at first accepted and then rejected, entire, by the race of men, just as the Neanderthal monsters resulted in tales of goblins and ogres. But of that Cororuc neither knew nor cared, and the ancient was speaking again.

"There, there, Briton," exulted he, pointing to the post, "there you shall pay! A scant payment for the debt your race owes mine, but to the fullest of your extent."

The old man's exultation would have been fiendish, except for a certain high purpose in his face. He was sincere. He believed that he was only taking just vengeance; and he seemed like some great patriot for a mighty, lost cause.

"But I am a Briton!" stammered Cororuc. "It was not my people who drove your race into exile! They were Gaels, from Ireland. I am a Briton and my race came from Gallia only a hundred years ago. We conquered the Gaels and drove them into Erin, Wales and Caledonia, even as they drove your race."

"No matter!" The ancient chief was on his feet. "A Celt is a Celt. Briton, or Gael, it makes no difference. Had it not been Gael, it would have been Briton. Every Celt who falls into our hands must pay, be it warrior or woman, babe or king. Seize him and bind him to the post."

In an instant Cororuc was bound to the post, and he saw, with horror, the Picts piling firewood about his feet.

"And when you are sufficiently burned, Briton," said the ancient, "this dagger that has drunk the blood of a hundred Britons, shall quench its thirst in yours."

"But never have I harmed a Pict!" Cororuc gasped, struggling with his bonds.

"You pay, not for what you did, but for what your race has done," answered the ancient sternly. "Well do I remember the deeds of the Celts when first they landed on Britain--the shrieks of the slaughtered, the screams of ravished girls, the smokes of burning villages, the plundering."

Cororuc felt his short neck-hairs bristle. When first the Celts landed on Britain! That was over five hundred years ago!

And his Celtic curiosity would not let him keep still, even at the stake with the Picts preparing to light firewood piled about him.

"You could not remember that. That was ages ago."

The ancient looked at him somberly. "And I am age-old. In my youth I was a witch-finder, and an old woman witch cursed me as she writhed at the stake. She said I should live until the last child of the Pictish race had passed. That I should see the once mighty nation go down into oblivion and then--and only then--should I follow it. For she put upon me the curse of life everlasting."

Then his voice rose until it filled the cavern. "But the curse was nothing. Words can do no harm, can do nothing, to a man. I live. A hundred generations have I seen come and go, and yet another hundred. What is time? The sun rises and sets, and another day has passed into oblivion. Men watch the sun and set their lives by it. They league themselves on every hand with time. They count the minutes that race them into eternity. Man outlived the centuries ere he began to reckon time. Time is man-made. Eternity is the work of the gods. In this cavern there is no such thing as time. There are no stars, no sun. Without is time; within is eternity. We count not time. Nothing marks the speeding of the hours. The youths go forth. They see the sun, the stars. They reckon time. And they pass. I was a young man when I entered this cavern. I have never left it. As you reckon time, I may have dwelt here a thousand years; or an hour. When not banded by time, the soul, the mind, call it what you will, can conquer the body. And the wise men of the race, in my youth, knew more than the outer world will ever learn. When I feel that my body begins to weaken, I take the magic draft, that is known only to me, of all the world. It does not give immortality; that is the work of the mind alone; but it rebuilds the body. The race of Picts vanish; they fade like the snow on the mountain. And when the last is gone, this dagger shall free me from the world." Then in a swift change of tone, "Light the fagots!"

Cororuc's mind was fairly reeling. He did not in the least understand what he had just heard. He was positive that he was going mad; and what he saw the next minute assured him of it.

Through the throng came a wolf; and he knew that it was the wolf whom he had rescued from the panther close by the ravine in the forest!

Strange, how long ago and far away that seemed! Yes, it was the same wolf. That same strange, shambling gait. Then the thing stood erect and raised its front feet to its head. What nameless horror was that?

Then the wolf's head fell back, disclosing a man's face. The face of a Pict; one of the first "werewolves." The man stepped out of the wolfskin and strode forward, calling something. A Pict just starting to light the wood about the Briton's feet drew back the torch and hesitated.

The wolf-Pict stepped forward and began to speak to the chief, using Celtic, evidently for the prisoner's benefit. Cororuc was surprized to hear so many speak his language, not reflecting upon its comparative simplicity, and the ability of the Picts.

"What is this?" asked the Pict who had played wolf. "A man is to be burned who should not be!"

"How?" exclaimed the old man fiercely, clutching his long beard. "Who are you to go against a custom of age-old antiquity?"

"I met a panther," answered the other, "and this Briton risked his life to save mine. Shall a Pict show ingratitude?"

And as the ancient hesitated, evidently pulled one way by his fanatical lust for revenge, and the other by his equally fierce racial pride, the Pict burst into a wild flight of oration, carried on in his own language. At last the ancient chief nodded.

"A Pict ever paid his debts," said he with impressive grandeur. "Never a Pict forgets. Unbind him. No Celt shall ever say that a Pict showed ingratitude."

Cororuc was released, and as, like a man in a daze, he tried to stammer his thanks, the chief waved them aside.

"A Pict never forgets a foe, ever remembers a friendly deed," he replied.

"Come," murmured his Pictish friend, tugging at the Celt's arm.

He led the way into a cave leading away from the main cavern. As they went, Cororuc looked back, to see the ancient chief seated upon his stone throne, his eyes gleaming as he seemed to gaze back through the lost glories of the ages; on each hand the fires leaped and flickered. A figure of grandeur, the king of a lost race.

On and on Cororuc's guide led him. And at last they emerged and the Briton saw the starlit sky above him.

"In that way is a village of your tribesmen," said the Pict, pointing, "where you will find a welcome until you wish to take up your journey anew."

And he pressed gifts on the Celt; gifts of garments of cloth and finely worked deerskin, beaded belts, a fine horn bow with arrows skillfully tipped with obsidian. Gifts of food. His own weapons were returned to him.

"But an instant," said the Briton, as the Pict turned to go. "I followed your tracks in the forest. They vanished." There was a question in his voice.

The Pict laughed softly. "I leaped into the branches of the tree. Had you looked up, you would have seen me. If ever you wish a friend, you will ever find one in Berula, chief among the Alban Picts."

He turned and vanished. And Cororuc strode through the moonlight toward the Celtic village.

THE END

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HAWKS OF OUTREMER

by Robert E. Howard

"The still, white, creeping road slips on.
Marked by the bones of man and beast.
What comeliness and might have gone
To pad the highway of the East!
Long dynasties of fallen rose.
The glories of a thousand wars.
A million lovers' hearts compose
The dust upon the road to Fars."
--Vansittart

Chapter I

: A Man Returns

"Halt!" The bearded man-at-arms swung his pike about, growling like a surly mastiff. It paid to be wary on the road to Antioch. The stars blinked redly through the thick night and their light was not sufficient for the fellow to make out what sort of man it was who loomed so gigantically before him.

An iron-clad hand shot out suddenly and closed on the soldier's mailed shoulder in a grasp that numbed his whole arm. From beneath the helmet the guardsman saw the blaze of ferocious blue eyes that seemed lambent, even in the dark.

"Saints preserve us!" gasped the frightened man-at-arms, "Cormac FitzGeoffrey! Avaunt! Back to Hell with ye, like a good knight! I swear to you, sir--"

"Swear me no oaths," growled the knight. "What is this talk?"

"Are you not an incorporeal spirit?" mouthed the soldier. "Were you not slain by the Moorish corsairs on your homeward voyage?"

"By the accursed gods!" snarled FitzGeoffrey. "Does this hand feel like smoke?"

He sank his mailed fingers into the soldier's arm and grinned bleakly at the resultant howl.

"Enough of such mummery; tell me who is within that tavern."

"Only my master, Sir Rupert de Vaile, of Rouen."

"Good enough," grunted the other. "He is one of the few men I count friends, in the East or elsewhere."

The big warrior strode to the tavern door and entered, treading lightly as a cat despite his heavy armor. The man-at-arms rubbed his arm and stared after him curiously, noting, in the dim light, that FitzGeoffrey bore a shield with the horrific emblem of his family--a white grinning skull. The guardsman knew him of old--a turbulent character, a savage fighter and the only man among the Crusaders who had been esteemed stronger than Richard the Lion-hearted. But FitzGeoffrey had taken ship for his native isle even before Richard had departed from the Holy Land. The Third Crusade had ended in failure and disgrace; most of the Frankish knights had followed their kings homeward. What was this grim Irish killer doing on the road to Antioch?

Sir Rupert de Vaile, once of Rouen, now a lord of the fast-fading Outremer, turned as the great form bulked in the doorway. Cormac FitzGeoffrey was a fraction of an inch above six feet, but with his mighty shoulders and two hundred pounds of iron muscle, he seemed shorter. The Norman stared in surprized recognition, and sprang to his feet. His fine face shone with sincere pleasure.

"Cormac, by the saints! Why, man, we heard that you were dead!"

Cormac returned the hearty grip, while his thin lips curved slightly in what would have been, in another man, a broad grin of greeting. Sir Rupert was a tall man, and well knit, but he seemed almost slight beside the huge Irish warrior who combined bulk with a sort of dynamic aggressiveness that was apparent in his every movement.

FitzGeoffrey was clean-shaven and the various scars that showed on his dark, grim face lent his already formidable features a truly sinister aspect. When he took off his plain visorless helmet and thrust back his mail coif, his square-cut, black hair that topped his low broad forehead contrasted strongly with his cold blue eyes. A true son of the most indomitable and savage race that ever trod the bloodstained fields of battle, Cormac FitzGeoffrey looked to be what he was--a ruthless fighter, born to the game of war, to whom the ways of violence and bloodshed were as natural as the ways of peace are to the average man.

Son of a woman of the O'Briens and a renegade Norman knight, Geoffrey the Bastard, in whose veins, it is said, coursed the blood of William the Conqueror, Cormac had seldom known an hour of peace or ease in all his thirty years of violent life. He was born in a feud-torn and blood-drenched land, and raised in a heritage of hate and savagery. The ancient culture of Erin had long crumbled before the repeated onslaughts of Norsemen and Danes. Harried on all sides by cruel foes, the rising civilization of the Celts had faded before the fierce necessity of incessant conflict, and the merciless struggle for survival had made the Gaels as savage as the heathens who assailed them.

Now, in Cormac's time, war upon red war swept the crimson isle, where clan fought clan, and the Norman adventurers tore at one another's throats, or resisted the attacks of the Irish, playing tribe against tribe, while from Norway and the Orkneys the still half-pagan Vikings ravaged all impartially.

A vague realization of all this flashed through Sir Rupert's mind as he stood staring at his friend.

"We heard you were slain in a sea-fight off Sicily," he repeated.

Cormac shrugged his shoulders. "Many died then, it is true, and I was struck senseless by a stone from a ballista. Doubtless that is how the rumor started. But you see me, as much alive as ever."

"Sit down, old friend." Sir Rupert thrust forward one of the rude benches which formed part of the tavern's furniture. "What is forward in the West?"

Cormac took the wine goblet proffered him by a dark-skinned servitor, and drank deeply.

"Little of note," said he. "In France the king counts his pence and squabbles with his nobles. Richard--if he lives--languishes somewhere in Germany, 'tis thought. In England Shane--that is to say, John--oppresses the people and betrays the barons. And in Ireland--Hell!" He laughed shortly and without mirth. "What shall I say of Ireland but the same old tale? Gael and foreigner cut each other's throat and plot together against the king. John De Coursey, since Hugh de Lacy supplanted him as governor, has raged like a madman, burning and pillaging, while Donal O'Brien lurks in the west to destroy what remains. Yet, by Satan, I think this land is but little better."

"Yet there is peace of a sort now," murmured Sir Rupert.

"Aye--peace while the jackal Saladin gathers his powers," grunted Cormac. "Think you he will rest idle while Acre, Antioch and Tripoli remain in Christian hands? He but waits an excuse to seize the remnants of Outremer."

Sir Rupert shook his head, his eyes shadowed.

"It is a naked land and a bloody one. Were it not akin to blasphemy I could curse the day I followed my King eastward. Betimes I dream of the orchards of Normandy, the deep cool forests and the dreaming vineyards. Methinks my happiest hours were when a page of twelve years--"

"At twelve," grunted FitzGeoffrey, "I was running wild with shock-head kerns on the naked fens--I wore wolf skins, weighed near to fourteen stone, and had killed three men."

Sir Rupert looked curiously at his friend. Separated from Cormac's native land by a width of sea and the breadth of Britain, the Norman knew but little of the affairs in that far isle. But he knew vaguely that Cormac's life had not been an easy one. Hated by the Irish and despised by the Normans, he had paid back contempt and ill-treatment with savage hate and ruthless vengeance. It was known that he owned a shadow of allegiance only to the great house of Fitzgerald, who, as much Welsh as Norman, had even then begun to take up Irish customs and Irish quarrels.

"You wear another sword than that you wore when I saw you last."

"They break in my hands," said Cormac. "Three Turkish sabers went into the forging of the sword I wielded at Joppa--yet it shattered like glass in that sea-fight off Sicily. I took this from the body of a Norse sea-king who led a raid into Munster. It was forged in Norway--see the pagan runes on the steel?"

He drew the sword and the great blade shimmered bluely, like a thing alive in the candle light. The servants crossed themselves and Sir Rupert shook his head.

"You should not have drawn it here--they say blood follows such a sword."

"Bloodshed follows my trail anyway," growled Cormac. "This blade has already drunk FitzGeoffrey blood--with this that Norse sea-king slew my brother, Shane."

"And you wear such a sword?" exclaimed Sir Rupert in horror. "No good will come of that evil blade, Cormac!"

"Why not?" asked the big warrior impatiently. "It's a good blade--I wiped out the stain of my brother's blood when I slew his slayer. By Satan, but that sea-king was a grand sight in his coat of mail with silvered scales. His silvered helmet was strong too--ax, helmet and skull shattered together."

"You had another brother, did you not?"

"Aye--Donal. Eochaidh O'Donnell ate his heart out after the battle at Coolmanagh. There was a feud between us at the time, so it may be Eochaidh merely saved me the trouble--but for all that I burned the O'Donnell in his own castle."

"How came you to first ride on the Crusade?" asked Sir Rupert curiously. "Were you stirred with a desire to cleanse your soul by smiting the Paynim?"

"Ireland was too hot for me," answered the Norman-Gael candidly. "Lord Shamus MacGearailt--James Fitzgerald--wished to make peace with the English king and I feared he would buy favor by delivering me into the hands of the king's governor. As there was feud between my family and most of the Irish clans, there was nowhere for me to go. I was about to seek my fortune in Scotland when young Eamonn Fitzgerald was stung by the hornet of Crusade and I accompanied him."

"But you gained favor with Richard--tell me the tale."

"Soon told. It was on the plains of Azotus when we came to grips with the Turks. Aye, you were there! I was fighting alone in the thick of the fray and helmets and turbans were cracking like eggs all around when I noted a strong knight in the forefront of our battle. He cut deeper and deeper into the close-ranked lines of the heathen and his heavy mace scattered brains like water. But so dented was his shield and so stained with blood his armor, I could not tell who he might be.

"But suddenly his horse went down and in an instant he was hemmed in on all sides by the howling fiends who bore him down by sheer weight of numbers. So hacking a way to his side I dismounted--"

"Dismounted?" exclaimed Sir Rupert in amazement.

Cormac's head jerked up in irritation at the interruption. "Why not?" he snapped. "I am no French she-knight to fear wading in the muck--anyway, I fight better on foot. Well, I cleared a space with a sweep or so of my sword, and the fallen knight, the press being lightened, came up roaring like a bull and swinging his blood-clotted mace with such fury he nearly brained me as well as the Turks. A charge of English knights swept the heathen away and when he lifted his visor I saw I had succored Richard of England.

"'Who are you and who is your master?' said he.

"'I am Cormac FitzGeoffrey and I have no master,' said I. 'I followed young Eamonn Fitzgerald to the Holy Land and since he fell before the walls of Acre, I seek my fortune alone.'

"'What think ye of me as a master?' asked he, while the battle raged half a bow-shot about us.

"'You fight reasonably well for a man with Saxon blood in his veins,' I answered, 'but I own allegiance to no English king.'

"He swore like a trooper. 'By the bones of the saints,' said he, 'that had cost another man his head. You saved my life, but for this insolence, no prince shall knight you!'

"'Keep your knighthoods and be damned,' said I. 'I am a chief in Ireland--but we waste words; yonder are pagan heads to be smashed.'

"Later he bade me to his royal presence and waxed merry with me; a rare drinker he is, though a fool withal. But I distrust kings--I attached myself to the train of a brave and gallant young knight of France--the Sieur Gerard de Gissclin, full of insane ideals of chivalry, but a noble youth.

"When peace was made between the hosts, I heard hints of a renewal of strife between the Fitzgeralds and the Le Boteliers, and Lord Shamus having been slain by Nial Mac Art, and I being in favor with the king anyway, I took leave of Sieur Gerard and betook myself back to Erin. Well--we swept Ormond with torch and sword and hanged old Sir William le Botelier to his own barbican. Then, the Geraldines having no particular need of my sword at the moment, I bethought myself once more of Sieur Gerard, to whom I owed my life and which debt I have not yet had opportunity to pay. How, Sir Rupert, dwells he still in his castle of Ali-El-Yar?"

Sir Rupert's face went suddenly white, and he leaned back as if shrinking from something. Cormac's head jerked up and his dark face grew more forbidding and fraught with somber potentialities. He seized the Norman's arm in an unconsciously savage grip.

"Speak, man," he rasped. "What ails you?"

"Sieur Gerard," half-whispered Sir Rupert. "Had you not heard? Ali-El-Yar lies in smoldering ruins and Gerard is dead."

Cormac snarled like a mad dog, his terrible eyes blazing with a fearful light. He shook Sir Rupert in the intensity of his passion.

"Who did the deed? He shall die, were he Emperor of Byzantium!"

"I know not!" Sir Rupert gasped, his mind half-stunned by the blast of the Gael's primitive fury. "There be foul rumors--Sieur Gerard loved a girl in a sheik's harem, it is said. A horde of wild riders from the desert assailed his castle and a rider broke through to ask aid of the baron Conrad Von Gonler. But Conrad refused--"

"Aye!" snarled Cormac, with a savage gesture. "He hated Gerard because long ago the youngster had the best of him at sword-play on shipboard before old Frederick Barbarossa's eyes. And what then?"

"Ali-El-Yar fell with all its people. Their stripped and mutilated bodies lay among the coals, but no sign was found of Gerard. Whether he died before or after the attack on the castle is not known, but dead he must be, since no demand for ransom has been made."

"Thus Saladin keeps the peace!"

Sir Rupert, who knew Cormac's unreasoning hatred for the great Kurdish sultan, shook his head. "This was no work of his--there is incessant bickering along the border--Christian as much at fault as Moslem. It could not be otherwise with Frankish barons holding castles in the very heart of Muhammadan country. There are many private feuds and there are wild desert and mountain tribes who owe no lordship even to Saladin, and wage their own wars. Many suppose that the sheik Nureddin El Ghor destroyed Ali-El-Yar and put Sieur Gerard to death."

Cormac caught up his helmet.

"Wait!" exclaimed Sir Rupert, rising. "What would you do?"

Cormac laughed savagely. "What would I do? I have eaten the bread of the de Gissclins. Am I a jackal to sneak home and leave my patron to the kites? Out on it!"

"But wait," Sir Rupert urged. "What will your life be worth if you ride on Nureddin's trail alone? I will return to Antioch and gather my retainers; we will avenge your friend together."

"Nureddin is a half-independent chief and I am a masterless wanderer," rumbled the Norman-Gael, "but you are Seneschal of Antioch. If you ride over the border with your men-at-arms, the swine Saladin will take advantage to break the truce and sweep the remnants of the Christian kingdoms into the sea. They are but weak shells, as it is, shadows of the glories of Baldwin and Bohemund. No--the FitzGeoffreys wreak their own vengeance. I ride alone."

He jammed his helmet into place and with a gruff "Farewell!" he turned and strode into the night, roaring for his horse. A trembling servant brought the great black stallion, which reared and snorted with a flash of wicked teeth. Cormac seized the reins and savagely jerked down the rearing steed, swinging into the saddle before the pawing front hoofs touched earth.

"Hate and the glutting of vengeance!" he yelled savagely, as the great stallion whirled away, and Sir Rupert, staring bewilderedly after him, heard the swiftly receding clash of the brazen-shod hoofs. Cormac FitzGeoffrey was riding east.

Chapter II
: The Cast of An Ax

White dawn surged out of the Orient to break in rose-red billows on the hills of Outremer. The rich tints softened the rugged outlines, deepened the blue wastes of the sleeping desert.

The castle of the baron Conrad Von Gonler frowned out over a wild and savage waste. Once a stronghold of the Seljuk Turks, its metamorphosis into the manor of a Frankish lord had abated none of the Eastern menace of its appearance. The walls had been strengthened and a barbican built in place of the usual wide gates. Otherwise the keep had not been altered.

Now in the dawn a grim, dark figure rode up to the deep, waterless moat which encircled the stronghold, and smote with iron-clad fist on hollow-ringing shield until the echoes reverberated among the hills. A sleepy man-at-arms thrust his head and his pike over the wall above the barbican and bellowed a challenge.

The lone rider threw back his helmeted head, disclosing a face dark with a passion that an all-night's ride had not cooled in the least.

"You keep rare watch here," roared Cormac FitzGeoffrey. "Is it because you're so hand-in-glove with the Paynim that you fear no attack? Where is that ale-guzzling swine you call your liege?"

"The baron is at wine," the fellow answered sullenly, in broken English.

"So early?" marveled Cormac.

"Nay," the other gave a surly grin, "he has feasted all night."

"Wine-bibber! Glutton!" raged Cormac. "Tell him I have business with him."

"And what shall I say your business is, Lord FitzGeoffrey?" asked the carl, impressed.

"Tell him I bring a passport to Hell!" yelled Cormac, gnashing his teeth, and the scared soldier vanished like a puppet on a string.

The Norman-Gael sat his horse impatiently, shield slung on his shoulders, lance in its stirrup socket, and to his surprize, suddenly the barbican door swung wide and out of it strutted a fantastic figure. Baron Conrad Von Gonler was short and fat; broad of shoulder and portly of belly, though still a young man. His long arms and wide shoulders had gained him a reputation as a deadly broadsword man, but just now he looked little of the fighter. Germany and Austria sent many noble knights to the Holy Land. Baron Von Gonler was not one of them.

His only arm was a gold-chased dagger in a richly brocaded sheath. He wore no armor, and his costume, flaming with gay silk and heavy with gold, was a bizarre mingling of European gauds and Oriental finery. In one hand, on each finger of which sparkled a great jewel, he held a golden wine goblet. A band of drunken revelers reeled out behind him--minnesingers, dwarfs, dancing girls, wine-companions, vacuous-faced, blinking like owls in the daylight. All the boot-kissers and hangers-on that swarm after a rich and degenerate lord trooped with their master--scum of both races. The luxury of the East had worked quick ruin on Baron Von Gonler.

"Well," shouted the baron, "who is it wishes to interrupt my drinking?"

"Any but a drunkard would know Cormac FitzGeoffrey," snarled the horseman, his lip writhing back from his strong teeth in contempt. "We have an account to settle."

That name and Cormac's tone had been enough to sober any drunken knight of the Outremer. But Von Gonler was not only drunk; he was a degenerate fool. The baron took a long drink while his drunken crew stared curiously at the savage figure on the other side of the dry moat, whispering to one another.

"Once you were a man, Von Gonler," said Cormac in a tone of concentrated venom; "now you have become a groveling debauchee. Well, that's your own affair. The matter I have in mind is another--why did you refuse aid to the Sieur de Gissclin?"

The German's puffy, arrogant face took on new hauteur. He pursed his thick lips haughtily, while his bleared eyes blinked over his bulbous nose like an owl. He was an image of pompous stupidity that made Cormac grind his teeth.

"What was the Frenchman to me?" the baron retorted brutally. "It was his own fault--out of a thousand girls he might have taken, the young fool tried to steal one a sheik wanted himself. He, the purity of honor! Bah!"

He added a coarse jest and the creatures with him screamed with mirth, leaping and flinging themselves into obscene postures. Cormac's sudden and lion-like roar of fury gave them pause.

"Conrad Von Gonler!" thundered the maddened Gael, "I name you liar, traitor and coward--dastard, poltroon and villain! Arm yourself and ride out here on the plain. And haste--I can not waste much time on you--I must kill you quick and ride on lest another vermin escape me."

The baron laughed cynically, "Why should I fight you? You are not even a knight. You wear no knightly emblem on your shield."

"Evasions of a coward," raged FitzGeoffrey. "I am a chief in Ireland and I have cleft the skulls of men whose boots you are not worthy to touch. Will you arm yourself and ride out, or are you become the swinish coward I deem you?"

Von Gonler laughed in scornful anger.

"I need not risk my hide fighting you. I will not fight you, but I will have my men-at-arms fill your hide with crossbow bolts if you tarry longer."

"Von Gonler," Cormac's voice was deep and terrible in its brooding menace, "will you fight, or die in cold blood?"

The German burst into a sudden brainless shout of laughter.

"Listen to him!" he roared. "He threatens me--he on the other side of the moat, with the drawbridge lifted--I here in the midst of my henchmen!"

He smote his fat thigh and roared with his fool's laughter, while the debased men and women who served his pleasures laughed with him and insulted the grim Irish warrior with shrill anathema and indecent gestures. And suddenly Cormac, with a bitter curse, rose in his stirrups, snatched his battle-ax from his saddle-bow and hurled it with all his mighty strength.

The men-at-arms on the towers cried out and the dancing girls screamed. Von Gonler had thought himself to be out of reach--but there is no such thing as being out of reach of Norman-Irish vengeance. The heavy ax hissed as it clove the air and dashed out Baron Conrad's brains.

The fat, gross body buckled to the earth like a mass of melted tallow, one fat, white hand still gripping the empty wine goblet. The gay silks and cloth-of-gold were dabbled in a deeper red than ever was sold in the bazaar, and the jesters and dancers scattered like birds, screaming at the sight of that blasted head and the crimson ruin that had been a human face.

Cormac FitzGeoffrey made a fierce, triumphant gesture and voiced a deep-chested yell of such ferocious exultation that men blenched to hear. Then wheeling his black steed suddenly, he raced away before the dazed soldiers could get their wits together to send a shower of arrows after him.

He did not gallop far. The great steed was weary from a hard night's travel. Cormac soon swung in behind a jutting crag, and reining his horse up a steep incline, halted and looked back the way he had come. He was out of sight of the keep, but he heard no sounds of pursuit. A wait of some half-hour convinced him that no attempt had been made to follow him. It was dangerous and foolhardy to ride out of a safe castle into these hills. Cormac might well have been one of an ambushing force.

At any rate, whatever his enemies' thoughts were on the subject, it was evident that he need expect no present attempt at retaliation, and he grunted with angry satisfaction. He never shunned a fight, but just now he had other business on hand.

Cormac rode eastward.

Chapter III
: The Road to El Ghor

The way to El Ghor was rough indeed. Cormac wound his way between huge jagged boulders, across deep ravines and up treacherous steeps. The sun slowly climbed toward the zenith and the heat waves began to dance and shimmer. The sun beat fiercely on Cormac's helmeted head, and glancing back from the bare rocks, dazzled his narrowed eyes. But the big warrior gave no heed; in his own land he learned to defy sleet and snow and bitter cold; following the standard of Coeur de Lion, before the shimmering walls of Acre, on the dusty plains of Azotus, and before Joppa, he had become inured to the blaze of the Oriental sun, to the glare of naked sands, to the slashing dust winds.

At noon he halted long enough to allow the black stallion an hour's rest in the shade of a giant boulder. A tiny spring bubbled there, known to him of old, and it slaked the thirst of the man and the horse. The stallion cropped eagerly at the scrawny fringe of grass about the spring and Cormac ate of the dried meats he carried in a small pouch. Here he had watered his steed in the old days, when he rode with Gerard. Ali-El-Yar lay to the west; in the night he had swung around it in a wide circle as he rode to the castle of Von Gonler. He had had no wish to gaze on the moldering ruins. The nearest Moslem chief of any importance was Nureddin El Ghor, who with his brother-at-arms, Kosru Malik, the Seljuk, held the castle of El Ghor, in the hills to the east.

Cormac rode on stolidly through the savage heat. As mid-afternoon neared he rode up out of a deep, wide defile and came onto the higher levels of the hills. Up this defile he had ridden aforetime to raid the wild tribes to the east, and on the small plateaus at the head of the defile stood a gibbet where Sieur Gerard de Gissclin had once hanged a red-handed Turkoman chief as a warning to those tribes.

Now, as FitzGeoffrey rode up on the plateau, he saw the old tree again bore fruit. His keen eyes made out a human form suspended in midair, apparently by the wrists. A tall warrior in the peaked helmet and light mail shirt of a Moslem stood beneath, tentatively prodding at the victim with a spear, making the body sway and spin on the rope. A bay Turkoman horse stood near. Cormac's cold eyes narrowed. The man on the rope--his naked body glistened too white in the sun for a Turk. The Norman-Gael touched spurs to the black stallion and swept across the plateau at a headlong run.

At the sudden thunder of hoofs the Muhammadan started and whirled. Dropping the spear with which he had been tormenting the captive, he mounted swiftly, stringing a short heavy bow as he did so. This done, and his left forearm thrust through the straps of a small round buckler, he trotted out to meet the onset of the Frank.

Cormac was approaching at a thundering charge, eyes glaring over the edge of his grim shield. He knew that this Turk would never meet him as a Frankish knight would have met him--breast to breast. The Moslem would avoid his ponderous rushes, and circling him on his nimbler steed, drive in shaft after shaft until one found its mark. But he rushed on as recklessly as if he had never before encountered Saracen tactics.

Now the Turk bent his bow and the arrow glanced from Cormac's shield. They were barely within javelin cast of each other, but even as the Moslem laid another shaft to string, doom smote him. Cormac, without checking his headlong gait, suddenly rose in his stirrups and gripping his long lance in the middle, cast it like a javelin. The unexpectedness of the move caught the Seljuk off guard and he made the mistake of throwing up his shield instead of dodging. The lance-head tore through the light buckler and crashed full on his mail-clad breast. The point bent on his hauberk without piercing the links, but the terrific impact dashed the Turk from his saddle and as he rose, dazed and groping for his scimitar, the great black stallion was already looming horrific over him, and under those frenzied hoofs he went down, torn and shattered.

Without a second glance at his victim Cormac rode under the gibbet and rising in the saddle, stared into the face of he who swung therefrom.

"By Satan," muttered the big warrior, "'tis Micaul na Blaos--Michael de Blois, one of Gerard's squires. What devil's work is this?"

Drawing his sword he cut the rope and the youth slid into his arms. Young Michael's lips were parched and swollen, his eyes dull with suffering. He was naked except for short leathern breeks, and the sun had dealt cruelly with his fair skin. Blood from a slight scalp wound caked his yellow hair, and there were shallow cuts on his limbs--marks left by his tormentor's spear.

Cormac laid the young Frenchman in the shade cast by the motionless stallion and trickled water through the parched lips from his canteen. As soon as he could speak, Michael croaked: "Now I know in truth that I am dead, for there is but one knight ever rode in Outremer who could cast a long lance like a javelin--and Cormac FitzGeoffrey has been dead for many months. But I be dead, where is Gerard--and Yulala?"

"Rest and be at ease," growled Cormac. "You live--and so do I."

He loosed the cords that had cut deep into the flesh of Michael's wrists and set himself to gently rub and massage the numb arms. Slowly the delirium faded from the youth's eyes. Like Cormac, he too came of a race that was tough as spring steel; an hour's rest and plenty of water, and his intense vitality asserted itself.

"How long have you hung from this gibbet?" asked Cormac.

"Since dawn." Michael's eyes were grim as he rubbed his lacerated wrists. "Nureddin and Kosru Malik said that since Sieur Gerard once hanged one of their race here, it was fitting that one of Gerard's men should grace this gibbet."

"Tell me how Gerard died," growled the Irish warrior. "Men hint at foul tales--"

Michael's fine eyes filled with tears. "Ah, Cormac, I who loved him, brought about his death. Listen--there is more to this than meets the casual eye. I think that Nureddin and his comrade-at-arms have been stung by the hornet of empire. It is in my mind that they, with various dog-knights among the Franks, dream of a mongrel kingdom among these hills, which shall hold allegiance neither to Saladin nor any king of the West.

"They begin to broaden their holdings by treachery. The nearest Christian hold was that of Ali-El-Yar, of course. Sieur Gerard was a true knight, peace be upon his fair soul, and he must be removed. All this I learned later--would to God I had known it beforehand! Among Nureddin's slaves is a Persian girl named Yulala, and with this innocent tool of their evil wishes, the twain sought to ensnare my lord--to slay at once his body and his good name. And God help me, through me they succeeded where otherwise they had failed.

"For my lord Gerard was honorable beyond all men. When in peace, and at Nureddin's invitation, he visited El Ghor, he paid no heed to Yulala's blandishments. For according to the commands of her masters, which she dared not disobey, the girl allowed Gerard to look on her, unveiled, as if by chance, and she pretended affection for him. But Gerard gave her no heed. But I--I fell victim to her charms."

Cormac snorted in disgust. Michael clutched his arm.

"Cormac," he cried, "bethink you--all men are not iron like you! I swear I loved Yulala from the moment I first set eyes on her--and she loved me! I contrived to see her again--to steal into El Ghor itself--"

"Whence men got the tale that it was Gerard who was carrying on an affair with Nureddin's slave," snarled FitzGeoffrey.

Michael hid his face in his hands. "Mine the fault," he groaned. "Then one night a mute brought a note signed by Yulala--apparently--begging me to come with Sieur Gerard and his men-at-arms and save her from a frightful fate--our love had been discovered, the note read, and they were about to torture her. I was wild with rage and fear. I went to Gerard and told him all, and he, white soul of honor, vowed to aid me. He could not break the truce and bring Saladin's wrath upon the Christian's cities, but he donned his mail and rode forth alone with me. We would see if there was any way whereby we might steal Yulala away, secretly; if not, my lord would go boldly to Nureddin and ask the girl as a gift, or offer to pay a great ransom for her. I would marry her.

"Well, when we reached the place outside the wall of El Ghor, where I was wont to meet Yulala, we found we were trapped. Nureddin, Kosru Malik and their warriors rose suddenly about us on all sides. Nureddin first spoke to Gerard, telling him of the trap he had set and baited, hoping to entice my lord into his power alone. And the Moslem laughed to think that the chance love of a squire had drawn Gerard into the trap where the carefully wrought plan had failed. As for the missive--Nureddin wrote that himself, believing, in his craftiness, that Sieur Gerard would do just as indeed he did.

"Nureddin and the Turk offered to allow Gerard to join them in their plan of empire. They told him plainly that his castle and lands were the price a certain powerful nobleman asked in return for his alliance, and they offered alliance with Gerard instead of this noble. Sieur Gerard merely answered that so long as life remained in him, he would keep faith with his king and his creed, and at the word the Moslems rolled on us like a wave.

"Ah, Cormac, Cormac, had you but been there with our men-at-arms! Gerard bore himself right manfully as was his wont--back to back we fought and I swear to you that we trod a knee-deep carpet of the dead before Gerard fell and they dragged me down. 'Christ and the Cross!' were his last words, as the Turkish spears and swords pierced him through and through. And his fair body--naked and gashed, and thrown to the kites and the jackals!"

Michael sobbed convulsively, beating his fists together in his agony. Cormac rumbled deep in his chest like a savage bull. Blue lights burned and flickered in his eyes.

"And you?" he asked harshly.

"Me they flung into a dungeon for torture," answered Michael, "but that night Yulala came to me. An old servitor who loved her, and who had dwelt in El Ghor before it fell to Nureddin, freed me and led us both through a secret passage that leads from the torture chamber, beyond the wall. We went into the hills on foot and without weapons and wandered there for days, hiding from the horsemen sent forth to hunt us down. Yesterday we were recaptured and brought back to El Ghor. An arrow had struck down the old slave who showed us the passageway, unknown to the present masters of the castle, and we refused to tell how we had escaped though Nureddin threatened us with torture. This dawn he brought me forth from the castle and hanged me to this gibbet, leaving that one to guard me. What he has done to Yulala, God alone knows."

"You knew that Ali-El-Yar had fallen?"

"Aye," Michael nodded dully. "Kosru Malik boasted of it. The lands of Gerard now fall heir to his enemy, the traitor knight who will come to Nureddin's aid when the Moslem strikes for a crown."

"And who is this traitor?" asked Cormac softly.

"The baron Conrad Von Gonler, whom I swear to spit like a hare--"

Cormac smiled thinly and bleakly. "Swear me no oaths. Von Gonler has been in Hell since dawn. I knew only that he refused to come to Gerard's aid. I could have slain him no deader had I known his whole infamy."

Michael's eyes blazed. "A de Gissclin to the rescue!" he shouted fiercely. "I thank thee, old war-dog! One traitor is accounted for--what now? Shall Nureddin and the Turk live while two men wear de Gissclin steel?"

"Not if steel cuts and blood runs red," snarled Cormac. "Tell me of this secret way--nay, waste no time in words--show me this secret way. If you escaped thereby, why should we not enter the same way? Here--take the arms from that carrion while I catch his steed which I see browses on the moss among the rocks. Night is not far away; mayhap we can gain through to the interior of the castle--there--"

His big hands clenched into iron sledges and his terrible eyes blazed; in his whole bearing there was apparent a plain tale of fire and carnage, of spears piercing bosoms and swords splitting skulls.

Chapter IV
: The Faith of Cormac

When Cormac FitzGeoffrey took up the trail to El Ghor again, one would have thought at a glance that a Turk rode with him. Michael de Blois rode the bay Turkoman steed and wore the peaked Turkish helmet. He was girt with the curved scimitar and carried the bow and quiver of arrows, but he did not wear the mail shirt; the hammering hoofs of the plunging stallion had battered and brayed it out of all usefulness.

The companions took a circuitous route into the hills to avoid outposts, and it was dusk before they looked down on the towers of El Ghor which stood, grim and sullen, girt on three sides by scowling hills. Westward a broad road wound down the steeps on which the castle stood. On all other sides ravine-cut slopes straggled to the beetling walls. They had made such a wide circle that they now stood in the hills almost directly east of the keep, and Cormac, gazing westward over the turrets, spoke suddenly to his friend.

"Look--a cloud of dust far out on the plain--"

Michael shook his head: "Your eyes are far keener than mine. The hills are so clouded with the blue shadows of twilight I can scarcely make out the blurred expanse that is the plain beyond, much less discern any movement upon it."

"My life has often depended on my eyesight," growled the Norman-Gael. "Look closely--see that tongue of plainsland that cleaves far into the hills like a broad valley, to the north? A band of horsemen, riding hard, are just entering the defiles, if I may judge by the cloud of dust they raise. Doubtless a band of raiders returning to El Ghor. Well--they are in the hills now where going is rough and it will be hours before they get to the castle. Let us to our task--stars are blinking in the east."

They tied their horses in a place hidden from sight of any watcher below down among the gullies. In the last dim light of dusk they saw the turbans of the sentries on the towers, but gliding among boulders and defiles, they kept well concealed. At last Michael turned into a deep ravine.

"This leads into the subterranean corridor," said he. "God grant it has not been discovered by Nureddin. He had his warriors searching for something of the sort, suspecting its existence when we refused to tell how we had escaped."

They passed along the ravine, which grew narrower and deeper, for some distance, feeling their way; then Michael halted with a groan. Cormac, groping forward, felt iron bars, and as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, made out an opening like the mouth of a cave. Solid iron sills had been firmly bolted into the solid rock, and into these sills were set heavy bars, too close together to allow the most slender human to slip through.

"They have found the tunnel and closed it," groaned Michael. "Cormac, what are we to do?"

Cormac came closer and laid hands tentatively on the bars. Night had fallen and it was so dark in the ravine even his catlike eyes could hardly make out objects close at hand. The big Norman-Celt took a deep breath, and gripping a bar in each mighty hand, braced his iron legs and slowly exerted all his incredible strength. Michael, watching in amazement, sensed rather than saw the great muscles roll and swell under the pliant mail, the veins swell in the giant's forehead and sweat burst out. The bars groaned and creaked, and even as Michael remembered that this man was stronger than King Richard himself, the breath burst from Cormac's lips in an explosive grunt and simultaneously the bars gave way like reeds in his iron hands. One came away, literally torn from its sockets, and the others bent deeply. Cormac gasped and shook the sweat out of his eyes, tossing the bar aside.

"By the saints," muttered Michael, "are you man or devil, Cormac FitzGeoffrey? That is a feat I deemed even beyond your power."

"Enough words," grunted the Norman. "Let us make haste, if we can squeeze through. It's likely that we'll find a guard in this tunnel, but it's a chance we must take. Draw your steel and follow me."

It was as dark as the maw of Hades in the tunnel. They groped their way forward, expecting every minute to blunder into a trap, and Michael, stealing close at the heels of his friend, cursed the pounding of his own heart and wondered at the ability of the giant to move stealthily and with no rattling of arms.

To the comrades it seemed that they groped forward in the darkness for an eternity, and just as Michael leaned forward to whisper that he believed they were inside the castle's outer walls, a faint glow was observed ahead. Stealing warily forward they came to a sharp turn in the corridor around which shone the light. Peering cautiously about the corner they saw that the light emanated from a flickering torch thrust into a niche in the wall, and beside this stood a tall Turk, yawning as he leaned on his spear. Two other Moslems lay sleeping on their cloaks nearby. Evidently Nureddin did not lay too much trust in the bars with which he had blocked the entrance.

"The guard," whispered Michael, and Cormac nodded, stepping back and drawing his companion with him. The Norman-Gael's wary eyes had made out a flight of stone steps beyond the warriors, with a heavy door at the top.

"These seem to be all the weapon-men in the tunnel," muttered Cormac. "Loose a shaft at the waking warrior--and do not miss."

Michael fitted notch to string, and leaning close to the angle of the turn, aimed at the Turk's throat, just above the hauberk. He silently cursed the flickering, illusive light. Suddenly the drowsy warrior's head jerked up and he glared in their direction, suspicion flaring his eyes. Simultaneously came the twang of the loosed string and the Turk staggered and went down, gurgling horribly and clawing at the shaft that transfixed his bull neck.

The other two, awakened by their comrade's death throes and the sudden swift drum of feet on the ground, started up--and were cut down as they rubbed at sleep-filled eyes and groped for weapons.

"That was well done," growled Cormac, shaking the red drops from his steel. "There was no sound that should have carried through yonder door. Still, if it be bolted from within, our work is useless and we undone."

But it was not bolted, as the presence of the warriors in the tunnel suggested. As Cormac gently opened the heavy iron door, a sudden pain-fraught whimper from the other side electrified them.

"Yulala!" gasped Michael, whitening. "'Tis the torture chamber, and that is her voice! In God's name, Cormac--in!"

And the big Norman-Gael recklessly flung the door wide and leaped through like a charging tiger, with Michael at his heels. They halted short. It was the torture chamber, right enough, and on the floor and the walls stood or hung all the hellish appliances that the mind of man has invented for the torment of his brother. Three people were in the dungeon and two of these were bestial-faced men in leathern breeches, who looked up, startled, as the Franks entered. The third was a girl who lay bound to a sort of bench, naked as the day she was born. Coals glowed in braziers nearby, and one of the mutes was in the very act of reaching for a pair of white-hot pinchers. He crouched now, glaring in amazement, his arm still outstretched.

From the white throat of the captive girl burst a piteous cry.

"Yulala!" Michael cried out fiercely and leaped forward, a red mist floating before his eyes. One of the beast-faced mutes was before him, lifting a short sword, but the young Frank, without checking his stride, brought down his scimitar in a sweeping arc that drove the curved blade through scalp and skull. Wrenching his weapon free, he dropped to his knees beside the torture bench, a great sob tearing his throat.

"Yulala! Yulala! Oh girl, what have they done to you?"

"Michael, my beloved!" Her great dark eyes were like stars in the mist. "I knew you would come. They have not tortured me--save for a whipping--they were just about to begin--"

The other mute had glided swiftly toward Cormac as a snake glides, knife in hand.

"Satan!" grunted the big warrior. "I won't sully my steel with such blood--"

His left hand shot out and caught the mute's wrist and there was a crunch of splintering bones. The knife flew from the mute's fingers, which spread wide suddenly like an inflated glove. Blood burst from the fingertips and the creature's mouth gaped in silent agony. And at that instant Cormac's right hand closed on his throat and through the open lips burst a red deluge of blood as the Norman's iron fingers ground flesh and vertebrae to a crimson pulp.

Flinging aside the sagging corpse, Cormac turned to Michael, who had freed the girl and now was nearly crushing her in his arms as he gripped her close in a very passion of relief and joy. A heavy hand on his shoulder brought him back to a realization of their position. Cormac had found a cloak and this he wrapped about the naked girl.

"Go, at once," he said swiftly. "It may not be long before others come to take the place of the guards in the tunnel. Here--you have no armor--take my shield--no, don't argue. You may need it to protect the girl from arrows if you--if we, are pursued. Haste now--"

"But you, Cormac?" Michael lingered, hesitant.

"I will make fast that outer door," said the Norman. "I can heap benches against it. Then I will follow you. But don't wait for me. This is a command, do you understand? Hasten through the tunnel and go to the horses. There, instantly mount the Turkoman horse and ride! I will follow by another route--aye, by a road none but I can ride! Ride ye to Sir Rupert de

Vaile, Seneschal of Antioch. He is our friend; hasten now."

Cormac stood a moment in the doorway at the head of the stairs and watched Michael and the girl hurry down the steps, past the place where the silent sentries lay, and vanish about the turn in the tunnel. Then he turned back into the torture chamber and closed the door. He crossed the room, threw the bolt on the outer door and swung it wide. He gazed up a winding flight of stairs. Cormac's face was immobile. He had voluntarily sealed his doom.

The giant Norman-Celt was an opportunist. He knew that such chance as had led him into the heart of his foe's stronghold was not likely to favor him again. Life was uncertain in Outremer; if he waited for another opportunity to strike at Nureddin and Kosru Malik, that opportunity might not come. This was his best opportunity for the vengeance for which his barbaric soul lusted.

That he would lose his own life in the consummating of that vengeance made no difference. Men were born to die in battle, according to his creed, and Cormac FitzGeoffrey secretly leaned toward the belief of his Viking ancestors in a Valhalla for the souls loosed gloriously in the clash of swords. Michael, having found the girl, had instantly forgotten the original plan of vengeance. Cormac had no blame for him; life and love were sweet to the young. But the grim Irish warrior owed a debt to the murdered Gerard and was prepared to pay with his own life. Thus Cormac kept faith with the dead.

He wished that he could have bade Michael ride the black stallion, but he knew that the horse would allow none but himself to bestride it. Now it would fall into Moslem hands, he thought with a sigh. He went up the stairs.

5. The Lion of Islam

At the top of the stairs, Cormac came into a corridor and along this he strode swiftly but warily, the Norse sword shimmering bluely in his hand. Going at random he turned into another corridor and here came full on a Turkish warrior, who stopped short, agape, seeing a supernatural horror in this grim slayer who strode like a silent phantom of death through the castle. Before the Turk could regain his wits, the blue sword shore through his neck cords.

Cormac stood above his victim for a moment, listening intently. Somewhere ahead of him he heard a low hum of voices, and the attitude of this Turk, with shield and drawn scimitar, had suggested that he stood guard before some chamber door. An irregular torch faintly illumined the wide corridor, and Cormac, groping in the semidarkness for a door, found instead a wide portal masked by heavy silk curtains. Parting them cautiously he gazed through into a great room thronged with armed men.

Warriors in mail and peaked helmets, and bearing wide-pointed, curved swords, lined the walls, and on silken cushions sat the chieftains--rulers of El Ghor and their satellites. Across the room sat Nureddin El Ghor, tall, lean, with a high-bridged, thin nose and keen dark eyes; his whole aspect distinctly hawk-like. His Semitic features contrasted with the Turks about him. His lean strong hand continually caressed the ivory hilt of a long, lean saber, and he wore a shirt of mesh-mail. A renegade chief from southern Arabia, this sheik was a man of great ability; his dream of an independent kingdom in these hills was no mad hashish hallucination. Let him win the alliance of a few Seljuk chiefs, of a few Frankish renegades like Von Gonler, and with the hordes of Arabs, Turks and Kurds that would assuredly flock to his banner, Nureddin would be a menace both to Saladin and the Franks who still clung to the fringes of Outremer. Among the mailed Turks Cormac saw the sheepskin caps and wolf skins of wild chiefs from beyond the hills--Kurds and Turkomans. Already the Arab's fame was spreading, if such unstable warriors as these were rallying to him.

Near the curtain-hung doorway sat Kosru Malik, known to Cormac of old, a warrior typical of his race, strongly built, of medium height, with a dark cruel face. Even as he sat in council he wore a peaked helmet and a gilded mail hauberk and held across his knees a jeweled-hilted scimitar. It seemed to Cormac that these men argued some matter just before setting out on some raid, as they were all fully armed. But he wasted no time on speculation. He tore the hangings aside with a mailed hand and strode into the room.

Amazement held the warriors frozen for an instant, and in that instant the giant Frank reached Kosru Malik's side. The Turk, his dark features paling, sprang to his feet like a steel spring released, raising his scimitar, but even as he did so, Cormac braced his feet and smote with all his power. The Norse sword shivered the curved blade and, rending the gilded mail, severed the Turk's shoulder-bone and cleft his breast.

Cormac wrenched the heavy blade free from the split breastbone and with one foot on Kosru Malik's body, faced his foes like a lion at bay. His helmeted head was lowered, his cold blue eyes flaming from under the heavy black brows, and his mighty right hand held ready the stained sword. Nureddin had leaped to his feet and stood trembling in rage and astonishment. This sudden apparition came as near to unmanning him as anything had ever done. His thin, hawk-like features lowered in a wrathful snarl, his beard bristled and with a quick motion he unsheathed his ivory-hilted saber. Then even as he stepped forward and his warriors surged in behind him, a startling interruption occurred.

Cormac, a fierce joy surging in him as he braced himself for the charge, saw, on the other side of the great room, a wide door swing open and a host of armed warriors appear, accompanied by sundry of Nureddin's men, who wore empty scabbards and uneasy faces.

The Arab and his warriors whirled to face the newcomers. These men, Cormac saw, were dusty as if from long riding, and his memory flashed to the horsemen he had seen riding into the hills at dusk. Before them strode a tall, slender man, whose fine face was traced with lines of weariness, but whose aspect was that of a ruler of men. His garb was simple in comparison with the resplendent armor and silken attendants. And Cormac swore in amazed recognition.

Yet his surprize was no greater than that of the men of El Ghor.

"What do you in my castle, unannounced?" gasped Nureddin.

A giant in silvered mail raised his hand warningly and spoke sonorously: "The Lion of Islam, Protector of the Faithful, Yussef Ibn Eyyub, Salah-ud-din, Sultan of Sultans, needs no announcement to enter yours or any castle, Arab."

Nureddin stood his ground, though his followers began salaaming madly; there was iron in this Arabian renegade.

"My lord," said he stoutly, "it is true I did not recognize you when you first came into the chamber; but El Ghor is mine, not by virtue of right or aid or grant from any sultan, but the might of my own arm. Therefore, I make you welcome but do not beg your mercy for my hasty words."

Saladin merely smiled in a weary way. Half a century of intrigue and warring rested heavily on his shoulders. His brown eyes, strangely mild for so great a lord, rested on the silent Frankish giant who still stood with his mail-clad foot on what had been the chief Kosru Malik.

"And what is this?" asked the Sultan.

Nureddin scowled: "A Nazarene outlaw has stolen into my keep and assassinated my comrade, the Seljuk. I beg your leave to dispose of him. I will give you his skull, set in silver--"

A gesture stopped him. Saladin stepped past his men and confronted the dark, brooding warrior.

"I thought I had recognized those shoulders and that dark face," said the Sultan with a smile. "So you have turned your face east again, Lord Cormac?"

"Enough!" The deep voice of the Norman-Irish giant filled the chamber. "You have me in your trap; my life is forfeit. Waste not your time in taunts; send your jackals against me and make an end of it. I swear by my clan, many of them shall bite the dust before I die, and the dead will be more than the living!"

Nureddin's tall frame shook with passion; he gripped his hilt until the knuckles showed white. "Is this to be borne, my Lord?" he exclaimed fiercely. "Shall this Nazarene dog fling dirt into our faces--"

Saladin shook his head slowly, smiling as if at some secret jest: "It may be his is no idle boast. At Acre, at Azotus, at Joppa I have seen the skull on his shield glitter like a star of death in the mist, and the Faithful fall before his sword like garnered grain."

The great Kurd turned his head, leisurely surveying the ranks of silent warriors and the bewildered chieftains who avoided his level gaze.

"A notable concourse of chiefs, for these times of truce," he murmured, half to himself. "Would you ride forth in the night with all these warriors to fight genii in the desert, or to honor some ghostly sultan, Nureddin? Nay, nay, Nureddin, thou hast tasted the cup of ambition, meseemeth--and thy life is forfeit!"

The unexpectedness of the accusation staggered Nureddin, and while he groped for reply, Saladin followed it up: "It comes to me that you have plotted against me--aye, that it was your purpose to seduce various Moslem and Frankish lords from their allegiances, and set up a kingdom of your own. And for that reason you broke the truce and murdered a good knight, albeit a Caphar, and burned his castle. I have spies, Nureddin."

The tall Arab glanced quickly about, as if ready to dispute the question with Saladin himself. But when he noted the number of the Kurd's warriors, and saw his own fierce ruffians shrinking away from him, awed, a smile of bitter contempt crossed his hawk-like features, and sheathing his blade, he folded his arms.

"God gives," he said simply, with the fatalism of the Orient.

Saladin nodded in appreciation, but motioned back a chief who stepped forward to bind the sheik. "Here is one," said the Sultan, "to whom you owe a greater debt than to me, Nureddin. I have heard Cormac FitzGeoffrey was brother-at-arms to the Sieur Gerard. You owe many debts of blood, oh Nureddin; pay one, therefore, by facing the lord Cormac with the sword."

The Arab's eyes gleamed suddenly. "And if I slay him--shall I go free?"

"Who am I to judge?" asked Saladin. "It shall be as Allah wills it. But if you fight the Frank you will die, Nureddin, even though you slay him; he comes of a breed that slays even in their death-throes. Yet it is better to die by the sword than by the cord, Nureddin."

The sheik's answer was to draw his ivory-hilted saber. Blue sparks flickered in Cormac's eyes and he rumbled deeply like a wounded lion. He hated Saladin as he hated all his race, with the savage and relentless hatred of the Norman-Celt. He had ascribed the Kurd's courtesy to King Richard and the Crusaders to Oriental subtlety, refusing to believe that there could be ought but trickery and craftiness in a Saracen's mind. Now he saw in the Sultan's suggestion but the scheming of a crafty trickster to match two of his foes against each other, and a feline-like gloating over his victims. Cormac grinned without mirth. He asked no more from life than to have his enemy at sword-points. But he felt no gratitude toward Saladin, only a smoldering hate.

The Sultan and the warriors gave back, leaving the rivals a clear space in the center of the great room. Nureddin came forward swiftly, having donned a plain round steel cap with a mail drop that fell about his shoulders.

"Death to you, Nazarene!" he yelled, and sprang in with the pantherish leap and headlong recklessness of an Arab's attack. Cormac had no shield. He parried the hacking saber with upflung blade, and slashed back. Nureddin caught the heavy blade on his round buckler, which he turned slightly slantwise at the instant of impact, so that the stroke glanced off. He returned the blow with a thrust that rasped against Cormac's coif, and leaped a spear's length backward to avoid the whistling sweep of the Norse sword.

Again he leaped in, slashing, and Cormac caught the saber on his left forearm. Mail links parted beneath the keen edge, and blood spattered, but almost simultaneously the Norse sword crashed under the Arab's arm, bones cracked and Nureddin was flung his full length to the floor. Warriors gasped as they realized the full power of the Irishman's tigerish strokes.

Nureddin's rise from the floor was so quick that he almost seemed to rebound from his fall. To the onlookers it seemed that he was not hurt, but the Arab knew. His mail had held; the sword edge had not gashed his flesh, but the impact of that terrible blow had snapped a rib like a rotten twig, and the realization that he could not long avoid the Frank's rushes filled him with a wild beast determination to take his foe with him to Eternity.

Cormac was looming over Nureddin, sword high, but the Arab nerving himself to a dynamic burst of superhuman quickness, sprang up as a cobra leaps from its coil, and struck with desperate power. Full on Cormac's bent head the whistling saber clashed, and the Frank staggered as the keen edge bit through steel cap and coif links into his scalp. Blood jetted down his face, but he braced his feet and struck back with all the power of arm and shoulders behind the sword. Again Nureddin's buckler blocked the stroke, but this time the Arab had no time to turn the shield, and the heavy blade struck squarely. Nureddin went to his knees beneath the stroke, bearded face twisted in agony. With tenacious courage he reeled up again, shaking the shattered buckler from his numbed and broken arm, but even as he lifted the saber, the Norse sword crashed down, cleaving the Moslem helmet and splitting the skull to the teeth.

Cormac set a foot on his fallen foe and wrenched free his gory sword. His fierce eyes met the whimsical gaze of Saladin.

"Well, Saracen," said the Irish warrior challengingly, "I have killed your rebel for you."

"And your enemy," reminded Saladin.

"Aye," Cormac grinned bleakly and ferociously. "I thank you--though well I know it was no love of me or mine that prompted you to send the Arab against me. Well--make an end, Saracen."

"Why do you hate me, Lord Cormac?" asked the Sultan curiously.

Cormac snarled. "Why do I hate any of my foes? You are no more and no less than any other robber chief, to me. You tricked Richard and the rest with courtly words and fine deeds, but you never deceived me, who well knew you sought to win by deceit where you could not gain by force of arms."

Saladin shook his head, murmuring to himself. Cormac glared at him, tensing himself for a sudden leap that would carry the Kurd with him into the Dark. The Norman-Gael was a product of his age and his country; among the warring chiefs of blood-drenched Ireland, mercy was unknown and chivalry an outworn and forgotten myth. Kindness to a foe was a mark of weakness; courtesy to an enemy a form of craft, a preparation for treachery; to such teachings had Cormac grown up, in a land where a man took every advantage, gave no quarter and fought like a blood-mad devil if he expected to survive.

Now at a gesture from Saladin, those crowding the door gave back.

"Your way is open, Lord Cormac."

The Gael glared, his eyes narrowing to slits: "What game is this?" he growled. "Shall I turn my back to your blades? Out on it!"

"All swords are in their sheaths," answered the Kurd. "None shall harm you."

Cormac's lion-like head swung from side to side as he glared at the Moslems.

"You honestly mean I am to go free, after breaking the truce and slaying your jackals?"

"The truce was already broken," answered Saladin. "I find in you no fault. You have repaid blood for blood, and kept your faith to the dead. You are rough and savage, but I would fain have men like you in mine own train. There is a fierce loyalty in you, and for this I honor you."

Cormac sheathed his sword ungraciously. A grudging admiration for this weary-faced Moslem was born in him and it angered him. Dimly he realized at last that this attitude of fairness, justice and kindliness, even to foes, was not a crafty pose of Saladin's, not a manner of guile, but a natural nobility of the Kurd's nature. He saw suddenly embodied in the Sultan, the ideals of chivalry and high honor so much talked of--and so little practiced--by the Frankish knights. Blondel had been right then, and Sieur Gerard, when they argued with Cormac that high-minded chivalry was no mere romantic dream of an outworn age, but had existed, and still existed and lived in the hearts of certain men. But Cormac was born and bred in a savage land where men lived the desperate existence of the wolves whose hides covered their nakedness. He suddenly realized his own innate barbarism and was ashamed. He shrugged his lion's shoulders.

"I have misjudged you, Moslem," he growled. "There is fairness in you."

"I thank you, Lord Cormac," smiled Saladin. "Your road to the west is clear."

And the Moslem warriors courteously salaamed as Cormac FitzGeoffrey strode from the royal presence of the slender noble who was Protector of the Califs, Lion of Islam, Sultan of Sultans.

THE END

Contents

THE BLOOD OF BELSHAZZAR

by Robert E. Howard

It shone on the breast of the Persian king.
It lighted Iskander's road;
It blazed where the spears were splintering.
A lure and a maddening goad.
And down through the crimson, changing years
It draws men, soul and brain;
They drown their lives in blood and tears.
And they break their hearts in vain.
Oh, it flames with the blood of strong men's hearts
Whose bodies are clay again.
--The Song of the Red Stone

Chapter I

Once it was called Eski-Hissar, the Old Castle, for it was very ancient even when the first Seljuks swept out of the east, and not even the Arabs, who rebuilt that crumbling pile in the days of Abu Bekr, knew what hands reared those massive bastions among the frowning foothills of the Taurus. Now, since the old keep had become a bandit's hold, men called it Bab-el-Shaitan, the Gate of the Devil, and with good reason.

That night there was feasting in the great hall. Heavy tables loaded with wine pitchers and jugs, and huge platters of food, stood flanked by crude benches for such as ate in that manner, while on the floor large cushions received the reclining forms of others. Trembling slaves hastened about, filling goblets from wineskins and bearing great joints of roasted meat and loaves of bread.

Here luxury and nakedness met, the riches of degenerate civilizations and the stark savagery of utter barbarism. Men clad in stenching sheepskins lolled on silken cushions, exquisitely brocaded, and guzzled from solid golden goblets, fragile as the stem of a desert flower. They wiped their bearded lips and hairy hands on velvet tapestries worthy of a shah's palace.

All the races of western Asia met here. Here were slim, lethal Persians, dangerous-eyed Turks in mail shirts, lean Arabs, tall ragged Kurds, Lurs and Armenians in sweaty sheepskins, fiercely mustached Circassians, even a few Georgians, with hawk-faces and devilish tempers.

Among them was one who stood out boldly from all the rest. He sat at a table drinking wine from a huge goblet, and the eyes of the others strayed to him continually. Among these tall sons of the desert and mountains his height did not seem particularly great, though it was above six feet. But the breadth and thickness of him were gigantic. His shoulders were broader, his limbs more massive than any other warrior there.

His mail coif was thrown back, revealing a lion-like head and a great corded throat. Though browned by the sun, his face was not as dark as those about him and his eyes were a volcanic blue, which smoldered continually as if from inner fires of wrath. Square-cut black hair like a lion's mane crowned a low, broad forehead.

He ate and drank apparently oblivious to the questioning glances flung toward him. Not that any had as yet challenged his right to feast in Bab-el-Shaitan, for this was a lair open to all refugees and outlaws. And this Frank was Cormac FitzGeoffrey, outlawed and hunted by his own race. The ex-Crusader was armed in close-meshed chain mail from head to foot. A heavy sword hung at his hip, and his kite-shaped shield with the grinning skull wrought in the center lay with his heavy vizorless helmet, on the bench beside him. There was no hypocrisy of etiquette in Bab-el-Shaitan. Its occupants went armed to the teeth at all times and no one questioned another's right to sit down to meat with his sword at hand.

Cormac, as he ate, scanned his fellow-feasters openly. Truly Bab-el-Shaitan was a lair of the spawn of Hell, the last retreat of men so desperate and bestial that the rest of the world had cast them out in horror. Cormac was no stranger to savage men; in his native Ireland he had sat among barbaric figures in the gatherings of chiefs and reavers in the hills. But the wild-beast appearance and utter inhumanness of some of these men impressed even the fierce Irish warrior.

There, for instance, was a Lur, hairy as an ape, tearing at a half-raw joint of meat with yellow fangs like a wolf's. Kadra Muhammad, the fellow's name was, and Cormac wondered briefly if such a creature could have a human soul. Or that shaggy Kurd beside him, whose lip, twisted back by a sword scar into a permanent snarl, bared a tooth like a boar's tusk. Surely no divine spark of soul-dust animated these men, but the merciless and soulless spirit of the grim land that bred them. Eyes, wild and cruel as the eyes of wolves, glared through lank strands of tangled hair, hairy hands unconsciously gripped the hilts of knives even while the owners gorged and guzzled.

Cormac glanced from the rank and file to scrutinize the leaders of the band--those whom superior wit or war-skill had placed high in the confidence of their terrible chief, Skol Abdhur, the Butcher. Not one but had a whole volume of black and bloody history behind him. There was that slim Persian, whose tone was so silky, whose eyes were so deadly, and whose small, shapely head was that of a human panther--Nadir Tous, once an emir high in the favor of the Shah of Kharesmia. And that Seljuk Turk, with his silvered mail shirt, peaked helmet and jewel-hilted scimitar--Kai Shah; he had ridden at Saladin's side in high honor once, and it was said that the scar which showed white in the angle of his jaw had been made by the sword of Richard the Lion-hearted in that great battle before the walls of Joppa. And that wiry, tall, eagle-faced Arab, Yussef el Mekru--he had been a great sheikh once in Yemen and had even led a revolt against the Sultan himself.

But at the head of the table at which Cormac sat was one whose history for strangeness and vivid fantasy dimmed them all. Tisolino di Strozza, trader, captain of Venice's warships, Crusader, pirate, outlaw--what a red trail the man had followed to his present casteless condition! Di Strozza was tall and thin and saturnine in appearance, with a hook-nosed, thin-nostriled face of distinctly predatory aspect. His armor, now worn and tarnished, was of costly Venetian make, and the hilt of his long narrow sword had once been set with gems. He was a man of restless soul, thought Cormac, as he watched the Venetian's dark eyes dart continually from point to point, and the lean hand repeatedly lifted to twist the ends of the thin mustache.

Cormac's gaze wandered to the other chiefs--wild reavers, born to the red trade of pillage and murder, whose pasts were black enough, but lacked the varied flavor of the other four. He knew these by sight or reputation--Kojar Mirza, a brawny Kurd; Shalmar Khor, a tall swaggering Circassian; and Jusus Zehor, a renegade Georgian who wore half a dozen knifes in his girdle.

There was one not known to him, a warrior who apparently had no standing among the bandits, yet who carried himself with the assurance born of prowess. He was of a type rare in the Taurus--a stocky, strongly built man whose head would come no higher than Cormac's shoulder. Even as he ate, he wore a helmet with a lacquered leather drop, and Cormac caught the glint of mail beneath his sheepskins; through his girdle was thrust a short wide-bladed sword, not curved as much as the Moslem scimitars. His powerful bowed legs, as well as the slanting black eyes set in an inscrutable brown face, betrayed the Mongol.

He, like Cormac, was a newcomer; riding from the east he had arrived at Bab-el-Shaitan that night at the same time that the Irish warrior had ridden in from the south. His name, as given in guttural Turki, was Toghrul Khan.

A slave whose scarred face and fear-dulled eyes told of the brutality of his masters, tremblingly filled Cormac's goblet. He started and flinched as a sudden scream faintly knifed the din; it came from somewhere above, and none of the feasters paid any attention. The Norman-Gael wondered at the absence of women-slaves. Skol Abdhur's name was a terror in that part of Asia and many caravans felt the weight of his fury. Many women had been stolen from raided villages and camel-trains, yet now there were apparently only men in Bab-el-Shaitan. This, to Cormac, held a sinister implication. He recalled dark tales, whispered under the breath, relating to the cryptic inhumanness of the robber chief--mysterious hints of foul rites in black caverns, of naked white victims writhing on hideously ancient altars, of blood-chilling sacrifices beneath the midnight moon. But that cry had been no woman's scream.

Kai Shah was close to di Strozza's shoulder, talking very rapidly in a guarded tone. Cormac saw that Nadir Tous was only pretending to be absorbed in his wine cup; the Persian's eyes, burning with intensity, were fixed on the two who whispered at the head of the table. Cormac, alert to intrigue and counter-plot, had already decided that there were factions in Bab-el-Shaitan. He had noticed that di Strozza, Kai Shah, a lean Syrian scribe named Musa bin Daoud, and the wolfish Lur, Kadra Muhammad, stayed close to each other, while Nadir Tous had his own following among the lesser bandits, wild ruffians, mostly Persians and Armenians, and Kojar Mirza was surrounded by a number of even wilder mountain Kurds. The manner of the Venetian and Nadir Tous toward each other was of a wary courtesy that seemed to mask suspicion, while the Kurdish chief wore an aspect of truculent defiance toward both.

As these thoughts passed through Cormac's mind, an incongruous figure appeared on the landing of the broad stairs. It was Jacob, Skol Abdhur's majordomo--a short, very fat Jew attired in gaudy and costly robes which had once decked a Syrian harem master. All eyes turned toward him, for it was evident he had brought word from his master--not often did Skol Abdhur, wary as a hunted wolf, join his pack at their feasts.

"The great prince, Skol Abdhur," announced Jacob in pompous and sonorous accents, "would grant audience to the Nazarene who rode in at dusk--the lord Cormac FitzGeoffrey."

The Norman finished his goblet at draft and rose deliberately, taking up his shield and helmet.

"And what of me, Yahouda?" It was the guttural voice of the Mongol. "Has the great prince no word for Toghrul Khan, who has ridden far and hard to join his horde? Has he said naught of an audience with me?"

The Jew scowled. "Lord Skol said naught of any Tartar," he answered shortly. "Wait until he sends for you, as he will do--if it so pleases him."

The answer was as much an insult to the haughty pagan as would have been a slap in the face. He half-made to rise then sank back, his face, schooled to iron control, showing little of his rage. But his serpent-like eyes glittering devilishly, took in not only the Jew but Cormac as well, and the Norman knew that he himself was included in Toghrul Khan's black anger. Mongol pride and Mongol wrath are beyond the ken of the Western mind, but Cormac knew that in his humiliation, the nomad hated him as much as he hated Jacob.

But Cormac could count his friends on his fingers and his personal enemies by the scores. A few more foes made little difference and he paid no heed to Toghrul Khan as he followed the Jew up the broad stairs, and along a winding corridor to a heavy, metal-braced door before which stood, like an image carven of black basalt, a huge naked Nubian who held a two-handed scimitar whose five-foot blade was a foot wide at the tip.

Jacob made a sign to the Nubian, but Cormac saw that the Jew was trembling and apprehensive.

"In God's name," Jacob whispered to the Norman, "speak him softly; Skol is in a devilish temper tonight. Only a little while ago he tore out the eyeball of a slave with his hands."

"That was that scream I heard then," grunted Cormac. "Well, don't stand there chattering; tell that black beast to open the door before I knock it down."

Jacob blenched; but it was no idle threat. It was not the Norman-Gael's nature to wait meekly at the door of any man--he who had been cup-companion to King Richard. The majordomo spoke swiftly to the mute, who swung the door open. Cormac pushed past his guide and strode across the threshold.

And for the first time he looked on Skol Abdhur the Butcher, whose deeds of blood had already made him a semi-mythical figure. The Norman saw a bizarre giant reclining on a silken divan, in the midst of a room hung and furnished like a king's. Erect, Skol would have towered half a head taller than Cormac, and though a huge belly marred the symmetry of his figure, he was still an image of physical prowess. His short, naturally black beard had been stained to a bluish tint; his wide black eyes blazed with a curious wayward look not altogether sane at times.

He was clad in cloth-of-gold slippers whose toes turned up extravagantly, in voluminous Persian trousers of rare silk, and a wide green silken sash, heavy with golden scales, was wrapt about his waist. Above this he wore a sleeveless jacket, richly brocaded, open in front, but beneath this his huge torso was naked. His blue-black hair, held by a gemmed circlet of gold, fell to his shoulders, and his fingers were gleaming with jewels, while his bare arms were weighted with heavy gem-crusted armlets. Women's earrings adorned his ears.

Altogether his appearance was of such fantastic barbarism as to inspire in Cormac an amazement which in an ordinary man would have been a feeling of utmost horror. The apparent savagery of the giant, together with his fantastic finery which heightened rather than lessened the terror of his appearance, lent Skol Abdhur an aspect which set him outside the pale of ordinary humanity. The effect of an ordinary man, so garbed, would have been merely ludicrous; in the robber chieftain it was one of horror.

Yet as Jacob salaamed to the floor in a very frenzy of obeisance, he was not sure that Skol looked any more formidable than the mail-clad Frank with his aspect of dynamic and terrible strength directed by a tigerish nature.

"The lord Cormac FitzGeoffrey, oh mighty prince," proclaimed Jacob, while Cormac stood like an iron image not deigning even to incline his lion-like head.

"Yes, fool, I can see that," Skol's voice was deep and resonant. "Take yourself hence before I crop your ears. And see that those fools downstairs have plenty of wine."

From the stumbling haste with which Jacob obeyed, Cormac knew the threat of cropping ears was no empty one. Now his eyes wandered to a shocking and pitiful figure--the slave standing behind Skol's divan ready to pour wine for his grim master. The wretch was trembling in every limb as a wounded horse quivers, and the reason was apparent--a ghastly gaping socket from which the eye had been ruthlessly ripped. Blood still oozed from the rim to join the stains which blotched the twisted face and spotted the silken garments. Pitiful finery! Skol dressed his miserable slaves in apparel rich merchants might envy. And the wretch stood shivering in agony, yet not daring to move from his tracks, though with the pain-misted half-sight remaining him, he could scarcely see to fill the gem-crusted goblet Skol lifted.

"Come and sit on the divan with me, Cormac," hailed Skol. "I would speak to you. Dog! Fill the lord Frank's goblet, and haste, lest I take your other eye."

"I drink no more this night," growled Cormac, thrusting aside the goblet Skol held out to him. "And send that slave away. He'll spill wine on you in his blindness."

Skol stared at Cormac a moment and then with a sudden laugh waved the pain-sick slave toward the door. The man went hastily, whimpering in agony.

"See," said Skol, "I humor your whim. But it was not necessary. I would have wrung his neck after we had talked, so he could not repeat our words."

Cormac shrugged his shoulders. Little use to try to explain to Skol that it was pity for the slave and not desire for secrecy that prompted him to have the man dismissed.

"What think you of my kingdom, Bab-el-Shaitan?" asked Skol suddenly.

"It would be hard to take," answered the Norman.

Skol laughed wildly and emptied his goblet.

"So the Seljuks have found," he hiccupped. "I took it years ago by a trick from the Turk who held it. Before the Turks came the Arabs held it and before them--the devil knows. It is old--the foundations were built in the long ago by Iskander Akbar--Alexander the Great. Then centuries later came the Roumi--the Romans--who added to it. Parthians, Persians, Kurds, Arabs, Turks--all have shed blood on its walls. Now it is mine, and while I live, mine it shall remain! I know its secrets--and its secrets," he cast the Frank a sly and wicked glance full of sinister meaning, "are more than most men reckon--even those fools Nadir Tous and di Strozza, who would cut my throat if they dared."

"How do you hold supremacy over these wolves?" asked Cormac bluntly.

Skol laughed and drank once more.

"I have something each wishes. They hate each other; I play them against one another. I hold the key to the plot. They do not trust each other enough to move against me. I am Skol Abdhur! Men are puppets to dance on my strings. And women"--a vagrant and curious glint stole into his eyes--"women are food for the gods," he said strangely.

"Many men serve me," said Skol Abdhur, "emirs and generals and chiefs, as you saw. How came they here to Bab-el-Shaitan where the world ends? Ambition--intrigues--women--jealousy--hatred--now they serve the Butcher. And what brought you here, my brother? That you are an outlaw I know--that your life is forfeit to your people because you slew a certain emir of the Franks, one Count Conrad von Gonler. But only when hope is dead do men ride to Bab-el-Shaitan. There are cycles within cycles, outlaws beyond the pale of outlawry, and Bab-el-Shaitan is the end of the world."

"Well," growled Cormac, "one man can not raid the caravans. My friend Sir Rupert de Vaile, Seneschal of Antioch, is captive to the Turkish chief Ali Bahadur, and the Turk refuses to ransom him for the gold that has been offered. You ride far, and fall on the caravans that bring the treasures of Hind and Cathay. With you I may find some treasure so rare that the Turk will accept it as a ransom. If not, with my share of the loot I will hire enough bold rogues to rescue Sir Rupert."

Skol shrugged his shoulders. "Franks are mad," said he, "but whatever the reason, I am glad you rode hither. I have heard you are faithful to the lord you follow, and I need such a man. Just now I trust no one but Abdullah, the black mute that guards my chamber."

It was evident to Cormac that Skol was fast becoming drunk. Suddenly he laughed wildly.

"You asked me how I hold my wolves in leash? Not one but would slit my throat. But look--so far I trust you I will show you why they do not!"

He reached into his girdle and drew forth a huge jewel which sparkled like a tiny lake of blood in his great palm. Even Cormac's eyes narrowed at the sight.

"Satan!" he muttered. "That can be naught but the ruby called--"

"!" exclaimed Skol Abdhur. "Aye, the gem Cyrus the Persian ripped from the sword-gashed bosom of the great king on that red night when Babylon fell! It is the most ancient and costly gem in the world. Ten thousand pieces of heavy gold could not buy it.

"Hark, Frank," again Skol drained a goblet, "I will tell you the tale of the Blood of Belshazzar. See you how strangely it is carved?"

He held it up and the light flashed redly from its many facets. Cormac shook his head, puzzled.

The carving was strange indeed, corresponding to nothing he had ever seen, east or west. It seemed that the ancient carver had followed some plan entirely unknown and apart from that of modern lapidary art. It was basically different with a difference Cormac could not define.

"No mortal cut that stone!" said Skol, "but the djinn of the sea! For once in the long, long ago, in the very dawn of happenings, the great king, even Belshazzar, went from his palace on pleasure bent and coming to the Green Sea--the Persian Gulf--went thereon in a royal galley, golden-prowed and rowed by a hundred slaves. Now there was one Naka, a diver of pearls, who desiring greatly to honor his king, begged the royal permission to seek the ocean bottom for rare pearls for the king, and Belshazzar granting his wish, Naka dived. Inspired by the glory of the king, he went far beyond the depth of divers, and after a time floated to the surface, grasping in his hand a ruby of rare beauty--aye, this very gem.

"Then the king and his lords, gazing on its strange carvings, were amazed, and Naka, nigh to death because of the great depth to which he had gone, gasped out a strange tale of a silent, seaweed-festooned city of marble and lapis lazuli far below the surface of the sea, and of a monstrous mummied king on a jade throne from whose dead taloned hand Naka had wrested the ruby. And then the blood burst from the diver's mouth and ears and he died.

"Then Belshazzar's lords entreated him to throw the gem back into the sea, for it was evident that it was the treasure of the djinn of the sea, but the king was as one mad, gazing into the crimson deeps of the ruby, and he shook his head.

"And lo, soon evil came upon him, for the Persians broke his kingdom, and Cyrus, looting the dying monarch, wrested from his bosom the great ruby which seemed so gory in the light of the burning palace that the soldiers shouted: 'Lo, it is the heart's blood of Belshazzar!' And so men came to call the gem the Blood of Belshazzar.

"Blood followed its course. When Cyrus fell on the Jaxartes, Queen Tomyris seized the jewel and for a time it gleamed on the naked bosom of the Scythian queen. But she was despoiled of it by a rebel general; in a battle against the Persians he fell and it went into the hands of Cambyses, who carried it with him into Egypt, where a priest of Bast stole it. A Numidian mercenary murdered him for it, and by devious ways it came back to Persia once more. It gleamed on Xerxes' crown when he watched his army destroyed at Salamis.

"Alexander took it from the corpse of Darius and on the Macedonian's corselet its gleams lighted the road to India. A chance sword blow struck it from his breastplate in a battle on the Indus and for centuries the Blood of Belshazzar was lost to sight. Somewhere far to the east, we know, its gleams shone on a road of blood and rapine, and men slew men and dishonored women for it. For it, as of old, women gave up their virtue, men their lives and kings their crowns.

"But at last its road turned to the west once more, and I took it from the body of a Turkoman chief I slew in a raid far to the east. How he came by it, I do not know. But now it is mine!"

Skol was drunk; his eyes blazed with inhuman passion; more and more he seemed like some foul bird of prey.

"It is my balance of power! Men come to me from palace and hovel, each hoping to have the Blood of Belshazzar for his own. I play them against each other. If one should slay me for it, the others would instantly cut him to pieces to gain it. They distrust each other too much to combine against me. And who would share the gem with another?"

He poured himself wine with an unsteady hand.

"I am Skol the Butcher!" he boasted, "a prince in my own right! I am powerful and crafty beyond the knowledge of common men. For I am the most feared chieftain in all the Taurus, I who was dirt beneath men's feet, the disowned and despised son of a renegade Persian noble and a Circassian slave-girl.

"Bah--these fools who plot against me--the Venetian, Kai Shah, Musa bin Daoud and Kadra Muhammad--over against them I play Nadir Tous, that polished cutthroat, and Kojar Mirza. The Persian and the Kurd hate me and they hate di Strozza, but they hate each other even more. And Shalmar Khor hates them all."

"And what of Seosamh el Mekru?" Cormac could not twist his Norman-Celtic tongue to the Arabic of Joseph.

"Who knows what is in an Arab's mind?" growled Skol. "But you may be certain he is a jackal for loot, like all his kind, and will watch which way the feather falls, to join the stronger side--and then betray the winners.

"But I care not!" the robber roared suddenly. "I am Skol the Butcher! Deep in the deeps of the Blood have I seen misty, monstrous shapes and read dark secrets! Aye--in my sleep I hear the whispers of that dead, half-human king from whom Naka the diver tore the jewel so long ago. Blood! That is a drink the ruby craves! Blood follows it; blood is drawn to it! Not the head of Cyrus did Queen Tomyris plunge into a vessel of warm blood as the legends say, but the gem she took from the dead king! He who wears it must quench its thirst or it will drink his own blood! Aye, the heart's flow of kings and queens have gone into its crimson shadow!

"And I have quenched its thirst! There are secrets of Bab-el-Shaitan none knows but I--and Abdullah whose withered tongue can never speak of the sights he has looked upon, the shrieks his ears have heard in the blackness below the castle when midnight holds the mountains breathless. For I have broken into secret corridors, sealed up by the Arabs who rebuilt the hold, and unknown to the Turks who followed them."

He checked himself as if he had said too much. But the crimson dreams began to weave again their pattern of insanity.

"You have wondered why you see no women here? Yet hundreds of fair girls have passed through the portals of Bab-el-Shaitan. Where are they now? Ha ha ha!" the giant's sudden roar of ghastly laughter thundered in the room.

"Many went to quench the ruby's thirst," said Skol, reaching for the wine jug, "or to become the brides of the Dead, the concubines of ancient demons of the mountains and deserts, who take fair girls only in death throes. Some I or my warriors merely wearied of, and they were flung to the vultures."

Cormac sat, chin on mailed fist, his dark brows lowering in disgust.

"Ha!" laughed the robber. "You do not laugh--are you thin-skinned, lord Frank? I have heard you spoken of as a desperate man. Wait until you have ridden with me for a few moons! Not for nothing am I named the Butcher! I have built a pyramid of skulls in my day! I have severed the necks of old men and old women, I have dashed out the brains of babes, I have ripped up women, I have burned children alive and sat them by scores on pointed stakes! Pour me wine, Frank."

"Pour your own damned wine," growled Cormac, his lip writhing back dangerously.

"That would cost another man his head," said Skol, reaching for his goblet. "You are rude of speech to your host and the man you have ridden so far to serve. Take care--rouse me not." Again he laughed his horrible laughter.

"These walls have re-echoed to screams of direst agony!" his eyes began to burn with a reckless and maddened light. "With these hands have I disemboweled men, torn out the tongues of children and ripped out the eyeballs of girls--thus!"

With a shriek of crazed laughter his huge hand shot at Cormac's face. With an oath the Norman caught the giant's wrist and bones creaked in that iron grip. Twisting the arm viciously down and aside with a force that nearly tore it from its socket, Cormac flung Skol back on the divan.

"Save your whims for your slaves, you drunken fool," the Norman rasped.

Skol sprawled on the divan, grinning like an idiotic ogre and trying to work his fingers which Cormac's savage grasp had numbed. The Norman rose and strode from the chamber in fierce disgust; his last backward glance showed Skol fumbling with the wine jug, with one hand still grasping the Blood of Belshazzar, which cast a sinister light all over the room.

The door shut behind Cormac and the Nubian cast him a sidelong, suspicious glance. The Norman shouted impatiently for Jacob, and the Jew bobbed up suddenly and apprehensively. His face cleared when Cormac brusquely demanded to be shown his chamber. As he tramped along the bare, torch-lighted corridors, Cormac heard sounds of revelry still going on below. Knives would be going before morning, reflected Cormac, and some would not see the rising of the sun. Yet the noises were neither as loud nor as varied as they had been when he left the banquet hall; no doubt many were already senseless from strong drink.

Jacob turned aside and opened a heavy door, his torch revealing a small cell-like room, bare of hangings, with a sort of bunk on one side; there was a single window, heavily barred, and but one door. The Jew thrust the torch into a niche of the wall.

"Was the lord Skol pleased with you, my lord?" he asked nervously.

Cormac cursed. "I rode over a hundred miles to join the most powerful raider in the Taurus, and I find only a wine-bibbing, drunken fool, fit only to howl bloody boasts and blasphemies to the roof."

"Be careful, for God's sake, sir," Jacob shook from head to foot. "These walls have ears! The great prince has these strange moods, but he is a mighty fighter and a crafty man for all that. Do not judge him in his drunkenness. Did--did--did he speak aught of me?"

"Aye," answered Cormac at random, a whimsical grim humor striking him. "He said you only served him in hopes of stealing his ruby some day."

Jacob gasped as if Cormac had hit him in the belly and the sudden pallor of his face told the Norman his chance shot had gone home. The majordomo ducked out of the room like a scared rabbit and it was in somewhat better humor that his tormentor turned to retire.

Looking out the window, Cormac glanced down into the courtyard where the animals were kept, at the stables wherein he had seen that his great black stallion had been placed. Satisfied that the steed was well sheltered for the night, he lay down on the bunk in full armor, with his shield, helmet and sword beside him, as he was wont to sleep in strange holds. He had barred the door from within, but he put little trust in bolts and bars.

Chapter II

Cormac had been asleep less than an hour when a sudden sound brought him wide awake and alert. It was utterly dark in the chamber; even his keen eyes could make out nothing, but someone or something was moving on him in the darkness. He thought of the evil reputation of Bab-el-Shaitan and a momentary shiver shook him--not of fear but of superstitious revulsion.

Then his practical mind asserted itself. It was that fool Toghrul Khan who had slipped into his chamber to cleanse his strange nomadic honor by murdering the man who had been given priority over him. Cormac cautiously drew his legs about and lifted his body until he was sitting on the side of the bunk. At the rattle of his mail, the stealthy sounds ceased, but the Norman could visualize Toghrul Khan's slant eyes glittering snake-like in the dark. Doubtless he had already slit the throat of Jacob the Jew.

As quietly as possible, Cormac eased the heavy sword from its scabbard. Then as the sinister sounds recommenced, he tensed himself, made a swift estimate of location, and leaped like a huge tiger, smiting blindly and terribly in the dark. He had judged correctly. He felt the sword strike solidly, crunching through flesh and bone, and a body fell heavily in the darkness.

Feeling for flint and steel, he struck fire to tinder and lighted the torch, then turning to the crumpled shape in the center of the room, he halted in amazement. The man who lay there in a widening pool of crimson was tall, powerfully built and hairy as an ape--Kadra Muhammad. The Lur's scimitar was in his scabbard, but a wicked dagger lay by his right hand.

"He had no quarrel with me," growled Cormac, puzzled. "What--" He stopped again. The door was still bolted from within, but in what had been a blank wall to the casual gaze, a black opening gaped--a secret doorway through which Kadra Muhammad had come. Cormac closed it and with sudden purpose pulled his coif in place and donned his helmet. Then taking up his shield, he opened the door and strode forth into the torch-lighted corridor. All was silence, broken only by the tramp of his iron-clad feet on the bare flags. The sounds of revelry had ceased and a ghostly stillness hung over Bab-el-Shaitan.

In a few minutes he stood before the door of Skol Abdhur's chamber and saw there what he had half-expected. The Nubian Abdullah lay before the threshold, disemboweled, and his woolly head half severed from his body. Cormac thrust open the door; the candles still burned. On the floor, in the blood-soaked ruins of the torn divan lay the gashed and naked body of Skol Abdhur the Butcher. The corpse was slashed and hacked horribly, but it was evident to Cormac that Skol had died in drunken sleep with no chance to fight for his life. It was some obscure hysteria or frantic hatred that had led his slayer or slayers to so disfigure his dead body. His garments lay near him, ripped to shreds. Cormac smiled grimly, nodding.

"So the Blood of Belshazzar drank your life at last, Skol," said he.

Turning toward the doorway he again scanned the body of the Nubian.

"More than one slew these men," he muttered, "and the Nubian gave scathe to one, at least."

The black still gripped his great scimitar, and the edge was nicked and bloodstained.

At that moment a quick rattle of steps sounded on the flags and the affrighted face of Jacob peered in at the door. His eyes flared wide and he opened his mouth to the widest extent to give vent to an ear-piercing screech.

"Shut up, you fool," snarled Cormac disgusted, but Jacob gibbered wildly.

"Spare my life, most noble lord! I will not tell anyone that you slew Skol--I swear--"

"Be quiet, Jew," growled Cormac. "I did not slay Skol and I will not harm you."

This somewhat reassured Jacob, whose eyes narrowed with sudden avarice.

"Have you found the gem?" he chattered, running into the chamber. "Swift, let us search for it and begone--I should not have shrieked but I feared the noble lord would slay me--yet perchance it was not heard--"

"It was heard," growled the Norman. "And here are the warriors."

The tramp of many hurried feet was heard and a second later the door was thronged with bearded faces. Cormac noted the men blinked and gaped like owls, more like men roused from deep sleep than drunken men. Bleary-eyed, they gripped their weapons and ogled, a ragged, bemused horde. Jacob shrank back, trying to flatten himself against the wall, while Cormac faced them, bloodstained sword still in his hand.

"Allah!" ejaculated a Kurd, rubbing his eyes. "The Frank and the Jew have murdered Skol!"

"A lie," growled Cormac menacingly. "I know not who slew this drunkard."

Tisolino di Strozza came into the chamber, followed by the other chiefs. Cormac saw Nadir Tous, Kojar Mirza, Shalmar Khor, Yussef el Mekru and Justus Zenor. Toghrul Khan, Kai Shah and Musa bin Daoud were nowhere in evidence, and where Kadra Muhammad was, the Norman well knew.

"The jewel!" exclaimed an Armenian excitedly. "Let us look for the gem!"

"Be quiet, fool," snapped Nadir Tous, a light of baffled fury growing in his eyes. "Skol has been stripped; be sure who slew him took the gem."

All eyes turned toward Cormac.

"Skol was a hard master," said Tisolino. "Give us the jewel, lord Cormac, and you may go your way in peace."

Cormac swore angrily; had not, he thought, even as he replied, the Venetian's eyes widened when they first fell on him?

"I have not your cursed jewel; Skol was dead when I came to his room."

"Aye," jeered Kojar Mirza, "and blood still wet on your blade." He pointed accusingly at the weapon in Cormac's hand, whose blue steel, traced with Norse runes, was stained a dull red.

"That is the blood of Kadra Muhammad," growled Cormac, "who stole into my cell to slay me and whose corpse now lies there."

His eyes were fixed with fierce intensity on di Strozza's face but the Venetian's expression altered not a whit.

"I will go to the chamber and see if he speaks truth," said di Strozza, and Nadir Tous smiled a deadly smile.

"You will remain here," said the Persian, and his ruffians closed menacingly around the tall Venetian. "Go you, Selim." And one of his men went grumbling. Di Strozza shot a swift glance of terrible hatred and suppressed wrath at Nadir Tous, then stood imperturbably; but Cormac knew that the Venetian was wild to escape from that room.

"There have been strange things done tonight in Bab-el-Shaitan," growled Shalmar Khor. "Where are Kai Shah and the Syrian--and that pagan from Tartary? And who drugged the wine?"

"Aye!" exclaimed Nadir Tous, "who drugged the wine which sent us all into the sleep from which we but a few moments ago awakened? And how is it that you, di Strozza, were awake when the rest of us slept?"

"I have told you, I drank the wine and fell asleep like the rest of you," answered the Venetian coldly. "I awoke a few moments earlier, that is all, and was going to my chamber when the horde of you came along."

"Mayhap," answered Nadir Tous, "but we had to put a scimitar edge to your throat before you would come with us."

"Why did you wish to come to Skol's chamber anyway?" countered di Strozza.

"Why," answered the Persian, "when we awoke and realized we had been drugged, Shalmar Khor suggested that we go to Skol's chamber and see if he had flown with the jewel--"

"You lie!" exclaimed the Circassian. "That was Kojar Mirza who said that--"

"Why this delay and argument!" cried Kojar Mirza. "We know this Frank was the last to be admitted to Skol this night. There is blood on his blade--we found him standing above the slain! Cut him down!"

And drawing his scimitar he stepped forward, his warriors surging in behind him. Cormac placed his back to the wall and braced his feet to meet the charge. But it did not come; the tense figure of the giant Norman-Gael was so fraught with brooding menace, the eyes glaring so terribly above the skull-adorned shield, that even the wild Kurd faltered and hesitated, though a score of men thronged the room and many more than that number swarmed in the corridor outside. And as he wavered the Persian Selim elbowed his way through the band, shouting: "The Frank spoke truth! Kadra Muhammad lies dead in the lord Cormac's chamber!"

"That proves nothing," said the Venetian quietly. "He might have slain Skol after he slew the Lur."

An uneasy and bristling silence reigned for an instant. Cormac noted that now Skol lay dead, the different factions made no attempt to conceal their differences. Nadir Tous, Kojar Mirza and Shalmar Khor stood apart from each other and their followers bunched behind them in glaring, weapon-thumbing groups. Yussef el Mekru and Justus Zehor stood aside, looking undecided; only di Strozza seemed oblivious to this cleavage of the robber band.

The Venetian was about to say more, when another figure shouldered men aside and strode in. It was the Seljuk, Kai Shah, and Cormac noted that he lacked his mail shirt and that his garments were different from those he had worn earlier in the night. More, his left arm was bandaged and bound close to his chest and his dark face was somewhat pale.

At the sight of him di Strozza's calm for the first time deserted him; he started violently.

"Where is Musa bin Daoud?" he exclaimed.

"Aye!" answered the Turk angrily. "Where is Musa bin Daoud?"

"I left him with you!" cried di Strozza fiercely, while the others gaped, not understanding this byplay.

"But you planned with him to elude me," accused the Seljuk.

"You are mad!" shouted di Strozza, losing his self-control entirely.

"Mad?" snarled the Turk. "I have been searching for the dog through the dark corridors. If you and he are acting in good faith, why did you not return to the chamber, when you went forth to meet Kadra Muhammad whom we heard coming along the corridor? When you came not back I stepped to the door to peer out for you, and when I turned back, Musa had darted through some secret opening like a rat--"

Di Strozza almost frothed at the mouth. "You fool!" he screamed, "keep silent!"

"I will see you in Gehennum and all our throats cut before I let you cozen me!" roared the Turk, ripping out his scimitar. "What have you done with Musa?"

"You fool of Hell," raved di Strozza, "I have been in this chamber ever since I left you! You knew that Syrian dog would play us false if he got the opportunity and--"

And at that instant when the air was already supercharged with tension, a terrified slave rushed in at a blind, stumbling run, to fall gibbering at di Strozza's feet.

"The gods!" he howled. "The black gods! Aie! The cavern under the floors and the djinn in the rock!"

"What are you yammering about, dog?" roared the Venetian, knocking the slave to the floor with an open-handed blow.

"I found the forbidden door open," screeched the fellow. "A stair goes down--it leads into a fearful cavern with a terrible altar on which frown gigantic demons--and at the foot of the stairs--the lord Musa--"

"What!" di Strozza's eyes blazed and he shook the slave as a dog shakes a rat.

"Dead!" gasped the wretch between chattering teeth.

Cursing terribly, di Strozza knocked men aside in his rush to the door; with a vengeful howl Kai Shah pelted after him, slashing right and left to clear a way. Men gave back from his flashing blade, howling as the keen edge slit their skins. The Venetian and his erstwhile comrade ran down the corridor, di Strozza dragging the screaming slave after him, and the rest of the pack gave tongue in rage and bewilderment and took after them. Cormac swore in amazement and followed, determined to see the mad game through.

Down winding corridors di Strozza led the pack, down broad stairs, until he came to a huge iron door that now swung open. Here the horde hesitated.

"This is in truth the forbidden door," muttered an Armenian. "The brand is on my back that Skol put there merely because I lingered too long before it once."

"Aye," agreed a Persian. "It leads into places once sealed up by the Arabs long ago. None but Skol ever passed through that door--he and the Nubian and the captives who came not forth. It is a haunt of devils."

Di Strozza snarled in disgust and strode through the doorway. He had snatched a torch as he ran and he held this high in one hand. Broad steps showed, leading downward, and cut out of solid rock. They were on the lower floor of the castle; these steps led into the bowels of the earth. As di Strozza strode down, dragging the howling, naked slave, the high-held torch lighting the black stone steps and casting long shadows into the darkness before them, the Venetian looked like a demon dragging a soul into Hell.

Kai Shah was close behind him with his drawn scimitar, with Nadir Tous and Kojar Mirza crowding him close. The ragged crew had, with unaccustomed courtesy, drawn back to let the lord Cormac through and now they followed, uneasily and casting apprehensive glances to all sides.

Many carried torches, and as their light flowed into the depths below a medley of affrighted yells went up. From the darkness huge evil eyes glimmered and titanic shapes loomed vaguely in the gloom. The mob wavered, ready to stampede, but di Strozza strode stolidly downward and the pack called on Allah and followed. Now the light showed a huge cavern in the center of which stood a black and utterly abhorrent altar, hideously stained, and flanked with grinning skulls laid out in strangely systematic lines. The horrific figures were disclosed to be huge images, carved from the solid rock of the cavern walls, strange, bestial, gigantic gods, whose huge eyes of some glassy substance caught the torchlight.

The Celtic blood in Cormac sent a shiver down his spine. Alexander built the foundations of this fortress? Bah--no Grecian ever carved such gods as these. No; an aura of unspeakable antiquity brooded over this grim cavern, as if the forbidden door were a mystic threshold over which the adventurer stepped into an elder world. No wonder mad dreams were here bred in the frenzied brain of Skol Abdhur. These gods were grim vestiges of an older, darker race than Roman or Hellene--a people long faded into the gloom of antiquity. Phrygians--Lydians--Hittites? Or some still more ancient, more abysmal people?

The age of Alexander was as dawn before these ancient figures, yet doubtless he bowed to these gods, as he bowed to many gods before his maddened brain made himself a deity.

At the foot of the stairs lay a crumpled shape--Musa bin Daoud. His face was twisted in horror. A medley of shouts went up: "The djinn have taken the Syrian! Let us begone! This is an evil place!"

"Be silent, you fools!" roared Nadir Tous. "A mortal blade slew Musa--see, he has been slashed through the breast and his bones are broken. See how he lies. Someone slew him and flung him down the stairs--"

The Persian's voice trailed off, as his gaze followed his own pointing fingers. Musa's left arm was outstretched and his fingers had been hacked away.

"He held something in that hand," whispered Nadir Tous. "So hard he gripped it that his slayer was forced to cut off his fingers to obtain it--"

Men thrust torches into niches on the wall and crowded nearer, their superstitious fears forgotten.

"Aye!" exclaimed Cormac, having pieced together some of the bits of the puzzle in his mind. "It was the gem! Musa and Kai Shah and di Strozza killed Skol, and Musa had the gem. There was blood on Abdullah's sword and Kai Shah has a broken arm--shattered by the sweep of the Nubian's great scimitar. Whoever slew Musa has the gem."

Di Strozza screamed like a wounded panther. He shook the wretched slave.

"Dog, have you the gem?"

The slave began a frenzied denial, but his voice broke in a ghastly gurgle as di Strozza, in a very fit of madness, jerked his sword edge across the wretch's throat and flung the blood-spurting body from him. The Venetian whirled on Kai Shah.

"You slew Musa!" he screamed. "He was with you last! You have the gem!"

"You lie!" exclaimed the Turk, his dark face an ashy pallor. "You slew him yourself--"

His words ended in a gasp as di Strozza, foaming at the mouth and all sanity gone from his eyes, ran his sword straight through the Turk's body. Kai Shah swayed like a sapling in the wind; then as di Strozza withdrew the blade, the Seljuk hacked through the Venetian's temple, and as Kai Shah reeled, dying on his feet but clinging to life with the tenacity of the Turk, Nadir Tous leaped like a panther and beneath his flashing scimitar Kai Shah dropped dead across the dead Venetian.

Forgetting all else in his lust for the gem, Nadir Tous bent over his victim, tearing at his garments--bent further as if in a deep salaam and sank down on the dead men, his own skull split to the teeth by Kojar Mirza's stroke. The Kurd bent to search the Turk, but straightened swiftly to meet the attack of Shalmar Khor. In an instant the scene was one of ravening madness, where men hacked and slew and died blindly. The flickering torches lit the scene, and Cormac, backing away toward the stairs, swore amazedly. He had seen men go mad before, but this exceeded anything he had ever witnessed.

Kojar Mirza slew Selim and wounded a Circassian, but Shalmar Khor slashed through his arm-muscles, Justus Zehor ran in and stabbed the Kurd in the ribs, and Kojar Mirza went down, snapping like a dying wolf, to be hacked to pieces.

Justus Zehor and Yussef el Mekru seemed to have taken sides at last; the Georgian had thrown in his lot with Shalmar Khor, while the Arab rallied to him the Kurds and Turks. But besides these loosely knit bands of rivals, various warriors, mainly the Persians of Nadir Tous, raged through the strife, foaming at the mouth and striking all impartially. In an instant a dozen men were down, dying and trampled by the living. Justus Zehor fought with a long knife in each hand and he wrought red havoc before he sank, skull cleft, throat slashed and belly ripped up.

Even while they fought, the warriors had managed to tear to shreds the clothing of Kai Shah and di Strozza. Finding naught there, they howled like wolves and fell to their deadly work with new frenzy. A madness was on them; each time a man fell, others seized him, ripping his garments apart in search for the gem, slashing at each other as they did so.

Cormac saw Jacob trying to steal to the stairs, and even as the Norman decided to withdraw himself, a thought came to the brain of Yussef el Mekru. Arab-like, the Yemenite had fought more coolly than the others, and perhaps he had, even in the frenzy of combat, decided on his own interests. Possibly, seeing that all the leaders were down except Shalmar Khor, he decided it would be best to reunite the band, if possible, and it could be best done by directing their attention against a common foe. Perhaps he honestly thought that since the gem had not been found, Cormac had it. At any rate, the Sheikh suddenly tore away and pointing a lean arm toward the giant figure at the foot of the stairs, screamed: "Allahu akbar! There stands the thief! Slay the Nazarene!"

It was good Moslem psychology. There was an instant of bewildered pause in the battle, then a bloodthirsty howl went up and from a tangled battle of rival factions, the brawl became instantly a charge of a solid compact body that rushed wild-eyed on Cormac howling: "Slay the Caphar!"

Cormac snarled in disgusted irritation. He should have anticipated that. No time to escape now; he braced himself and met the charge. A Kurd, rushing in headlong, was impaled on the Norman's long blade, and a giant Circassian, hurling his full weight on the kite-shaped shield, rebounded as from an iron tower. Cormac thundered his battle cry, "Cloigeand abu," (Gaelic: "The skull to victory.") in a deep-toned roar that drowned the howls of the Moslems; he freed his blade and swung the heavy weapon in a crashing arc. Swords shivered to singing sparks and the warriors gave back. They plunged on again as Yussef el Mekru lashed them with burning words. A big Armenian broke his sword on Cormac's helmet and went down with his skull split. A Turk slashed at the Norman's face and howled as his wrist was caught on the Norse sword, and the hand flew from it.

Cormac's defense was his armor, the unshakable immovability of his stance, and his crashing blows. Head bent, eyes glaring above the rim of his shield, he made scant effort to parry or avoid blows. He took them on his helmet or his shield and struck back with thunderous power. Now Shalmar Khor smote full on his helmet with every ounce of his great rangy body behind the blow, and the scimitar bit through the steel cap, notching on the coif links beneath. It was a blow that might have felled an ox, yet Cormac, though half-stunned, stood like a man of iron and struck back with all the power of arm and shoulders. The Circassian flung up his round buckler but it availed not. Cormac's heavy sword sheared through the buckler, severed the arm that held it and crashed full on the Circassian's helmet, shattering both steel cap and the skull beneath.

But fired by fanatical fury as well as greed, the Moslems pressed in. They got behind him. Cormac staggered as a heavy weight landed full on his shoulders. A Kurd had stolen up the stairs and leaped from them full on to the Frank's back. Now he clung like an ape, slavering curses and hacking wildly at Cormac's neck with his long knife.

The Norman's sword was wedged deep in a split breastbone and he struggled fiercely to free it. His hood was saving him so far from the knife strokes of the man on his back, but men were hacking at him from all sides and Yussef el Mekru, foam on his beard, was rushing upon him. Cormac drove his shield upward, catching a frothing Moslem under the chin with the rim and shattering his jawbone, and almost at the same instant the Norman bent his helmeted head forward and jerked it back with all the strength of his mighty neck, and the back of his helmet crushed the face of the Kurd on his back. Cormac felt the clutching arms relax; his sword was free, but a Lur was clinging to his right arm--they hemmed him in so he could not step back, and Yussef el Mekru was hacking at his face and throat. He set his teeth and lifted his sword-arm, swinging the clinging Lur clear of the floor. Yussef's scimitar rasped on his bent helmet--his hauberk--his coif links--the Arab's swordplay was like the flickering of light and in a moment it was inevitable that the flaming blade would sink home. And still the Lur clung, ape-like, to Cormac's mighty arm.

Something whispered across the Norman's shoulder and thudded solidly. Yussef el Mekru gasped and swayed, clawing at the thick shaft that protruded from his heavy beard. Blood burst from his parted lips and he fell dying. The man clinging to Cormac's arm jerked convulsively and fell away. The press slackened. Cormac, panting, stepped back and gained the stairs. A glance upward showed him Toghrul Khan standing on the landing bending a heavy bow. The Norman hesitated; at that range the Mongol could drive a shaft through his mail.

"Haste, bogatyr," came the nomad's gutturals. "Up the stairs!"

At that instant Jacob started running fleetly for the darkness beyond the flickering torches; three steps he took before the bow twanged. The Jew screamed and went down as though struck by a giant's hand; the shaft had struck between his fat shoulders and gone clear through him.

Cormac was backing warily up the stairs, facing his foes who clustered at the foot of the steps, dazed and uncertain. Toghrul Khan crouched on the landing, beady eyes a-glitter, shaft on string, and men hesitated. But one dared--a tall Turkoman with the eyes of a mad dog. Whether greed for the gem he thought Cormac carried, or fanatical hate sent him leaping into the teeth of sword and arrow, he sprang howling up the stairs, lifting high a heavy iron-braced shield. Toghrul Khan loosed, but the shaft glanced from the metal work, and Cormac, bracing his legs again, struck downward with all his power. Sparks flashed as the down-crashing sword shattered the shield and dashed the onrushing Turkoman headlong to lie stunned and bloodied at the foot of the stairs.

Then as the warriors fingered their weapons undecidedly, Cormac gained the landing, and Norman and Mongol backed together out of the door which Toghrul Khan slammed behind them. A wild medley of wolfish yells burst out from below and the Mongol, slamming a heavy bolt in place, growled: "Swiftly, bogatyr! It will be some minutes before those dog-brothers can batter down the door. Let us begone!"

He led the way at a swift run along a corridor, through a series of chambers, and flung open a barred door. Cormac saw that they had come into the courtyard, flooded now by the gray light of dawn. A man stood near, holding two horses--the great black stallion of Cormac's and the Mongol's wiry roan. Leaning close Cormac saw that the man's face was bandaged so that only one eye showed.

"Haste," Toghrul Khan was urging. "The slave saddled my mount, but yours he could not saddle because of the savagery of the beast. The serf is to go with us."

Cormac made haste to comply; then swinging into the saddle he gave the fellow a hand and the slave sprang up behind him. The strangely assorted companions thundered across the courtyard just as raging figures burst through the doorway through which they had come.

"No sentries at the gates this night," grunted the Mongol.

They pulled up at the wide gates and the slave sprang down to open them. He swung the portals wide, took a single step toward the black stallion and went down, dead before he struck the ground. A crossbow bolt had shattered his skull, and Cormac, wheeling with a curse, saw a Moslem kneeling on one of the bastions, aiming his weapon. Even as he looked, Toghrul Khan rose in his stirrups, drew a shaft to the head and loosed. The Moslem dropped his arbalest and pitched headlong from the battlement.

With a fierce yell the Mongol wheeled away and charged through the gates, Cormac close at his heels. Behind them sounded a wild and wolfish babble as the warriors rushed about the courtyard, seeking to find and saddle mounts.

Chapter III

"Look!" The companions had covered some miles of wild gorges and treacherous slopes, without hearing any sound of pursuit. Toghrul Khan pointed back. The sun had risen in the east, but behind them a red glow rivaled the sun.

"The Gate of Erlik burns," said the Mongol. "They will not hunt us, those dog-brothers. They stopped to loot the castle and fight one another; some fool has set the hold on fire."

"There is much I do not understand," said Cormac slowly. "Let us sift truth from lies. That di Strozza, Kai Shah and Musa killed Skol is evident, also that they sent Kadra Muhammad to slay me--why, I know not. But I do not understand what Kai Shah meant by saying that they heard Kadra Muhammad coming down the corridor, and that di Strozza went forth to meet him, for surely at that moment Kadra Muhammad lay dead on my chamber floor. And I believe that both Kai Shah and the Venetian spoke truth when they denied slaying Musa."

"Aye," acknowledged the Mongol. "Harken, lord Frank: scarcely had you gone up to Skol's chamber last night, when Musa the scribe left the banquet hall and soon returned with slaves who bore a great bowl of spiced wine--prepared in the Syrian way, said the scribe, and the steaming scent of it was pleasant.

"But I noted that neither he nor Kadra Muhammad drank of it, and when Kai Shah and di Strozza plunged in their goblets, they only pretended to drink. So when I raised my goblet to my lips, I sniffed long and secretly and smelled therein a very rare drug--aye, one I had thought was known only to the magicians of Cathay. It makes deep sleep and Musa must have obtained a small quantity in some raid on a caravan from the East. So I did not drink of the wine, but all the others drank saving those I have mentioned, and soon men began to grow drowsy, though the drug acted slowly, being weak in that it was distributed among so many.

"Soon I went to my chamber which a slave showed me, and squatting on my bunk, devised a plan of vengeance in my mind, for because that dog of a Jew put shame upon me before the lords, hot anger burned in my heart so that I could not sleep. Soon I heard one staggering past my door as a drunkard staggers, but this one whined like a dog in pain. I went forth and found a slave whose eye, he said, his master had torn out. I have some knowledge of wounds, so I cleansed and bandaged his empty socket, easing his pain, for which he would have kissed my feet.

"Then I bethought me of the insult which had been put upon me, and desired the slave to show me where slept the fat hog, Jacob. He did so, and marking the chamber in my mind, I turned again and went with the slave into the courtyard where the beasts were kept. None hindered us, for all were in the feasting-hall and their din was growing lesser swiftly. In the stables I found four swift horses, ready saddled--the mounts of di Strozza and his comrades. And the slave told me, furthermore, that there were no guards at the gates that night--di Strozza had bidden all to feast in the great hall. So I bade the slave saddle my steed and have it ready, and also your black stallion which I coveted.

"Then I returned into the castle and heard no sound; all those who had drunk of the wine slept in the sleep of the drug. I mounted to the upper corridors, even to Jacob's chamber, but when I entered to slit his fat throat, he was not sleeping there. I think he was guzzling wine with the slaves in some lower part of the castle.

"I went along the corridors searching for him, and suddenly saw ahead of me a chamber door partly open, through which shone light, and I heard the voice of the Venetian speak: 'Kadra Muhammad is approaching; I will bid him hasten.'

"I did not desire to meet these men, so I turned quickly down a side corridor, hearing di Strozza call the name of Kadra Muhammad softly and as if puzzled. Then he came swiftly down the corridor, as if to see whose footfalls it was he heard, and I went hurriedly before him, crossing the landing of a wide stair which led up from the feasting-hall, and entered another corridor where I halted in the shadows and watched.

"Di Strozza came to the landing and paused, like a man bewildered, and at that moment an outcry went up from below. The Venetian turned to escape but the waking drunkards had seen him. Just as I had thought, the drug was too weak to keep them sleeping long, and now they realized they had been drugged and stormed bewilderedly up the stairs and laid hold on di Strozza, accusing him of many things and making him accompany them to Skol's chamber. Me they did not spy.

"Still seeking Jacob, I went swiftly down the corridor at random and coming onto a narrow stairway, came at last to the ground floor and a dark tunnel-like corridor which ran past a most strange door. And then sounded quick footsteps and as I drew back in the shadows, there came one in panting haste--the Syrian Musa, who gripped a scimitar in his right hand and something hidden in his left.

"He fumbled with the door until it opened; then lifting his head, he saw me and crying out wildly he slashed at me with his scimitar. Erlik! I had no quarrel with the man, but he was as one maddened by fear. I struck with the naked steel, and he, being close to the landing inside the door, pitched headlong down the stairs.

"Then I was desirous of learning what he held so tightly in his left hand, so I followed him down the stairs. Erlik! That was an evil place, dark and full of glaring eyes and strange shadows. The hair on my head stood up but I gripped my steel, calling on the Lords of Darkness and the high places. Musa's dead hand still gripped what he held so firmly that I was forced to cut off the fingers. Then I went back up the stairs and out the same way by which we later escaped from the castle, and found the slave ready with my mount, but unable to saddle yours.

"I was loath to depart without avenging my insult, and as I lingered I heard the clash of steel within the hold. And I stole back and came to the forbidden stair again while the fighting was fiercest below. All were assailing you, and though my heart was hot against you, because you had been given preference over me, I warmed to your valor. Aye, you are a hero, bogatyr!"

"Then it was thus, apparently," mused the Frank, "di Strozza and his comrades had it well planned out--they drugged the wine, called the guards from the walls, and had their horses ready for swift flight. As I had not drunk the drugged wine, they sent the Lur to slay me. The other three killed Skol and in the fight Kai Shah was wounded--Musa took the gem doubtless because neither Kai Shah nor the Venetian would trust it to the other.

"After the murder, they must have retired into a chamber to bandage Kai Shah's arm, and while there they heard you coming along the corridor and thought it the Lur. Then when di Strozza followed he was seized by the waking bandits, as you say--no wonder he was wild to be gone from Skol's chamber! And meanwhile Musa gave Kai Shah the slip somehow, meaning to have the gem for himself. But what of the gem?"

"Look!" the nomad held out his hand in which a sinister crimson glow throbbed and pulsed like a living thing in the early sun.

"," said Toghrul Khan. "Greed for this slew Skol and fear born of this evil thing slew Musa; for, escaping from his comrades, he thought the hand of all men against him and attacked me, when he could have gone on unmolested. Did he think to remain hidden in the cavern until he could slip away, or does some tunnel admit to outer air?

"Well, this red stone is evil--one can not eat it or drink it or clothe himself with it, or use it as a weapon, yet many men have died for it. Look--I will cast it away." The Mongol turned to fling the gem over the verge of the dizzy precipice past which they were riding. Cormac caught his arm.

"Nay--if you do not want it, let me have it."

"Willingly," but the Mongol frowned. "My brother would wear the gaud?"

Cormac laughed shortly and Toghrul Khan smiled.

"I understand; you will buy favor from your sultan."

"Bah!" Cormac growled, "I buy favor with my sword. No." He grinned, well pleased. "This trinket will pay the ransom of Sir Rupert de Vaile to the chief who now holds him captive."

Contents

SHE DEVIL

By Robert E. Howard

Outside, where dawn was just dispelling the fog-wisps from the South Pacific waters, the sea was calm, but a typhoon was raging in the cabin of the Saucy Wench. Most of the thunder was supplied by Captain Harrigan--vociferous oratory, charged with brimstone and sulphur, punctuated with resounding bangs of a hairy fist on the table across which he was bellowing damnation and destruction at Raquel O'Shane, who screamed back at him. Between them they were making so much noise they did not hear the sudden shouting that burst forth on deck.

"Shut up!" bawled the captain. He was broad as a door and his undershirt revealed a chest and arms muscled and hairy as an ape's. A growth of whiskers bristled his jaws, and his eyes blazed. He was a spectacle to daunt any woman, even if she had not known him as Bully Harrigan, smuggler, blackbirder, pearl-thief and pirate, when opportunity offered itself.

"Shut up!" he repeated. "One more yap out of you, you Spanish-Irish gutter-snipe, and I'll bend one on your jaw!"

Being a man of primal impulses, he demonstrated his meaning by a fervent swipe of a mallet-like fist, which Raquel dodged with the agility of much practice. She was slim and supple, with foamy black hair, dark eyes that blazed with deviltry, and an ivory-tinted skin, heritage of her mixed Celtic-Latin blood, that made men's heads swim at first sight. Her figure agitated by her movements, was a poem of breath-taking grace.

"Pig!" she screamed. "Don't you dare lay a finger on me!" This was purely rhetorical; Harrigan had laid a finger on her more than once during the past weeks, to say nothing of whole fists, belaying pins, and rope's ends. But she was still untamed.

She too banged the table and cursed in three languages.

"You've treated me like a dog all the way from Brisbane!" she raged. "Getting tired of me, are you, after taking me away from a good job in San Francisco--"

"I took you--" The enormity of the accusation choked the captain. "Why, you Barbary Coast hussy, the first time I ever saw you was that night you climbed aboard as we were pullin' out and begged me on your blasted knees to take you to sea and save you from the cops, account of your knifin' a Wop in that Water Street honky-tonk where you were workin', you--"

"Don't you call me that!" she shrieked, doing a war-dance. "All I did in that joint was dance! And I've played square with you, and now--"

"Now I'm sick of your tantrums," quoth Harrigan, downing a horse-sized snort from a square-faced bottle. "They're too much even for a good-hearted swab like me. As soon as we raise a civilized port, I'm goin' to kick you off onto the docks. And you give me any more lip, and I'll sell you to the first Kanaka chief I meet, you blasted hell-cat!"

That set her off again, like a match to the fuse of a sky-rocket. She hit the roof, and for a few moments the cabin was so full of impassioned feminine profanity it even drowned out Harrigan's roars.

"And where are we heading?" she demanded, remembering another grievance. "I want to know! The crew wants to know! You've told us nothing since we left Brisbane! We've picked up no cargo, and now we've gotten into these God-forsaken seas where none of us knows where we are, except you, and all you do is guzzle booze and study the blasted chart!"

She snatched it from the table and brandished it accusingly.

"Gimme that!" he bellowed, grabbing wildly. She jumped back agilely, sensing it was precious to him, and woman-like seizing the advantage.

"I won't! Not till you promise to quit knocking me around! Get back! I'll throw it out the port-hole if you come any closer!" Her rapid breathing, her agitation, made her loveliness devastating, but for the moment, he had no eyes for that.

With a frantic roar Harrigan lunged, upsetting the table with a crash. Raquel had raised a bigger hurricane than she had expected or intended. She squealed in alarm and leaped back, the chart waving wildly in her hand.

"Gimme that!" It was the howl of a lost soul. Harrigan's hair stood straight up and his eyes bulged. Raquel yelped with terror, too confused to make her peace by delivering the article requested. She sprang backward, tripped over a chair and fell on her back, with a shriek and an involuntary abandon that tossed her bare ivory-tinted legs revealingly skyward. But Harrigan was blind to this entrancing display. For as she fell, her arm, thrown out wildly, propelled the chart through the air; and as the Devil always controls such things, it sailed through the open port-hole.

Harrigan tore his hair and rushed for the port-hole. On deck an ear-splitting racket had burst suddenly forth but the occupants of the cabin ignored it. Harrigan, glaring pop-eyed from the port-hole, was just in time to see the chart vanish on its way to Davy Jones's locker, and his agonized howl paled all his previous efforts--so much so that out in the passageway the bos'n, who had just reached the cabin door in breathless haste, turned tail, and fled back the way he had come. Raquel had risen, in apprehensive silence, and was making some necessary adjustments in her garments. Her lovely eyes dilated at the red glare in Harrigan's eyes as he wheeled toward her.

"You threw that away on purpose!" he choked. "A million dollars right through the damn port-hole! I'll fix you--"

He lunged and she skipped back with a squeal, but not quickly enough. His huge paw closed on a shoulder-strap. There was a shriek, a ripping sound, and Raquel fled toward the door minus the dress which remained in Harrigan's hand. He was after her instantly, but panic winged her small feet. She beat him to the door and slammed it in his face, and even tried to hold it against him until convinced of her folly by a big fist which, crashing through the panels, grazed her dainty nose, filling her eyes with stars and tears. She yipped pitifully, abandoned the door, and fled up the companion-way, a startling figure in slippers and pink chemise.

After her came Captain Harrigan, a bellowing, red-eyed, hairy monstrosity whose only passion was to sweep the deck from poop to forecastle with that supple, half-naked body.

In their different emotions of fright and fury they were not, even then, aware of the clamor going on upon the deck, until they came full on a scene so unique it even checked Harrigan short in his tracks.

Not so Raquel; she scampered across the deck, unnoticed by the mob milling in the waist, and sprang into the main shrouds before she turned and stared at the spectacle which had halted Harrigan.

Hemmed in by a ring of blaspheming seamen the mate, Buck Richardson, was locked in combat with a stranger whose breeches (his only garment) dripped sea-water. That Mr. Richardson should be battling a stranger was not unique; what was unique was that Mr. Richardson, the terror of a thousand ports, bucko deluxe and hazer extraordinary, was getting the

prime essence of hell beaten out of him. His opponent was as big as he--a broad-shouldered, clean-waisted, heavy-armed man with wetly plastered black hair, blue eyes that blazed with the joy of mayhem, and lips that grinned savagely even when, as now, they were smeared with blood.

He fought with gusto that horrified even his hard-boiled audience. Continually he plunged in, head down, not blindly like a bull, but with his eyes open--except the one the mate had closed--hammering the luckless bucko like a blacksmith pounding an anvil. Richardson was bleeding like a stuck pig, and spitting pieces of broken teeth. He was blowing like a porpoise and in his one good eye there was a desperate gleam.

"Who's that?" demanded Harrigan aghast. "Where'd he come from?"

"We sighted him just as the fog lifted," said the bos'n, spitting carefully to leeward. "He was driftin' along in a open boat, balin' and cussin' somethin' fierce. His boat sunk under him before he could get it to the ship, and he swum for it. A shark tried to scoff him on the way, but he kicked its brains out or bit it in the neck, or done somethin' atrocious to it. That's Wild Bill Clanton!"

"The hell it is!" grunted the captain, staring with new interest. Then he swore as Clanton bashed Mr. Richardson on the snout with appalling results. "They're bleedin' all over my clean deck!"

"Well," said the bos'n, "as soon as he clumb over the rail he seen the mate and went for him. From the remarks they passed before they was too winded to cuss, I gathered that Buck stole a gal from Clanton once. I went after you, but you seemed busy, so I just let 'em fight."

Bam! Mr. Clanton's left mauler met Mr. Richardson's midriff with an impact that sounded like the smack of a loose boom against a wet sail. Bam! A mallet-like right-hander to the jaw and Mr. Richardson went reeling backward and brought up against the rail with a crack that would have fractured the skull of anybody except a bucko mate on a trading schooner.

Clanton went for him with a blood-thirsty yell--then his eyes encountered Raquel, poised in the ratlines. He stopped short, batted his eyes, his mouth wide open as he glared wildly at the ivory-tinted vision posed against the blue, in a sheer wisp of pink silk that tempted even as it concealed little.

"Holy saints of Hell!" breathed Clanton in awe--and at this instant Mr. Richardson, a bloody ruin, lurched away from the rail with a belaying pin. Bam! It crashed on Clanton's head and that warrior bit the deck. Mr. Richardson croaked gratefully and bestowed himself lovingly on his victim's bosom, naively intent on beating his brains out with his trusty belaying pin. But Clanton anticipated his design by drawing up his legs, after the manner of a panther fighting on its back, and, receiving the hurtling mate on his feet and knees, he catapulted Mr. Richardson over his head.

The mate smote the deck headfirst and reverberantly, and this time the impact was too much even for his adamantine skull. But Clanton, bounding up, observed some faint signs of life still, and sought to correct this oversight by leaping ardently and with both feet on the mate's bosom.

"Grab him!" yelled Harrigan. "He's killin' the mate!"

As no spectacle could have pleased the crew better than Mr. Richardson's violent demise, they made no move to obey. Harrigan ran forward blasphemously and tugging forth an enormous revolver thrust it under the nose of Mr. Clanton who eyed it and its owner without favor.

"Are you the cap'n of this mud-scow?" Clanton demanded.

"I am, by God!" gnashed Mr. Harrigan. "I'm Bully Harrigan! What are you doin' on board my ship?"

"I've been keepin' a damned sieve of a boat afloat for a day and a night," retorted the other. "I was mate aboard the Damnation, out of Bristol. The cap'n didn't like Americans. After I won his share of the cargo at draw poker, he welshed and put me afloat--with the aid of the crew."

Harrigan broodingly visualized the battle that must have required!

"Carry the mate to his bunk and bring him to," he ordered the men. "And for you, Clanton, you'll work for your passage! Get for'ard!"

Clanton ignored the command. He was again staring at the vision clinging to the ratlines. Raquel peeped at him approvingly, noting the clean-cut muscular symmetry that was his.

"Who's that?" he inquired, and all turned to stare. Harrigan roared like a sea-lion with awakened memory.

"Drag her down!" he yelled. "Tie her to the mast! I'll--"

"Don't touch me!" shrieked Raquel. "I'll jump and drown myself!"

She didn't mean that, but she sounded as though she did. Clanton reached the rail with a tigerish bound, caught her wrist, and whipped her down onto the deck before she knew what was happening.

"Oh!" she gasped, staring at him with dilated eyes. He was bronzed by the sun of the Seven Seas, and his torso was ridged with clean hard cords of muscles. In fierce admiration his gaze devoured her from her trim ankles to the foamy burnished mass of her hair.

"Good work, Clanton!" roared Harrigan, striding forward. "Hold her!" Raquel wailed despairfully, but Harrigan, reaching for her, had his hand knocked aside, and he paused and goggled stupidly at Clanton.

"Avast!" roared Clanton gustily. "That's no way to treat a lady!"

"Lady, hell!" bleated Harrigan. "Do you know what she just did? Threw away my chart! The only dash-blank chart in the world that could show me how to find the island of Aragoa!"

"Was we goin' there, cap'n?" asked the bos'n.

"Yes, we was!" yelled Harrigan. "And what for? I'll tell you! Ambegis. A barrel full! At thirty-two dollars an ounce! You bilge-rats been grousin' to know where we were sailin' to--all right, I'll tell you! And then I'm goin' to tie that wench up and skin her stern with a rope's end!

"A few months ago a blackbirder bound for Australia went on a reef in a storm, off a desert island, and nobody but the mate got ashore alive. They'd found a mess of the stuff floatin' on the water, and filled a big barrel with it--and it floated ashore with him. The mate stood the solitude of the island as long as he could, and then took to sea in the ship's boat he'd patched up. He'd salvaged a chart and marked the island's position. He'd been weeks at sea when I picked him up, on my last voyage from Honolulu to Brisbane. He was ravin' and let slip about the ambergris--I mean he was that grateful to me for savin' him he told me all about it, and gimme the chart for safekeepin', and right after that he got delirious and fell overboard and drowned--"

Somebody laughed sardonically and Harrigan glared murderously around.

"He called the island Aragoa," he growled. "It ain't on no other chart. And now that the daughter of Jezebel has fed that chart to the sharks--"

"Why, hell!" quoth Clanton. "Is that all? Why, I can steer you to Aragoa without any blasted chart! I've been there a dozen times!"

Harrigan started and looked at him searchingly.

"Are you lyin'?"

"Belay with those insults!" said Clanton heatedly. "I won't take you anywhere unless you promise not to punish the girl."

"All right," snarled Harrigan, and Raquel sighed in relief. "But!" brandishing his gun in Clanton's face, "if you're lyin', I'll feed you to the sharks! Take the wheel and lay a course for Aragoa. You don't leave the poop till we raise land!"

"I've got to have food," growled Clanton.

"Tell it to the cook. Then get hold of that wheel." Reminded suddenly of Raquel's lightly-clad condition he roared: "Get below and get some clothes on, you shameless slut!"

A heavy toe emphasized the command by a direct hit astern, and she fled squeaking for the companion.

Clanton scowled, descended into the galley, and bullied the Chinese cook into setting out a feed that would have taxed the capacity of a horse. Having disposed of this, he swaggered up the poop ladder and took the wheel. The men watched him with interest, which was shared by Raquel, peeping from the companion. She had heard of him: who in the South Seas had not? A wild adventurer roaring on a turbulent career that included everything from pearl-diving to piracy, he was a man at least, not a beast like Harrigan.

Her flesh tingled deliciously with the feel of his strong grasp on her rounded arm; she was consumed with eagerness for more intimate contact with him, but the opportunity did not come until night had fallen and the powerful figure stood in solitary grandeur at the wheel.

His shoulders bulked against the South Sea stars as he held the schooner to her course; he might have posed for the image of intrepid exploration until a slender figure glided up the poop ladder.

"Does Harrigan know you're out here?" he demanded.

"He sleeps like a pig," she answered, her great dark eyes sad and wistful in the starlight. "He is a pig." She whimpered a little and leaned against him as if seeking pity and protection.

"Poor kid," he said with grand compassion, slipping a protecting arm about her waist--the paternal effect of which was somewhat marred by his patting of the swelling slope of a firm hip. A luxurious shudder ran through her supple body and she snuggled closer within the bend of his muscular arm and pressed her cheek against his shoulder.

"What did Harrigan say was the name of that island?" he asked.

"Aragoa!" she jerked her head back and stared at him, startled. "I thought you said you knew about it!"

"Never heard of it!" he declared. "I just said that to save you!"

"Oh!" she stood aghast. "What will we do when he finds out you lied?"

"I dunno," he answered. "We're in a jam that requires thought and concentration. Sneak down and steal me a few bottles of Harrigan's booze."

She cast him an uncertain glance, but moved away down the ladder, softly as an ivory-hued shadow, to return presently with an arm-ful of darkly gleaming bottles that made Clanton's eyes glisten. He lashed the wheel, casually sighting at a star on the horizon, and sat down by the rail.

"Set 'em down here," he requested, and when she complied, he grabbed her before she could straighten and pulled her down on his lap. For convention's sake she struggled faintly for a moment, and then her arms went convulsively around his corded neck, and she gave him her full red lips in a kiss that he felt clear to the tips of his toes.

"Judas!" During the entire course of a roving life he had never encountered a human volcano like this before. He shook his head to clear the swimming brain, took a deep breath and dived. When he came up for air, she was gasping too, quivering from the dynamic impact of his kisses.

Contentedly he knocked the neck off the bottle, took a deep swig and held it to her lips. She merely sipped; the night was still young, and she needed no alcoholic stimulant to drive the hot blood racing through her veins. It was already breaking all speed records.

Clanton did not need any stimulants either; but drank because he was thirsty; because liquor was to him what moonlight and perfume are to some men. At each swig he gulped as though he were trying to see the bottom.

By the time he had tossed an empty overboard he was saying: "To hell with Harrigan! If he gets gay with me, I'll kick his teeth out! I don't believe there's any such damn' place as Aragoa, anyway!"

"Who cares?" she breathed, leaning her supple back against his breast, and lifting her arms up and back to encircle his brawny neck. He ran an appreciative hand over a warm, rounded shoulder, and let his other hand rest on a knee.

Just as grey dawn stole over the sea, a terrific shock ran through the Saucy Wench. There was a crash in the galley, blasphemy in the forecastle, as men fell out of their bunks. The schooner lurched drunkenly--and remained motionless, with a list to starboard. Preceded by a blue-streaked haze of profanity Harrigan came hurtling from the companion and pranced up the poop ladder in his drawers.

"What the blitherin' hell?" he screamed. "My God, we're aground!"

From a litter of empty bottles Clanton rose unsteadily, stretched, yawned, spat and stared appreciatively at the jungle-fringed beach which--with only a narrow strip of shallow water between--stretched away from under the port bow.

"There's your island, Bully!" he announced with a magnificent gesture.

Harrigan tore his hair and howled like a wolf. "Did you have to run her onto the beach, you son of a slut?"

"That could have happened to anybody," asserted Clanton, and added reprovingly: "Where's your pants?"

But the captain had seen the broken bottles, and his howl had all the poignancy of a stricken soul. Then he saw something else. Raquel, awakened by the noise, rose uncertainly, rubbing her eyes childishly. She made a face, tasting again all the square-face she had guzzled the night before.

Harrigan turned purple; his arm windmilled, to the fascination of the crew who watched from the deck below. He found words, lurid and frenetic.

"You stole my liquor!" he roared. "You had my girl here all night! You've run my ship aground, and by God, I'm goin' to kill you, ambergris or no ambergris!"

He reached for his gun, only to discover that he wore neither gun nor belt. Bellowing he snatched a belaying pin from the rail and made at Clanton who smote him with such effect that the captain's head fractured the binnacle as his whole body performed a parabola backward.

At this moment a frightful figure appeared at the head of the starboard ladder--Mr. Richardson, bedecked in bandages, and with one good eye gleaming eerily. Not even such a beating as he'd received yesterday could long keep a true bucko in his bunk. In his hand was a revolver, and this he fired point-blank. But Mr. Richardson's one good eye was bleared, and his aim was not good. His bullet merely burned a welt across Clanton's ribs, and before he could fire again, Clanton's foot, striking his breastbone with great violence, catapulted him headlong down the ladder at the foot of which his head again met the deck with a force that rendered him temporarily hors-de-combat.

But Captain Harrigan had seized the opportunity to flee down the port ladder yelling: "Gimme my gun! I'll shoot 'em both!"

"Overboard!" yelled Clanton to Raquel, and then as she hesitated, he grabbed her around the waist, tossed her over the rail, and leaped after her.

The plunge into the water snapped her out of her hangover; she screamed, gasped, and then struck out for the beach, followed by Clanton. They reached it just as Harrigan appeared on the poop with a triumphant howl and a Winchester, with which he opened up on them as they raced across the sands and dived into the trees.

Under cover Clanton paused and looked back. The antics of Harrigan on the poop moved him to hearty guffaws, smiting his dripping thigh. Raquel glared at him, wringing out her skirt, and raking back a wet strand of hair.

"What's so funny about being marooned?" she demanded angrily.

He spanked her jocosely and replied: "Don't worry, kid. When the schooner sails, we'll be on her. You stay here and watch 'em while I go inland and look for fruit and fresh water. She's not stuck bad; they can warp her off."

"All right." She shucked her wet dress and hung it up to dry, while she lay down on her stomach on the soft dry sand to peer through the bushes at the ship. She made an alluring picture thus, her pink chemise dripping from their submersion, fitting her tighter than a glove. Clanton admired the view for a moment, and then departed through the trees, striding lightly and softly for so big a man.

Raquel lay there, watching the men piling into boats, with hawsers, where presently they were employed in yanking the schooner loose, stern-first, by main strength and profanity. But it was slow work. The sun rose, and Raquel got impatient. She was hungry and very, very thirsty.

She donned her dress, now dry, and started out to look for Clanton. The trees were denser than she had thought, and she soon lost sight of the beach. Presently she had to climb over a big log, and when she leaped down on the other side, a bramble bush caught up her skirt, twisting it high about her ivory thighs. She twisted about in vain, unable to reach the clinging branch or to free her skirt.

As she squirmed and swore, a light step sounded behind her, and without looking around she commanded, "Bill, untangle me!"

Obligingly a firm masculine hand grasped her skirt and freed it from the branch, by the simple process of raising it several inches. But her rescuer did not then lower the garment; indeed Raquel felt him pull it up even higher--much higher!

"Quit clowning," she requested, turning her head--and then she opened her lovely mouth to its widest extent and emitted a yell that startled the birds in the trees. The man who was holding her skirt in such an indelicate position was not Clanton. He was a big Kanaka in breech-clout. Raquel made a convulsive effort to escape, but a big brown arm encircled her supple waist. In an instant the peaceful glade was a hurricane-center, punctuated by lusty shrieks that a big hand clapped over red-lipped mouth could not altogether stifle.

Clanton heard those screams as he glided like a big bronzed tiger toward the beach. They acted on him like a jolt of electricity. The next instant he was in full career through the jungle, leaving behind him a sizzling wake of profanity. Crashing through the bushes, he burst full onto a scene, striking in its primitive simplicity.

Raquel was defending her virtue as vigorously as civilized nations defend mythical possessions. Her dress had been torn half off and her white body and limbs contrasted vividly with the brown skin of her captor. He wasn't all brown, though; he was red in spots, for she had bitten him freely. So much so that irritation entered into his ardor, and, momentarily abandoning his efforts to subdue her by more pleasant means, he drew back an enormous fist for a clout calculated to waft her into dreamland.

It was at this moment that Clanton arrived on the scene and his bare foot, describing a terrific arc, caught the Kanaka under his haunches and somersaulted him clear over his captive, who scurried to her protector on her all-fours.

"Didn't I tell you to stay on the beach?" Wham! In his irritation Clanton emphasized his reproof with a resounding, open-handed slap where he could reach her easiest. Raquel's shriek was drowned in a vengeful roar. The Kanaka had regained his feet and was bounding toward them, swinging a knotty-headed war club he had leaned against a tree when he stole up on Raquel.

He lunged with a yell and a swing that would have spattered Clanton's brains all over the glade if it had landed. But it flailed empty air as Clanton left his feet in a headlong dive that carried him under the swipe and crashed his shoulders against the Kanaka's legs. Bam! They hit the earth together and the club flew out of the native's hand.

The next instant they were rolling all over the glade in a desperate dog-fight, gouging and slugging. Then Clanton, in the midst of their frantic revolutions, perceived that Raquel had secured the club and was dancing about, trying to get a swipe at his antagonist. Clanton, knowing the average accuracy of a woman's aim, was horrified. The Kanaka had him by the throat, trying to drive thumbs and fingers through the thick cords of muscle that protected the white man's wind-pipe and jugular, but it was the risk of being accidentally brained by a wild swipe of Raquel's club that galvanized Clanton to more desperate energy.

Fighting for an instant's purchase, he drove his knee into the Kanaka's groin, and the man gasped and doubled convulsively. Clanton broke away, kicking him heavily in the belly. Surprisingly the warrior gave a maddened yell, grabbed the foot and twisted it savagely. Clanton whirled to save himself a broken leg, and fell to his all-fours. At the same moment Raquel swung the too-heavy club. She missed as the Kanaka ducked, and she sprawled on her belly in the sand. Both men gained their feet simultaneously, but the Kanaka reached for the club. As he bent over Clanton swung his right over-hand like a hammer and with about the same effect. It crashed behind the Kanaka's ear with the impact of a caulking maul. The Kanaka stretched out in the sand without a quiver.

Raquel leaped up and threw herself hysterically in Clanton's arms. He shook her loose, with lurid language.

"No time for a pettin' party! There's a whole village of the illegitimates over toward the other side of the island. I saw it! Come on!" He grabbed her wrist and fled toward the beach with her, panting: "Thick brush, men cussin' on the ship. They wouldn't hear the racket we've made--I hope." She didn't ask why. She clutched her tattered dress about her as she ran.

They burst onto the beach, and saw that the Saucy Wench was afloat; she was anchored in clear water off the shore, and Harrigan was oiling his rifle on the poop, with the be-bandaged Richardson beside him.

"Ahoy!" yelled Clanton from behind a tree. "Harrigan! I've found your ambergris!"

Harrigan started violently and glared, head-down like a surly bear.

"What's that? Where are you? Show yourself!"

"And get shot? Like hell! But I'll make a trade with you. I've hidden the stuff where you'll never find it. But I'll lead you to it if you'll promise to take us aboard and put us ashore at some civilized port!"

"You fool!" whispered Raquel, kicking his shins. "He'll promise anything, and then shoot us when he's got the loot!"

But Harrigan was bellowing back across the strip of blue water.

"All right! Let bygones be bygones! I'm comin' ashore!"

A few moments later a boat was making for the beach. Raquel danced in her nervousness; her torn dress revealed flashing expanses of ivory flesh.

"Are you crazy? They'll kill us! And that native you knocked out will come to and get his tribe and--"

He grinned and stepped out on the beach, pulling her with him.

"They won't shoot us till I show them the ambergris! I'll take Harrigan inland; you wait here at the boat. And let me do the talkin'!"

She was not in the habit of meekly taking orders, but she lapsed into sulky and bewildered silence. She was badly scared.

Harrigan and Richardson piled out before the boat grounded. The captain had a Winchester, the mate a shotgun. They covered Clanton instantly.

"Stay here!" the captain told the half dozen men who had rowed him ashore. "Now then, Clanton, lead us to that ambergris, and no tricks!"

"Follow me!" Clanton led them into the jungle while behind at the boat, Raquel watched with dilated eyes and crawling flesh.

Clanton swung wide of the glade where--he hoped--the Kanaka still lay senseless. Hardly out of sight of the beach he stumbled over a root and fell. Sitting up he groaned, cursed and tenderly felt of his ankle.

"Blast the luck! It's broken! You'll have to rig a stretcher and carry me!"

"Carry you, hell!!" snorted Harrigan. "Tell us where the loot is, and we'll go on and find it ourselves."

"Go straight on about three hundred yards." groaned Clanton. "Till you come to a clump of sago-palms. Then turn to the left and go on till you come to a pool of fresh water. I rolled the barrel in there."

"All right," grunted Harrigan. "And if we don't find it, we'll shoot you when we get back."

"And we're goin' to shoot you whether we find it or not!" snarled Richardson. "That's why we left the men on the beach--didn't want no witnesses! And we're goin' to leave that wench to starve here with your skeleton when we sail. How you like that, huh?"

Clanton registered horrified despair, and both men chortled brutally as they strode away. They vanished among the trees, and Clanton waited a minute--five--ten--then he sprang up and sprinted for the beach.

He burst onto the beach so suddenly the bos'n nearly shot him.

"Pile in and row for the ship, Quick!" he yelled. "Cannibals! They've got Harrigan and the mate! Listen!"

Back in the jungle rose a sudden bedlam of shots and blood-freezing yells. It was enough. No heroic soul proposed a rescuing sortie. In another instant the boat was scudding for the schooner. Its occupants swarmed up the side, spurred by the rising clamor that was approaching through the jungle. Clanton stood on the poop and yelled orders, and they were obeyed without question.

The anchor came up with a rush, and the Saucy Wench was standing out to sea by the time the tribesman danced out on the beach. They swarmed to the water's edge, three or four hundred of them, yelling vengefully. One waved a blood-splashed shotgun, another a broken Winchester.

Clanton grinned; the directions he had given his enemies had led them accurately--straight into the native village! He thumbed his nose at the baffled barbarians on the beach, and turned and addressed the crew.

"As the only man aboard who can navigate, and owner of the ship, I'm assuming the position of cap'n! Do I hear any objections?"

The bos'n demanded: "What you mean, owner of ship?"

"Me and Harrigan matched pennies," asserted Clanton. "My share of the ambergris against the ship. I won."

"What about the ambergris?" demanded a hardy soul.

Clanton nodded back toward the receding beach. "Anybody that wants to swim back there and fight those boys for it, is welcome to try!"

In the self-conscious silence that followed, he barked suddenly: "All right, get to work! Tail onto those lines! There's a breeze makin' and we're headin' for the Solomons for a load of niggers for Queensland!"

As the crew jumped briskly, Raquel nudged him.

"You didn't find that ambergris," she said, her eyes ablaze with admiration. "That wasn't even the right island. That was all a lie!"

"I doubt if there ever was any ambergris," quoth he. "The fellow that made that chart was probably crazy. To hell with it!" He patted her plump hip possessively and added: "I reckon you go with the ship; that bein' the case I want to see you down in the cap'n's cabin, right away!"

THE END

Contents

THE PURPLE HEART OF ERLIK

By Robert E. Howard

"You'll do what I tell you—or else!" Duke Tremayne smiled cruelly as he delivered his ultimatum. Across the table from him Arline Ellis clenched her white hands in helpless rage. Duke Tremayne, world adventurer, was tall, slim, darkly mustached, handsome in a ruthless way; and many women looked on him with favor. But Arline hated him, with as good reason as she feared him.

But she ventured a flare of rebellion.

"I won't do it! It's too risky!"

"Not half as risky as defying me!" he reminded her. "I've got you by the seat of your pretty pants, my dear. How would you like to have me tell the police why you left Canton in such a hurry? Or tell them my version of that night in Baron Takayami's apartment—"

"Hush!" she begged. She was trembling as she glanced fearfully about the little curtained alcove in which they sat. It was well off the main floor of the Bordeaux Cabaret; even the music from the native orchestra came only faintly to their ears. They were alone, but the words he had just spoken were dynamite, not even safe for empty walls to hear.

"You know I didn't kill him—"

"So you say. But who'd believe you if I swore I saw you do it?"

She bent her head in defeat. This was the price she must pay for an hour of folly. In Canton she had been indiscreet enough to visit the apartments of a certain important Japanese official. It had been only the harmless escapade of a thrill-hunting girl.

She had found more thrills than she wanted, when the official had been murdered, almost before her eyes, by his servant, who she was sure was a Russian spy. The murderer had fled, and so had she, but not before she had been seen leaving the house by Duke Tremayne, a friend of the slain official. He had kept silent. But the murderer had taken important documents with him in his flight, and there was hell to pay in diplomatic circles.

It had been an international episode, that almost set the big guns of war roaring in the East. The murder and theft remained an unsolved mystery to the world at large, a wound that still rankled in the capitals of the Orient.

Arline had fled the city in a panic, realizing she could never prove her innocence, if connected with the affair. Tremayne had followed her to Shanghai and laid his cards on the table. If she did not comply with his wishes, he'd go to the police and swear he saw her murder the Jap. And she knew his testimony would send her to a firing squad, for various governments were eager for a scape-goat with which to conciliate the wrathful Nipponese.

Terrified, Arline submitted to the blackmail. And now Tremayne had told her the price of his silence. It was not what she had expected, though, from the look in his eyes as he devoured her trim figure from blonde hair to French heels, she felt it would come to that eventually. But here in the Bordeaux, a shady rendezvous in the shadowy borderland between the European and the native quarters, he had set her a task that made her flesh crawl.

He had commanded her to steal the famous Heart of Erlik, the purple ruby belonging to Woon Yuen, a Chinese merchant of powerful and sinister connections.

"So many men have tried," she argued. "How can I hope to succeed? I'll be found floating in the Yangtze with my throat cut, just as they were."

"You'll succeed," he retorted. "They tried force or craft; we'll use a woman's strategy. I've learned where he keeps it—had a spy working in his employ and he learned that much. He keeps it in a wall safe that looks like a dragon's head, in the inner chamber of his antique shop, where he keeps his rarest goods, and where he never admits anybody but wealthy women collectors. He entertains them there alone, which makes it easy."

"But how am I going to steal it, with him in there with me?"

"Easy!" he snapped. "He always serves his guests tea. You watch your chance and drop this knock-out pill in his tea."

He pressed a tiny, faintly odorous sphere into her hand.

"He'll go out like a candle. Then you open the safe, take the ruby and skip. It's like taking candy from a baby. One reason I picked you for this job, you have a natural gift for unraveling Chinese puzzles. The safe doesn't have a dial. You press the dragon's teeth. In what combination, I don't know. That's for you to find out."

"But how am I going to get into the inner chamber?" she demanded.

"That's the cream of the scheme," he assured her. "Did you ever hear of Lady Elizabeth Willoughby? Well, every antique dealer in the Orient knows her by sight or reputation. She's never been to Shanghai, though, and I don't believe Woon Yuen ever saw her. That'll make it easy to fool him. She's a young English woman with exotic ideas and she spends her time wandering around the world collecting rare Oriental art treasures. She's worth millions, and she's a free spender.

"Well, you look enough like her in a general way to fit in with any description Woon Yuen's likely to have heard. You're about the same height, same color of hair and eyes, same kind of figure—" his eyes lit with admiration as they dwelt on the trim curves of bosom and hips. "And you can act, too. You can put on an English accent that would fool the Prince of Wales, and act the high-born lady to a queen's taste.

"I've seen Lady Elizabeth's cards, and before I left Canton I had one made, to match. You see I had this in mind, even then." He passed her a curious slip of paper-thin jade, carved with scrawling Chinese characters.

"Her name, of course, in Chinese. She spends a small fortune on cards like that, alone. Now go back to your apartment and change into the duds I had sent up there—scarlet silk dress, jade-green hat, slippers with ivory heels, and a jade brooch. That's the way Lady Elizabeth always dresses. Eccentric? You said it! Go to Woon Yuen's shop and tell him you want to see the ivory Bon. He keeps it in the inner chamber. When you get in there, do your stuff, but be careful! They say Woon Yuen worships that ruby, and burns incense to it. But you'll pull the wool over his eyes, all right. Be careful he doesn't fall for youl Couldn't blame him if he did."

He was leaning toward her, and his hand was on her knee. She flinched at the feel of his questing fingers. She loathed his caresses, but she dared not repulse him. He was arrogantly possessive, and she did not doubt that when—and if—she returned with the coveted gem, he would demand the ultimate surrender. And she knew she would not dare refuse him. Tears of helpless misery welled to her eyes, but he ignored them. Grudgingly he withdrew his hand and rose.

"Go out by the back way. When you get the ruby, meet me at room Number 7, in the Alley of Rats—you know the place. Shanghai will be too hot for you, and we'll have to get you out of town in a hurry. And remember, sweetheart," his voice grew hard as his predatory eyes, and his arm about her waist was more a threat than a caress, "if you double-cross me, or if you flop on this job, I'll see you stood before a Jap firing squad if it's the last thing I do. I won't accept any excuses, either. Get me?"

His fingers brushed her chin, trailed over the soft white curve of her throat, to her shoulder; and as he voiced his threat, he dug them in like talons, emphasizing his command with a brutality that made Arline bite her lip to keep from crying out with pain.

"Yes, I get you."

"All right. Get going." He spanked her lightly and pushed her toward a door opposite the curtained entrance beyond which the music blared.

The door opened into a long narrow alley that eventually reached the street. As Arline went down this alley, seething with rebellion and dismay for the task ahead of her, a man stepped from a doorway and stopped her. She eyed him suspiciously, though concealing a secret throb of admiration for a fine masculine figure.

He was big, broad-shouldered, heavy-fisted, with smoldering blue eyes and a mop of unruly black hair under a side-tilted seaman's cap. And he was Wild Bill Clanton, sailor, gun-runner, blackbirder, pearl-poacher, and fighting man de luxe.

"Will you get out of my way?" she demanded.

"Wait a minute, Kid!" He barred her way with a heavy arm, and his eyes blazed as they ran over the smooth bland curves of her blond loveliness. "Why do you always give me the shoulder? I've made it a point to run into you in a dozen ports, and you always act like I had the plague."

"You have, as far as I'm concerned," she retorted.

"You seem to think Duke Tremayne's healthy," he growled resentfully.

She flinched at the name of her master, but answered spiritedly: "What I see in Duke Tremayne's none of your business. Now let me pass!"

But instead he caught her arm in a grip that hurt.

"Damn your saucy little soul!" he ripped out, anger fighting with fierce desire in his eyes. "If I didn't want you so bad, I'd smack your ears back! What the hell! I'm as good a man as Duke Tremayne. I'm tired of your superior airs. I came to Shanghai just because I heard you were here. Now are you going to be nice, or do I have to get rough?"

"You wouldn't dare!" she exclaimed. "I'll scream—"

A big hand clapped over her mouth put a stop to that.

"Nobody interferes with anything that goes on in alleys behind dumps like the Bordeaux," he growled, imprisoning her arms and lifting her off her feet, kicking and struggling. "Any woman caught here's fair prey."

He kicked open the door through which he had reached the alley, and carried Arline into a dim hallway. Traversing this with his writhing captive, he shoved open a door that opened on it. Arline, crushed against his broad breast, felt the tumultuous pounding of his heart, and experienced a momentary thrill of vanity that she should rouse such stormy emotion in Wild Bill Clanton, whose exploits with the women of a hundred ports were as widely celebrated as his myriad bloody battles with men.

He entered a bare, cobwebby room, and set her on her feet, placing his back against the door.

"Let me out of here, you beast!" She kicked his shins vigorously.

He ignored her attack.

"Why don't you be nice?" he begged. "I don't want to be rough with you. Honest, kid, I'd be good to you—better than Tremayne probably is—"

For answer she bent her blonde head and bit his wrist viciously, even though discretion warned her it was probably the worst thing she could do.

"You little devil!" he swore, grabbing her. "That settles it!"

Scornful of her resistance he crushed her writhing figure against his chest, and kissed her red lips, her furious eyes, her flaming cheeks and white throat, until she lay panting and breathless, unable to repel the possessive arms that drew her closer and closer.

She squirmed and moaned with mingled emotions as he sank his head, eagerly as a thirsty man bending to drink, and pressed his burning lips to the tender hollow of her throat. One hand wandered lower, to her waist, locked her against him despite her struggles.

In a sort of daze she found herself on the dingy cot, with her skirt bunched about her hips. The gleam of her own white flesh, so generously exposed, brought her to her senses, out of the maze of surrender into which his strength was forcing her. Her agile mind worked swiftly. As she sank back, suddenly she shrieked convulsively.

"My back! Something's stabbed me! A knife in the mattress—"

"What the hell?" He snatched her up instantly and whirled her about, but she had her hands pressed over the small of her back, and was writhing and moaning in well-simulated pain.

"I'm sorry, kid—" he began tearing the mattress to pieces, trying to find what had hurt her, and as he turned his back, she snatched a heavy pitcher from the wash-stand and smashed it over his head.

Not even Wild Bill Clanton could stand up under a clout like that. He went down like a pole-axed ox—or bull, rather—and she darted through the door and down the hall. Behind her she heard a furious roar that lent wings to her small high heels. She sprang into the alley and ran up it, not stopping to arrange her garments.

As she emerged into the street, a backward glance showed her Clanton reeling out into the alley, streaming blood, a raging and formidable figure. But she was on a semi-respectable street, with people strolling past and Sikh policemen within call. He wouldn't dare come out of the alley after her. She walked sedately away, arranging her dress as she went. A few loungers had seen her run from the alley, but they merely smiled in quiet amusement and made no comment. It was no novelty in that quarter to see a girl run from a back alley with her breasts exposed and her skirt pulled awry.

But a few deft touches smoothed out her appearance, and a moment later, looking cool, unruffled and demure as though she had just stepped out of a beauty shop, she was headed for her apartment, where waited the garments she must don for her dangerous masquerade.

An hour later she entered the famous antique shop of Woon Yuen, which rose in the midst of a squalid native quarter like a cluster of jewels in a litter of garbage. Outside it was unpretentious, but inside, even in the main chamber with its display intended to catch the fancy of tourists and casual collectors, the shop was a colorful riot of rich artistry.

A treasure trove in jade, gold, and ivory was openly exhibited, apparently unguarded. But the inhabitants of the quarter were not fooled by appearances. Not one would dare to try to rob Woon Yuen. Arline fought down a chill of fear.

A cat-footed Chinese bowed before her, hands concealed in his wide silken sleeves. She eyed him with the languid indifference of an aristocrat, and said, with an accent any Briton would have sworn she was born with: "Tell Woon Yuen that Lady Elizabeth Willoughby wishes to see the ivory Bon." The slant eyes of the impassive Chinese widened just a trifle at the name. With an even lower bow, he took the fragment of jade with the Chinese characters, and kowtowed her into an ebony chair with dragon-claw feet, before he disappeared through the folds of a great dark velvet tapestry which curtained the back of the shop.

She sat there, glancing indifferently about her, according to her role. Lady Elizabeth would not be expected to show any interest in the trifles displayed for the general public. She believed she was being spied on through some peephole. Woon Yuen was a mysterious figure, suspected of strange activities, but so far untouchable, either by his many enemies or by the authorities. When he came, it was so silently that he was standing before her before she was aware of his entrance. She glanced at him, masking her curiosity with the bored air of an English noblewoman.

Woon Yuen was a big man, for a Chinese, squattily built, yet above medium height. His square, lemon-tinted face was adorned with a thin wisp of drooping mustachios, and his bull-like shoulders seemed ready to split the seams of the embroidered black silk robe he wore. He had come to Shanghai from the North, and there was more Mongol than Chinese in him, as emphasized by his massive forearms, impressive even beneath his wide sleeves. He bowed, politely but not obsequiously. He seemed impressed, but not awed by the presence of the noted collector in his shop.

"Lady Elizabeth Willoughby does my humble establishment much honor," said he, in perfect English, sweeping his eyes over her without any attempt to conceal his avid interest in her ripe curves. There was a natural arrogance about him, an assurance of power. He had dealt with wealthy white women before, and strange tales were whispered of his dealings with some of them. The air of mystery and power about him made him seem a romantic figure to some European women. "The Bon is in the inner chamber," he said. "There, too, are my real treasures. These," he gestured contemptuously about him, "are only a show for tourists'. If milady would honor me—"

She rose and moved across the room, with the assured bearing of a woman of quality, certain of deference at all time. He drew back a satin curtain on which gilt dragons writhed, and following her through, drew it together behind them. They went along a narrow corridor, where the walls were hung with black velvet and the floor was carpeted with thick Bokhara rugs in which her feet sank deep.

A soft golden glow emanated from bronze lanterns, suspended from the gilt-inlaid ceiling. She felt her pulse quicken. She was on her way to the famous, yet mysterious, inner chamber of Woon Yuen, inaccessible to all but wealthy and beautiful women, and in which, rumor whispered, Woon Yuen had struck strange bargains; He did not always sell his antiques for money, and there were feminine collectors who would barter their virtue for a coveted relic.

Woon Yuen opened a bronze door, worked in gold and ebon inlay, and Arline entered a broad chamber, over a silvery plate of glass set in the threshold. She saw Woon Yuen glance down as she walked over it, and knew he was getting an eyeful. That mirror placed where a woman must walk over it to enter the chamber was a typical Chinese trick to allow the master of the establishment to get a more intimate glimpse of the charms of his fair customers, as reflected in the mirror. She didn't care, but was merely amused at his ingenuity. Even Woon Yuen would hardly dare to make a pass at Lady Elizabeth Willoughby.

He closed the door and bowed her to an ornate mahogany chair.

"Please excuse me for a moment, milady. I will return instantly."

He went out by another door, and she looked about her at a display whose richness might have shamed a shah's treasure-house. Here indeed were the real treasures of Woon Yuen—what looked like the plunder of a thousand sultans' palaces and heathen temples. Idols in jade, gold, and ivory grinned at her, and a less sophisticated woman would have blushed at some of the figures, depicting Oriental gods and goddesses in amorous poses of an astonishing variety. She could imagine the effect these things would have on some of his feminine visitors.

Even her eyes dilated a trifle at the sight of the smirking, pot-bellied monstrosity that was the ivory Bon, looted from God only knew what nameless monastery high in the forbidden Himalayas. Then every nerve tingled as she saw a gold-worked dragon head jutting from the wall beyond the figure. Quickly she turned her gaze back to the god, just as her host returned on silent, velvet-shod feet.

He smiled to see her staring at the idol and the female figure in its arms.

"That is only one of the conceptions of the god—the Tibetan. It is worth, to any collector—but let us delay business talk until after tea. If you will honor me—"

With his guest seated at a small ebon table, the Mongol struck a bronze gong, and tea was served by a slim, silent-footed Chinese girl, clad only in a filmy jacket which came a little below her budding hips, and which concealed none of her smooth-skinned, lemon-tinted charms.

This display, Arline knew, was in accord with the peculiar Chinese belief that a woman is put in a properly receptive mood for amorous advances by the sight of another woman's exposed charms. She wondered, if, after all, Woon Yuen had designs—but he showed no signs of it.

The slave girl bowed herself humbly out with a last salaam that displayed her full breasts beneath the low-necked jacket, and Arline's nerves tightened. Now was the time. She interrupted Woon Yuen's polite trivialities.

"That little jade figure, over there on the ivory shelf," she said, pointing. "Isn't that a piece of Jum Shan's work?"

"I will get it!"

As he rose and stepped to the shelf, she dropped the knock-out pellet into his tea-cup. It dissolved instantly, without discoloring the liquid. She was idly sipping her own tea when the Mongol returned and placed the tiny figure of a jade warrior before her.

"Genuine Jum Shan," said he. "It dates from the tenth century!" He lifted his cup and emptied it at a draught, while she watched him with a tenseness which she could not wholly conceal. He sat the cup down empty, frowning slightly and twitching his lips at the taste.

"I would like to call your attention, milady—" he leaned forward, reaching toward the jade figure—then slumped down across the table, out cold. In an instant she was across the room, and her white, tapering fingers were at work on the teeth of the carved dragon's head. There was an instinct in those fingers, a super-sensitiveness such as skilled cracksmen sometimes have.

In a few moments the jaws gaped suddenly, revealing a velvet-lined nest in the midst of which, like an egg of some fabled bird of paradise, burned and smoldered a great, smooth, round jewel.

She caught her breath as awedly she cupped it in her hands. It was a ruby, of such deep crimson that it looked darkly purple, the hue of old wine, and the blood that flows near the heart. It looked like the materialization of a purple nightmare. She could believe now the wild tales she had heard—that Woon Yuen worshiped it as a god, sucking madness from its sinister depths, that he performed terrible sacrifices to it—

"Lovely, is it not?"

The low voice cracked the tense stillness like the heart-stopping blast of an explosion. She whirled, gasping, then stood transfixed. Woon Yuen stood before her, smiling dangerously, his eyes slits of black fire. A frantic glance sped to the tea-table. There still sprawled a limp, bulky figure, idential to Woon Yuen in every detail.

"What—?" she gasped weakly.

"My shadow," he smiled. "I must be cautious. Long ago I hit upon the expedient of having a servant made up to resemble me, to fool my enemies. When I left the chamber a little while ago, he took my place, and I watched through the peep-hole. I supposed you were after the Heart.

"How did you guess?" She sensed the uselessness of denial.

"Why not? Has not every thief in China tried to steal it?" He spoke softly, but his eyes shone reddishly, and the veins swelled on his neck. "As soon as I learned you were not what you pretended, I knew you had come to steal something. Why not the ruby? I set my trap and let you walk into it. But I must congratulate you on your cleverness. Not one in a thousand could have discovered the way to open the dragon's jaws."

"How did you know I wasn't Lady Elizabeth?" she whispered, dry-lipped; the great ruby seemed to burn her palms.

"I knew it when you walked across the mirror and I saw your lower extremities reflected there, I have never seen Lady Elizabeth, but all dealers in jade know her peculiarities by reputation. One of them is such a passion for jade that she always wears jade-green step-ins. Yours are lavender."

"What are you going to do?" she panted, as he moved toward her.

A light akin to madness burned in his eyes.

"You have defamed the Heart by your touch! It must drink of all who touch it save me, its high priest! If a man, his blood! If a woman—"

No need for him to complete his abominable decree. The ruby fell to the thick carpet, rolled along it like a revolving, demoniac eyeball. She sprang back, shrieking, as Woon Yuen, no longer placid, but with his convulsed face a beast's mask, caught her by the wrist. Against his thickly muscled arms her struggles were vain. As in a nightmare, she felt herself lifted and carried kicking and scratching, through heavily brocaded drapes into a curtained alcove. Her eyes swept the room helplessly; she saw the ivory Bon leering at her as through a mist. It seemed to mock her.

The alcove was walled with mirrors. Only Chinese cruelty could have devised such an arrangement, where, whichever way she twisted her head she was confronted by the spectacle of her own humiliation, reflected from every angle. She was at once actor and spectator in a beastly drama. She could not escape the shameful sight of her own writhings and the eager brutish hands of Woon Yuen remorselessly subduing her hopeless, desperate struggles.

As she felt the greedy yellow fingers on her cringing flesh, she saw in the mirrors, her quivering white breasts, her dress torn—dishevelled, the scarlet skirt in startling contrast to the white thighs, with only a wisp of silk protecting them as they frantically flexed, twisted and writhed—then with a sucking gasp of breath between his grinding teeth, Woon Yuen tore the filmy underthings to rags on her body....

At the tea-table the senseless Chinese still sprawled, deaf to the frantic, agonized shrieks that rang again and again through the inner chamber of Woon Yuen.

An hour later a door opened into a narrow alley in the rear of Woon Yuen's antique shop, and Arline was thrust roughly out, her breasts almost bare, her dress ripped to shreds. She fell sprawling from the force of the shove, and the door was slammed, with a brutal laugh. Dazedly she rose, shook down the remains of her skirt, drew her dress together, and tottered down the alley, sobbing hysterically.

Inside the room from which she had just been ejected, Woon Yuen turned to a lean, saturnine individual, whose pigtail was wound tightly about his head, and from whose wide silk girdle jutted the handle of a light hatchet.

"Yao Chin, take Yun Kang and follow her. There is always some man behind the scenes, when a woman steals. I let her go because I wished her to lead us to that man, send Yun Kang back to me. On no account kill him yourself. I, and only I, must feed the Heart with their vile blood—hers and his."

The hatchetman bowed and left the room, his face showing nothing of his secret belief that Woon Yuen was crazy, not because he believed the Heart drank human blood, but because he, a rich merchant, insisted on doing murder which others of his class always left to hired slayers.

In the mouth of a little twisting alley that ran out upon a rotting abandoned wharf, Arline paused. Her face was haggard and desperate. She had reached the end of her trail. She had failed, and Tremayne would not accept any excuse. Ahead of her she saw only the black muzzles of a firing squad to which he would deliver her—but first there would be torture, inhuman torture, to wring from her secrets her captors would think she possessed. The world at large never knows the full story of the treatment of suspected spies.

With a low moan she covered her eyes with her arm and stumbled blindly toward the edge of the wharf—then a strong arm caught her waist and she looked up into the startled face of Wild Bill Clanton.

"What the hell are you fixin' to do?"

"Let go!" she whimpered. "It's my life! I can end it if I want to!"

"Not with me around," he grunted, picking her up and carrying her back away from the wharf-lip. He sat down on a pile and took her on his lap, like a child. "Good thing I found you," he grunted. "I had a hell of a time tracin' you after you slugged me and ran up that alley, but I finally saw you duckin' down this one. You pick the damndest places to stroll in. Now you tell me what the trouble is. A classy dame like you don't need to go jumpin' off of docks."

He seemed to hold no grudge for that clout with the pitcher. There was possessiveness in the clasp of his arms about her supple body, but she found a comforting solidity in the breast muscles against which her flaxen head rested. There was a promise of security in his masculine strength. Suddenly she no longer resented his persistent pursuit of her. She needed his strength—needed a man who would fight for her.

In a few words she told him everything—the hold Tremayne had on her, the task he had set for her, and what had happened in Woon Yuen's inner room.

He swore at the narrative.

"I'll get that yellow-belly for that! But first we'll go to the Alley of Rats. Try to stall Tremayne along to give you another chance. In the meantime I'll work on a Eurasian wench I know who could tell me plenty about him—and she will, too, or I'll skin her alive. He's been mixed up in plenty of crooked rackets. If we get somethin' hot on him, we can shut his mouth, all right. And we'll get somethin', you can bet."

When they entered the Alley of Rats, in a half-abandoned warehouse district in the native quarter, they did not see two furtive figures slinking after them, nor hear the taller whisper: "Yun Kang, go back and tell our master she had led us to a man! I will watch the alley till he comes."

Clanton and Arline turned into a dingy doorway, and went down a corridor that seemed wholly deserted. Groping along it, in the dusk, she found the room she sought and led Clanton into it. She lit a candle stub stuck on a shelf, and turned to Clanton: "He'll be here soon."

"I'll wait in the next room," he said, reluctantly taking his arm from about her waist. "If he gets rough, I'll come in."

Alone in the candle-lighted room she tried to compose herself; her heart was beating a wild tattoo, loud in the stillness. Somewhere rats scampered noisily. Time dragged insufferably. Then quick, light steps sounded in the hall, and Duke Tremayne burst through the door, his eyes blazing with greed. They turned red as he read defeat in her eyes; his face contorted.

"Damn you!" His fingers were like talons as he gripped her shoulders. "You failed!"

"I couldn't help it!" she pleaded. "He knew I was a fake. Please don't hurt me, Duke. I'll try again—"

"Try again? You little fool! Do you think that Chinese devil will give you another chance?" Tremayne's suavity was gone; he was like a madman. "You failed, after all my planning! All right! I'll have a little profit out of you! Take off that dress—" Already in shreds, the garment ripped easily in his grasp, baring a white breast which quivered under his gaze.

The inner door swung open. Tremayne wheeled, drawing a pistol, but before he could fire, Clanton's fist crashed against his jaw and stretched him senseless. Clanton bent and picked up the gun, then whirled as the hall door opened behind him. He stiffened as a tranquil voice spoke: "Do not move, my friend!"

He looked into the muzzle of a gun in Woon Yuen's hand.

"So you are the man?" muttered the Mongol. "Good! The Heart drinks—"

He could fire before Clanton could lift the pistol he held. But behind the American Arline laughed suddenly, unexpectedly.

"It worked, Bill!" she exclaimed. "Our man will get the ruby while we hold Woon Yuen here! The fool! He hasn't yet guessed that we tricked him to draw him away from his shop after I'd found where he hid the gem."

Woon Yuen's face went ashen. With a choking cry he fired, not at Clanton but at the girl. But his hand was shaking like a leaf. He missed, and like an echo of his shot came the crack of Clanton's pistol. Woon Yuen dropped, drilled through the head.

"Good work, kid!" Clanton cried exultantly. "He fell for it—hard!"

"But they'll hang us for this!" whimpered the girl. "Listen! Someone's running up the hall! They've heard the shots!"

Stooping swiftly Clanton folded Duke Tremayne's fingers about the butt of the smoking pistol, and then kicked the man heavily in the shins. Tremayne grunted and showed signs of returning consciousness. Clanton drew Arline into the other room and they watched through the crack of the door.

The hall door opened and Yao Chin came in like a panther, hatchet in hand. His eyes blazed at the sight of Woon Yuen on the floor, Tremayne staggering to his feet, a pistol in his hand. With one stride the hatchetman reached the reeling blackmailer. There was a flash of steel, an ugly butcher-shop crunch, and Tremayne slumped, his skull split. Yao Chin tossed the reeking hatchet to the floor beside his victim and turned away.

"Out of here, quick!" muttered Clanton, shaking Arline who seemed threatened with hysteria. "Up the alley—in the other direction."

She regained her poise in their groping flight up the darkened alley, as Clanton muttered: "We're in the clear now. Tremayne can't talk, with his head split, and that hatchetman'll tell his pals Tremayne shot their boss."

"We'd better get out of town!" They had emerged into a narrow, lamp-lit street.

"Why? We're safe from suspicion now." A little tingle of pleasure ran through her as Clanton turned into a doorway and spoke to a grinning old Chinaman who bowed them into a small neat room, with curtained windows and a couch.

As the door closed behind the old Chinese, Clanton caught her hungrily to him, finding her red lips, now unresisting. Her arms went about his thick neck as he lifted her bodily from the floor. Willingly she yielded, responded to his eager caresses.

She had only exchanged masters, it was true, but this was different. There was a delicious sense of comfort and security in a strong man who could fight for her and protect her. There was pleasure in the dominance of his strong hands. With a blissful sigh she settled herself luxuriously in his powerful arms.

THE END

Contents

LORD OF SAMARCAND

by Robert E. Howard

Chapter 1

The roar of battle had died away; the sun hung like a ball of crimson gold on the western hills. Across the trampled field of battle no squadrons thundered, no war-cry reverberated. Only the shrieks of the wounded and the moans of the dying rose to the circling vultures whose black wings swept closer and closer until they brushed the pallid faces in their flight.

On his rangy stallion, in a hillside thicket, Ak Boga the Tatar watched, as he had watched since dawn, when the mailed hosts of the Franks, with their forest of lances and flaming pennons, had moved out on the plains of Nicopolis to meet the grim hordes of Bayazid.

Ak Boga, watching their battle array, had chk-chk'd his teeth in surprize and disapproval as he saw the glittering squadrons of mounted knights draw out in front of the compact masses of stalwart infantry, and lead the advance. They were the flower of Europe--cavaliers of Austria, Germany, France and Italy; but Ak Boga shook his head.

He had seen the knights charge with a thunderous roar that shook the heavens, had seen them smite the outriders of Bayazid like a withering blast and sweep up the long slope in the teeth of a raking fire from the Turkish archers at the crest. He had seen them cut down the archers like ripe corn, and launch their whole power against the oncoming spahis, the Turkish light cavalry. And he had seen the spahis buckle and break and scatter like spray before a storm, the light-armed riders flinging aside their lances and spurring like mad out of the melee. But Ak Boga had looked back, where, far behind, the sturdy Hungarian pikemen toiled, seeking to keep within supporting distance of the headlong cavaliers.

He had seen the Frankish horsemen sweep on, reckless of their horses' strength as of their own lives, and cross the ridge. From his vantage-point Ak Boga could see both sides of that ridge and he knew that there lay the main power of the Turkish army--sixty-five thousand strong--the janizaries, the terrible Ottoman infantry, supported by the heavy cavalry, tall men in strong armor, bearing spears and powerful bows.

And now the Franks realized, what Ak Boga had known, that the real battle lay before them; and their horses were weary, their lances broken, their throats choked with dust and thirst.

Ak Boga had seen them waver and look back for the Hungarian infantry; but it was out of sight over the ridge, and in desperation the knights hurled themselves on the massed enemy, striving to break the ranks by sheer ferocity. That charge never reached the grim lines. Instead a storm of arrows broke the Christian front, and this time, on exhausted horses, there was no riding against it. The whole first rank went down, horses and men pincushioned, and in that red shambles their comrades behind them stumbled and fell headlong. And then the janizaries charged with a deep-toned roar of "Allah!" that was like the thunder of deep surf.

All this Ak Boga had seen; had seen, too, the inglorious flight of some of the knights, the ferocious resistance of others. On foot, leaguered and outnumbered, they fought with sword and ax, falling one by one, while the tide of battle flowed around them on either side and the blood-drunken Turks fell upon the infantry which had just toiled into sight over the ridge.

There, too, was disaster. Flying knights thundered through the ranks of the Wallachians, and these broke and retired in ragged disorder. The Hungarians and Bavarians received the brunt of the Turkish onslaught, staggered and fell back stubbornly, contesting every foot, but unable to check the victorious flood of Moslem fury.

And now, as Ak Boga scanned the field, he no longer saw the serried lines of the pikemen and ax-fighters. They had fought their way back over the ridge and were in full, though ordered, retreat, and the Turks had come back to loot the dead and mutilate the dying. Such knights as had not fallen or broken away in flight, had flung down the hopeless sword and surrendered. Among the trees on the farther side of the vale, the main Turkish host was clustered, and even Ak Boga shivered a trifle at the screams which rose where Bayazid's swordsmen were butchering the captives. Nearer at hand ran ghoulish figures, swift and furtive, pausing briefly over each heap of corpses; here and there gaunt dervishes with foam on their beards and madness in their eyes plied their knives on writhing victims who screamed for death.

"Erlik!" muttered Ak Boga. "They boasted that they could hold up the sky on their lances, were it to fall, and lo, the sky has fallen and their host is meat for the ravens!"

He reined his horse away through the thicket; there might be good plunder among the plumed and corseleted dead, but Ak Boga had come hither on a mission which was yet to be completed. But even as he emerged from the thicket, he saw a prize no Tatar could forego--a tall Turkish steed with an ornate high-peaked Turkish saddle came racing by. Ak Boga spurred quickly forward and caught the flying, silver-worked rein. Then, leading the restive charger, he trotted swiftly down the slope away from the battlefield.

Suddenly he reined in among a clump of stunted trees. The hurricane of strife, slaughter and pursuit had cast its spray on this side of the ridge. Before him Ak Boga saw a tall, richly clad knight grunting and cursing as he sought to hobble along using his broken lance as a crutch. His helmet was gone, revealing a blond head and a florid choleric face. Not far away lay a dead horse, an arrow protruding from its ribs.

As Ak Boga watched, the big knight stumbled and fell with a scorching oath. Then from the bushes came a man such as Ak Boga had never seen before, even among the Franks. This man was taller than Ak Boga, who was a big man, and his stride was like that of a gaunt gray wolf. He was bareheaded, a tousled shock of tawny hair topping a sinister scarred face, burnt dark by the sun, and his eyes were cold as gray icy steel. The great sword he trailed was crimson to the hilt, his rusty scale-mail shirt hacked and rent, the kilt beneath it torn and slashed. His right arm was stained to the elbow, and blood dripped sluggishly from a deep gash in his left forearm.

"Devil take all!" growled the crippled knight in Norman French, which Ak Boga understood; "this is the end of the world!"

"Only the end of a horde of fools," the tall Frank's voice was hard and cold, like the rasp of a sword in its scabbard.

The lame man swore again. "Stand not there like a blockhead, fool! Catch me a horse! My damnable steed caught a shaft in its cursed hide, and though I spurred it until the blood spurted over my heels, it fell at last, and I think, broke my ankle."

The tall one dropped his sword-point to the earth and stared at the other somberly.

"You give commands as though you sat in your own fief of Saxony, Lord Baron Frederik! But for you and divers other fools, we had cracked Bayazid like a nut this day."

"Dog!" roared the baron, his intolerant face purpling; "this insolence to me? I'll have you flayed alive!"

"Who but you cried down the Elector in council?" snarled the other, his eyes glittering dangerously. "Who called Sigismund of Hungary a fool because he urged that the lord allow him to lead the assault with his infantry? And who but you had the ear of that young fool High Constable of France, Philip of Artois, so that in the end he led the charge that ruined us all, nor would wait on the ridge for support from the Hungarians? And now you, who turned tail quicker than any when you saw what your folly had done, you bid me fetch you a horse!"

"Aye, and quickly, you Scottish dog!" screamed the baron, convulsed with fury. "You shall answer for this--"

"I'll answer here," growled the Scotsman, his manner changing murderously. "You have heaped insults on me since we first sighted the Danube. If I'm to die, I'll settle one score first!"

"Traitor!" bellowed the baron, whitening, scrambling up on his knee and reaching for his sword. But even as he did so, the Scotsman struck, with an oath, and the baron's roar was cut short in a ghastly gurgle as the great blade sheared through shoulder-bone, ribs and spine, casting the mangled corpse limply upon the blood-soaked earth.

"Well struck, warrior!" At the sound of the guttural voice the slayer wheeled like a great wolf, wrenching free the sword. For a tense moment the two eyed each other, the swordsman standing above his victim, a brooding somber figure terrible with potentialities of blood and slaughter, the Tatar sitting his high-peaked saddle like a carven image.

"I am no Turk," said Ak Boga. "You have no quarrel with me. See, my scimitar is in its sheath. I have need of a man like you--strong as a bear, swift as a wolf, cruel as a falcon. I can bring you to much you desire."

"I desire only vengeance on the head of Bayazid," rumbled the Scotsman.

The dark eyes of the Tatar glittered.

"Then come with me. For my lord is the sworn enemy of the Turk."

"Who is your lord?" asked the Scotsman suspiciously.

"Men call him the Lame," answered Ak Boga. "Timour, the Servant of God, by the favor of Allah, Amir of Tatary."

The Scotsman turned his head in the direction of the distant shrieks which told that the massacre was still continuing, and stood for an instant like a great bronze statue. Then he sheathed his sword with a savage rasp of steel.

"I will go," he said briefly.

The Tatar grinned with pleasure, and leaning forward, gave into his hands the reins of the Turkish horse. The Frank swung into the saddle and glanced inquiringly at Ak Boga. The Tatar motioned with his helmeted head and reined away down the slope. They touched in the spurs and cantered swiftly away into the gathering twilight, while behind them the shrieks of dire agony still rose to the shivering stars which peered palely out, as if frightened by man's slaughter of man.

Chapter 2

"Had we twa been upon the green.
And never an eye to see.
I wad hae had you, flesh and fell;
But your sword shall gae wi' me."
--The Ballad of Otterbourne.

Again the sun was sinking, this time over a desert, etching the spires and minarets of a blue city. Ak Boga drew rein on the crest of a rise and sat motionless for a moment, sighing deeply as he drank in the familiar sight, whose wonder never faded.

"Samarcand," said Ak Boga.

"We have ridden far," answered his companion. Ak Boga smiled. The Tatar's garments were dusty, his mail tarnished, his face somewhat drawn, though his eyes still twinkled. The Scotsman's strongly chiseled features had not altered.

"You are of steel, bogatyr," said Ak Boga. "The road we have traveled would have wearied a courier of Genghis Khan. And by Erlik, I, who was bred in the saddle, am the wearier of the twain!"

The Scotsman gazed unspeaking at the distant spires, remembering the days and nights of apparently endless riding, when he had slept swaying in the saddle, and all the sounds of the universe had died down to the thunder of hoofs. He had followed Ak Boga unquestioning: through hostile hills where they avoided trails and cut through the blind wilderness, over mountains where the chill winds cut like a sword-edge, into stretches of steppes and desert. He had not questioned when Ak Boga's relaxing vigilance told him that they were out of hostile country, and when the Tatar began to stop at wayside posts where tall dark men in iron helmets brought fresh steeds. Even then there was no slacking of the headlong pace: a swift guzzling of wine and snatching of food; occasionally a brief interlude of sleep, on a heap of hides and cloaks; then again the drum of racing hoofs. The Frank knew that Ak Boga was bearing the news of the battle to his mysterious lord, and he wondered at the distance they had covered between the first post where saddled steeds awaited them and the blue spires that marked their journey's end. Wide-flung indeed were the boundaries of the lord called Timour the Lame.

They had covered that vast expanse of country in a time the Frank would have sworn impossible. He felt now the grinding wear of that terrible ride, but he gave no outward sign. The city shimmered to his gaze, mingling with the blue of the distance, so that it seemed part of the horizon, a city of illusion and enchantment. Blue: the Tatars lived in a wide magnificent land, lavish with color schemes, and the prevailing motif was blue. In the spires and domes of Samarcand were mirrored the hues of the skies, the far mountains and the dreaming lakes.

"You have seen lands and seas no Frank has beheld," said Ak Boga, "and rivers and towns and caravan trails. Now you shall gaze upon the glory of Samarcand, which the lord Timour found a town of dried brick and has made a metropolis of blue stone and ivory and marble and silver filigree."

The two descended into the plain and threaded their way between converging lines of camel-caravans and mule-trains whose robed drivers shouted incessantly, all bound for the Turquoise Gates, laden with spices, silks, jewels, and slaves, the goods and gauds of India and Cathay, of Persia and Arabia and Egypt.

"All the East rides the road to Samarcand," said Ak Boga.

They passed through the wide gilt-inlaid gates where the tall spearmen shouted boisterous greetings to Ak Boga, who yelled back, rolling in his saddle and smiting his mailed thigh with the joy of homecoming. They rode through the wide winding streets, past palace and market and mosque, and bazaars thronged with the people of a hundred tribes and races, bartering, disputing, shouting. The Scotsman saw hawk-faced Arabs, lean apprehensive Syrians, fat fawning Jews, turbaned Indians, languid Persians, ragged swaggering but suspicious Afghans, and more unfamiliar forms; figures from the mysterious reaches of the north, and the far east; stocky Mongols with broad inscrutable faces and the rolling gait of an existence spent in the saddle; slant-eyed Cathayans in robes of watered silk; tall quarrelsome Vigurs; round-faced Kipchaks; narrow-eyed Kirghiz; a score of races whose existence the West did not guess. All the Orient flowed in a broad river through the gates of Samarcand.

The Frank's wonder grew; the cities of the West were hovels compared to this. Past academies, libraries and pleasure-pavilions they rode, and Ak Boga turned into a wide gateway, guarded by silver lions. There they gave their steeds into the hands of silk-sashed grooms, and walked along a winding avenue paved with marble and lined with slim green trees. The Scotsman, looking between the slender trunks, saw shimmering expanses of roses, cherry trees and waving exotic blossoms unknown to him, where fountains jetted arches of silver spray. So they came to the palace, gleaming blue and gold in the sunlight, passed between tall marble columns and entered the chambers with their gilt-worked arched doorways, and walls decorated with delicate paintings of Persian and Cathayan artists, and the gold tissue and silver work of Indian artistry.

Ak Boga did not halt in the great reception room with its slender carven columns and frieze-work of gold and turquoise, but continued until he came to the fretted gold-adorned arch of a door which opened into a small blue-domed chamber that looked out through gold-barred windows into a series of broad, shaded, marble-paved galleries. There silk-robed courtiers took their weapons, and grasping their arms, led them between files of giant black mutes in silken loincloths, who held two-handed scimitars upon their shoulders, and into the chamber, where the courtiers released their arms and fell back, salaaming deeply. Ak Boga knelt before the figure on the silken divan, but the Scotsman stood grimly erect, nor was obeisance required of him. Some of the simplicity of Genghis Khan's court still lingered in the courts of these descendants of the nomads.

The Scotsman looked closely at the man on the divan; this, then, was the mysterious Tamerlane, who was already becoming a mythical figure in Western lore. He saw a man as tall as himself, gaunt but heavy-boned, with a wide sweep of shoulders and the Tatar's characteristic depth of chest. His face was not as dark as Ak Boga's, nor did his black magnetic eyes slant; and he did not sit cross-legged as a Mongol sits. There was power in every line of his figure, in his clean-cut features, in the crisp black hair and beard, untouched with gray despite his sixty-one years. There was something of the Turk in his appearance, thought the Scotsman, but the dominant note was the lean wolfish hardness that suggested the nomad. He was closer to the basic Turanian rootstock than was the Turk; nearer to the wolfish, wandering Mongols who were his ancestors.

"Speak, Ak Boga," said the Amir in a deep powerful voice. "Ravens have flown westward, but there has come no word."

"We rode before the word, my lord," answered the warrior. "The news is at our heels, traveling swift on the caravan roads. Soon the couriers, and after them the traders and the merchants, will bring to you the news that a great battle has been fought in the west; that Bayazid has broken the hosts of the Christians, and the wolves howl over the corpses of the kings of Frankistan."

"And who stands beside you?" asked Timour, resting his chin on his hand and fixing his deep somber eyes on the Scotsman.

"A chief of the Franks who escaped the slaughter," answered Ak Boga. "Single-handed he cut his way through the melee, and in his flight paused to slay a Frankish lord who had put shame upon him aforetime. He has no fear and his thews are steel. By Allah, we passed through the land outracing the wind to bring thee news of the war, and this Frank is less weary than I, who learned to ride ere I learned to walk."

"Why do you bring him to me?"

"It was my thought that he would make a mighty warrior for thee, my lord."

"In all the world," mused Timour, "there are scarce half a dozen men whose judgment I trust. Thou art one of those," he added briefly, and Ak Boga, who had flushed darkly in embarrassment, grinned delightedly.

"Can he understand me?" asked Timour.

"He speaks Turki, my lord."

"How are you named, oh Frank?" queried the Amir. "And what is your rank?"

"I am called Donald MacDeesa," answered the Scotsman. "I come from the country of Scotland, beyond Frankistan. I have no rank, either in my own land or in the army I followed. I live by my wits and the edge of my claymore."

"Why do you ride to me?"

"Ak Boga told me it was the road to vengeance."

"Against whom?"

"Bayazid the Sultan of the Turks, whom men name the Thunderer."

Timour dropped his head on his mighty breast for a space and in the silence MacDeesa heard the silvery tinkle of a fountain in an outer court and the musical voice of a Persian poet singing to a lute.

Then the great Tatar lifted his lion's head.

"Sit ye with Ak Boga upon this divan close at my hand," said he. "I will instruct you how to trap a gray wolf."

As Donald did so, he unconsciously lifted a hand to his face, as if he felt the sting of a blow eleven years old. Irrelevantly his mind reverted to another king and another, ruder court, and in the swift instant that elapsed as he took his seat close to the Amir, glanced fleetingly along the bitter trail of his life.

Young Lord Douglas, most powerful of all the Scottish barons, was headstrong and impetuous, and like most Norman lords, choleric when he fancied himself crossed. But he should not have struck the lean young Highlander who had come down into the border country seeking fame and plunder in the train of the lords of the marches. Douglas was accustomed to using both riding-whip and fists freely on his pages and esquires, and promptly forgetting both the blow and the cause; and they, being also Normans and accustomed to the tempers of their lords, likewise forgot. But Donald MacDeesa was no Norman; he was a Gael, and Gaelic ideas of honor and insult differ from Norman ideas as the wild uplands of the North differ from the fertile plains of the Lowlands. The chief of Donald's clan could not have struck him with impunity, and for a Southron to so venture--hate entered the young Highlander's blood like a black river and filled his dreams with crimson nightmares.

Douglas forgot the blow too quickly to regret it. But Donald's was the vengeful heart of those wild folk who keep the fires of feud flaming for centuries and carry grudges to the grave. Donald was as fully Celtic as his savage Dalriadian ancestors who carved out the kingdom of Alba with their swords.

But he hid his hate and bided his time, and it came in a hurricane of border war. Robert Bruce lay in his tomb, and his heart, stilled forever, lay somewhere in Spain beneath the body of Black Douglas, who had failed in the pilgrimage which was to place the heart of his king before the Holy Sepulcher. The great king's grandson, Robert II, had little love for storm and stress; he desired peace with England and he feared the great family of Douglas.

But despite his protests, war spread flaming wings along the border and the Scottish lords rode joyfully on the foray. But before the Douglas marched, a quiet and subtle man came to Donald MacDeesa's tent and spoke briefly and to the point.

"Knowing that the aforesaid lord hath put despite upon thee, I whispered thy name softly to him that sendeth me, and sooth, it is well known that this same bloody lord doth continually embroil the kingdoms and stir up wrath and woe between the sovereigns--" he said in part, and he plainly spoke the word, "Protection."

Donald made no answer and the quiet person smiled and left the young Highlander sitting with his chin on his fist, staring grimly at the floor of his tent.

Thereafter Lord Douglas marched right gleefully with his retainers into the border country and "burned the dales of Tyne, and part of Bambroughshire, and three good towers on Reidswire fells, he left them all on fire," and spread wrath and woe generally among the border English, so that King Richard sent notes of bitter reproach to King Robert, who bit his nails with rage, but waited patiently for news he expected to hear.

Then after an indecisive skirmish at Newcastle, Douglas encamped in a place called Otterbourne, and there Lord Percy, hot with wrath, came suddenly upon him in the night, and in the confused melee which ensued, called by the Scottish the Battle of Otterbourne and by the English Chevy Chase, Lord Douglas fell. The English swore he was slain by Lord Percy, who neither confirmed nor denied it, not knowing himself what men he had slain in the confusion and darkness.

But a wounded man babbled of a Highland plaid, before he died, and an ax wielded by no English hand. Men came to Donald and questioned him hardly, but he snarled at them like a wolf, and the king, after piously burning many candles for Douglas' soul in public, and thanking God for the baron's demise in the privacy of his chamber, announced that "we have heard of this persecution of a loyal subject and it being plain in our mind that this youth is innocent as ourselves in this matter we hereby warn all men against further hounding of him at pain of death."

So the king's protection saved Donald's life, but men muttered in their teeth and ostracized him. Sullen and embittered, he withdrew to himself and brooded in a hut alone, till one night there came news of the king's sudden abdication and retirement into a monastery. The stress of a monarch's life in those stormy times was too much for the monkish sovereign. Close on the heels of the news came men with drawn daggers to Donald's hut, but they found the cage empty. The hawk had flown, and though they followed his trail with reddened spurs, they found only a steed that had fallen dead at the seashore, and saw only a white sail dwindling in the growing dawn.

Donald went to the Continent because, with the Lowlands barred to him, there was nowhere else to go; in the Highlands he had too many blood-feuds; and across the border the English had already made a noose for him. That was in 1389. Seven years of fighting and intriguing in European wars and plots. And when Constantinople cried out before the irresistible onslaught of Bayazid, and men pawned their lands to launch a new Crusade, the Highland swordsman had joined the tide that swept eastward to its doom. Seven years--and a far cry from the border marches to the blue-domed palaces of fabulous Samarcand, reclining on a silken divan as he listened to the measured words which flowed in a tranquil monotone from the lips of the lord of Tatary.

Chapter 3

"If thou'rt the lord of this castle.
Sae well it pleases me:
For, ere I cross the border fells.
The tane of us shall dee."

--Battle of Otterbourne.

Time flowed on as it does whether men live or die. The bodies rotted on the plains of Nicopolis, and Bayazid, drunk with power, trampled the scepters of the world. The Greeks, the Serbs and the Hungarians he ground beneath his iron legions, and into his spreading empire he molded the captive races. He laved his limbs in wild debauchery, the frenzy of which astounded even his tough vassals. The women of the world flowed whimpering between his iron fingers and he hammered the golden crowns of kings to shoe his war-steed. Constantinople reeled beneath his strokes, and Europe licked her wounds like a crippled wolf, held at bay on the defensive. Somewhere in the misty mazes of the East moved his arch-foe Timour, and to him Bayazid sent missives of threat and mockery. No response was forthcoming, but word came along the caravans of a mighty marching and a great war in the south; of the plumed helmets of India scattered and flying before the Tatar spears. Little heed gave Bayazid; India was little more real to him than it was to the Pope of Rome. His eyes were turned westward toward the Caphar cities. "I will harrow Frankistan with steel and flame," he said. "Their sultans shall draw my chariots and the bats lair in the palaces of the infidels."

Then in the early spring of 1402 there came to him, in an inner court of his pleasure-palace at Brusa, where he lolled guzzling the forbidden wine and watching the antics of naked dancing girls, certain of his emirs, bringing a tall Frank whose grim scarred visage was darkened by the suns of far deserts.

"This Caphar dog rode into the camp of the janizaries as a madman rides, on a foam-covered steed," said they, "saying he sought Bayazid. Shall we flay him before thee, or tear him between wild horses?"

"Dog," said the Sultan, drinking deeply and setting down the goblet with a satisfied sigh, "you have found Bayazid. Speak, ere I set you howling on a stake."

"Is this fit welcome for one who has ridden far to serve you?" retorted the Frank in a harsh unshaken voice. "I am Donald MacDeesa and among your janizaries there is no man who can stand up against me in sword-play, and among your barrel-bellied wrestlers there is no man whose back I can not break."

The Sultan tugged his black beard and grinned.

"Would thou wert not an infidel," said he, "for I love a man with a bold tongue. Speak on, oh Rustum! What other accomplishments are thine, mirror of modesty?"

The Highlander grinned like a wolf.

"I can break the back of a Tatar and roll the head of a Khan in the dust."

Bayazid stiffened, subtly changing, his giant frame charged with dynamic power and menace; for behind all his roistering and bellowing conceit was the keenest brain west of the Oxus.

"What folly is this?" he rumbled. "What means this riddle?"

"I speak no riddle," snapped the Gael. "I have no more love for you than you for me. But more I hate Timour-il-leng who has cast dung in my face."

"You come to me from that half-pagan dog?"

"Aye. I was his man. I rode beside him and cut down his foes. I climbed city walls in the teeth of the arrows and broke the ranks of mailed spearmen. And when the honors and gifts were distributed among the emirs, what was given me? The gall of mockery and the wormwood of insult. 'Ask thy dog-sultans of Frankistan for gifts, Caphar,' said Timour--may the worms devour him--and the emirs roared with laughter. As God is my witness, I will wipe out that laughter in the crash of falling walls and the roar of flames!"

Donald's menacing voice reverberated through the chamber and his eyes were cold and cruel. Bayazid pulled his beard for a space and said, "And you come to me for vengeance? Shall I war against the Lame One because of the spite of a wandering Caphar vagabond?"

"You will war against him, or he against you," answered MacDeesa. "When Timour wrote asking that you lend no aid to his foes, Kara Yussef the Turkoman, and Ahmed, Sultan of Bagdad, you answered him with words not to be borne, and sent horsemen to stiffen their ranks against him. Now the Turkomans are broken, Bagdad has been looted and Damascus lies in smoking ruins. Timour has broken your allies and he will not forget the despite you put upon him."

"Close have you been to the Lame One to know all this," muttered Bayazid, his glittering eyes narrowing with suspicion. "Why should I trust a Frank? By Allah, I deal with them by the sword! As I dealt with those fools at Nicopolis!"

A fierce uncontrollable flame leaped up for a fleeting instant in the Highlander's eyes, but the dark face showed no sign of emotion.

"Know this, Turk," he answered with an oath, "I can show you how to break Timour's back."

"Dog!" roared the Sultan, his gray eyes blazing, "think you I need the aid of a nameless rogue to conquer the Tatar?"

Donald laughed in his face, a hard mirthless laugh that was not pleasant.

"Timour will crack you like a walnut," said he deliberately. "Have you seen the Tatars in war array? Have you seen their arrows darkening the sky as they loosed, a hundred thousand as one? Have you seen their horsemen flying before the wind as they charged home and the desert shook beneath their hoofs? Have you seen the array of their elephants, with towers on their backs, whence archers send shafts in black clouds and the fire that burns flesh and leather alike pours forth?"

"All this I have heard," answered the Sultan, not particularly impressed.

"But you have not seen," returned the Highlander; he drew back his tunic sleeve and displayed a scar on his iron-thewed arm. "An Indian tulwar kissed me there, before Delhi. I rode with the emirs when the whole world seemed to shake with the thunder of combat. I saw Timour trick the Sultan of Hindustan and draw him from the lofty walls as a serpent is drawn from its lair. By God, the plumed Rajputs fell like ripened grain before us!

"Of Delhi Timour left a pile of deserted ruins, and without the broken walls he built a pyramid of a hundred thousand skulls. You would say I lied were I to tell you how many days the Khyber Pass was thronged with the glittering hosts of warriors and captives returning along the road to Samarcand. The mountains shook with their tread and the wild Afghans came down in hordes to place their heads beneath Timour's heel--as he will grind thy head underfoot, Bayazid!"

"This to me, dog?" yelled the Sultan. "I will fry you in oil!"

"Aye, prove your power over Timour by slaying the dog he mocked," answered MacDeesa bitterly. "You kings are all alike in fear and folly."

Bayazid gaped at him. "By Allah!" he said, "thou'rt mad to speak thus to the Thunderer. Bide in my court until I learn whether thou be rogue, fool, or madman. If spy, not in a day or three days will I slay thee, but for a full week shalt thou howl for death."

So Donald abode in the court of the Thunderer, under suspicion, and soon there came a brief but peremptory note from Timour, asking that "the thief of a Christian who hath taken refuge in the Ottoman court" be given up for just punishment. Whereat Bayazid, scenting an opportunity to further insult his rival, twisted his black beard gleefully between his fingers and grinned like a hyena as he dictated a reply, "Know, thou crippled dog, that the Osmanli are not in the habit of conceding to the insolent demands of pagan foes. Be at ease while thou mayest, oh lame dog, for soon I will take thy kingdom for an offal-heap and thy favorite wives for my concubines."

No further missives came from Timour. Bayazid drew Donald into wild revels, plied him with strong drink and even as he roared and roistered, he keenly watched the Highlander. But even his suspicions grew blunter when at his drunkest Donald spoke no word that might hint he was other than he seemed. He breathed the name of Timour only with curses. Bayazid discounted the value of his aid against the Tatars, but contemplated putting him to use, as Ottoman sultans always employed foreigners for confidants and guardsmen, knowing their own race too well. Under close, subtle scrutiny the Gael indifferently moved, drinking all but the Sultan onto the floor in the wild drinking-bouts and bearing himself with a reckless valor that earned the respect of the hard-bitten Turks, in forays against the Byzantines.

Playing Genoese against Venetian, Bayazid lay about the walls of Constantinople. His preparations were made: Constantinople, and after that, Europe; the fate of Christendom wavered in the balance, there before the walls of the ancient city of the East. And the wretched Greeks, worn and starved, had already drawn up a capitulation, when word came flying out of the East, a dusty, bloodstained courier on a staggering horse. Out of the East, sudden as a desert-storm, the Tatars had swept, and Sivas, Bayazid's border city, had fallen. That night the shuddering people on the walls of Constantinople saw torches and cressets tossing and moving through the Turkish camp, gleaming on dark hawk-faces and polished armor, but the expected attack did not come, and dawn revealed a great flotilla of boats moving in a steady double stream back and forth across the Bosphorus, bearing the mailed warriors into Asia. The Thunderer's eyes were at last turned eastward.

Chapter 4

"The deer runs wild on hill and dale.
The birds fly wild from tree to tree;
But there is neither bread nor kale.
To fend my men and me."
--Battle of Otterbourne.

"Here we will camp," said Bayazid, shifting his giant body in the gold-crusted saddle. He glanced back at the long lines of his army, winding beyond sight over the distant hills: over 200,000 fighting men; grim janizaries, spahis glittering in plumes and silver mail, heavy cavalry in silk and steel; and his allies and alien subjects, Greek and Wallachian pikemen, the twenty thousand horsemen of King Peter Lazarus of Serbia, mailed from crown to heel; there were troops of Tatars, too, who had wandered into Asia Minor and been ground into the Ottoman empire with the rest--stocky Kalmucks, who had been on the point of mutiny at the beginning of the march, but had been quieted by a harangue from Donald MacDeesa, in their own tongue.

For weeks the Turkish host had moved eastward on the Sivas road, expecting to encounter the Tatars at any point. They had passed Angora, where the Sultan had established his base-camp; they had crossed the river Halys, or Kizil Irmak, and now were marching through the hill country that lies in the bend of that river which, rising east of Sivas, sweeps southward in a vast half-circle before it bends, west of Kirshehr, northward to the Black Sea.

"Here we camp," repeated Bayazid; "Sivas lies some sixty-five miles to the east. We will send scouts into the city."

"They will find it deserted," predicted Donald, riding at Bayazid's side, and the Sultan scoffed, "Oh gem of wisdom, will the Lame One flee so quickly?"

"He will not flee," answered the Gael. "Remember he can move his host far more quickly than you can. He will take to the hills and fall suddenly upon us when you least expect it."

Bayazid snorted his contempt. "Is he a magician, to flit among the hills with a horde of 150,000 men? Bah! I tell you, he will come along the Sivas road to join battle, and we will crack him like a nutshell."

So the Turkish host went into camp and fortified the hills, and there they waited with growing wrath and impatience for a week. Bayazid's scouts returned with the news that only a handful of Tatars held Sivas. The Sultan roared with rage and bewilderment.

"Fools, have ye passed the Tatars on the road?"

"Nay, by Allah," swore the riders, "they vanished in the night like ghosts, none can say whither. And we have combed the hills between this spot and the city."

"Timour has fled back to his desert," said Peter Lazarus, and Donald laughed.

"When rivers run uphill, Timour will flee," said he; "he lurks somewhere in the hills to the south."

Bayazid had never taken other men's advice, for he had found long ago that his own wit was superior. But now he was puzzled. He had never before fought the desert riders whose secret of victory was mobility and who passed through the land like blown clouds. Then his outriders brought in word that bodies of mounted men had been seen moving parallel to the Turkish right wing.

MacDeesa laughed like a jackal barking. "Now Timour sweeps upon us from the south, as I predicted."

Bayazid drew up his lines and waited for the assault, but it did not come and his scouts reported that the riders had passed on and disappeared. Bewildered for the first time in his career, and mad to come to grips with his illusive foe, Bayazid struck camp and on a forced march reached the Halys river in two days, where he expected to find Timour drawn up to dispute his passage. No Tatar was to be seen. The Sultan cursed in his black beard; were these eastern devils ghosts, to vanish in thin air? He sent riders across the river and they came flying back, splashing recklessly through the shallow water. They had seen the Tatar rear guard. Timour had eluded the whole Turkish army, and was even now marching on Angora! Frothing, Bayazid turned on MacDeesa.

"Dog, what have you to say now?"

"What would you?" the Highlander stood his ground boldly. "You have none but yourself to blame, if Timour has outwitted you. Have you harkened to me in aught, good or bad? I told you Timour would not await your coming, nor did he. I told you he would leave the city and go into the southern hills. And he did. I told you he would fall upon us suddenly, and therein I was mistaken. I did not guess that he would cross the river and elude us. But all else I warned you of has come to pass."

Bayazid grudgingly admitted the truth of the Frank's words, but he was mad with fury. Else he had never sought to overtake the swift-moving horde before it reached Angora. He flung his columns across the river and started on the track of the Tatars. Timour had crossed the river near Sivas, and moving around the outer bend, eluded the Turks on the other side. And now Bayazid followed his road, which swung outward from the river, into the plains where there was little water--and no food, after the horde had swept through with torch and blade.

The Turks marched over a fire-blackened, slaughter-reddened waste. Timour covered the ground in three days, over which Bayazid's columns staggered in a week of forced marching; a hundred miles through the burning, desolated plain, strewn with bare hills that made marching a hell. As the strength of the army lay in its infantry, the cavalry was forced to set its pace with the foot-soldiers, and all stumbled wearily through the clouds of stinging dust that rose from beneath the sore, shuffling feet. Under a burning summer sun they plodded grimly along, suffering fiercely from hunger and thirst.

So they came at last to the plain of Angora, and saw the Tatars installed in the camp they had left, besieging the city. And a roar of desperation went up from the thirst-maddened Turks. Timour had changed the course of the little river which ran through Angora, so that now it ran behind the Tatar lines; the only way to reach it was straight through the desert hordes. The springs and wells of the countryside had been polluted or damaged. For an instant Bayazid sat silent in his saddle, gazing from the Tatar camp to his own long straggling lines, and the marks of suffering and vain wrath in the drawn faces of his warriors. A strange fear tugged at his heart, so unfamiliar he did not recognize the emotion. Victory had always been his; could it ever be otherwise?

Chapter 5

"What's yon that follows at my side?--
The foe that ye must fight, my lord,--
That hirples swift as I can ride?--
The shadow of the night, my lord."
--Kipling.

On that still summer morning the battle-lines stood ready for the death-grip. The Turks were drawn up in a long crescent, whose tips overlapped the Tatar wings, one of which touched the river and the other an entrenched hill fifteen miles away across the plain.

"Never in all my life have I sought another's advice in war," said Bayazid, "but you rode with Timour six years. Will he come to me?"

Donald shook his head. "You outnumber his host. He will never fling his riders against the solid ranks of your janizaries. He will stand afar off and overwhelm you with flights of arrows. You must go to him."

"Can I charge his horse with my infantry?" snarled Bayazid. "Yet you speak wise words. I must hurl my horse against his--and Allah knows his is the better cavalry."

"His right wing is the weaker," said Donald, a sinister light burning in his eyes. "Mass your strongest horsemen on your left wing, charge and shatter that part of the Tatar host; then let your left wing close in, assailing the main battle of the Amir on the flank, while your janizaries advance from the front. Before the charge the spahis on your right wing may make a feint at the lines, to draw Timour's attention."

Bayazid looked silently at the Gael. Donald had suffered as much as the rest on that fearful march. His mail was white with dust, his lips blackened, his throat caked with thirst.

"So let it be," said Bayazid. "Prince Suleiman shall command the left wing, with the Serbian horse and my own heavy cavalry, supported by the Kalmucks. We will stake all on one charge!"

And so they took up their positions, and no one noticed a flat-faced Kalmuck steal out of the Turkish lines and ride for Timour's camp, flogging his stocky pony like mad. On the left wing was massed the powerful Serbian cavalry and the Turkish heavy horse, with the bow-armed Kalmucks behind. At the head of these rode Donald, for they had clamored for the Frank to lead them against their kin. Bayazid did not intend to match bow-fire with the Tatars, but to drive home a charge that would shatter Timour's lines before the Amir could further outmaneuver him. The Turkish right wing consisted of the spahis; the center of the janizaries and Serbian foot with Peter Lazarus, under the personal command of the Sultan.

Timour had no infantry. He sat with his bodyguard on a hillock behind the lines. Nur ad-Din commanded the right wing of the riders of high Asia, Ak Boga the left, Prince Muhammad the center. With the center were the elephants in their leather trappings, with their battle-towers and archers. Their awesome trumpeting was the only sound along the widespread steel-clad Tatar lines as the Turks came on with a thunder of cymbals and kettle-drums.

Like a thunderbolt Suleiman launched his squadrons at the Tatar right wing. They ran full into a terrible blast of arrows, but grimly they swept on, and the Tatar ranks reeled to the shock. Suleiman, cutting a heron-plumed chieftain out of his saddle, shouted in exultation, but even as he did so, behind him rose a guttural roar, "Ghar! ghar! ghar! Smite, brothers, for the lord Timour!"

With a sob of rage he turned and saw his horsemen going down in windrows beneath the arrows of the Kalmucks. And in his ear he heard Donald MacDeesa laughing like a madman.

"Traitor!" screamed the Turk. "This is your work--"

The claymore flashed in the sun and Prince Suleiman rolled headless from his saddle.

"One stroke for Nicopolis!" yelled the maddened Highlander. "Drive home your shafts, dog-brothers!"

The stocky Kalmucks yelped like wolves in reply, wheeling away to avoid the scimitars of the desperate Turks, and driving their deadly arrows into the milling ranks at close range. They had endured much from their masters; now was the hour of reckoning. And now the Tatar right wing drove home with a roar; and caught before and behind, the Turkish cavalry buckled and crumpled, whole troops breaking away in headlong flight. At one stroke had been swept away Bayazid's chance to crush his enemy's formation.

As the charge had begun, the Turkish right wing had advanced with a great blare of trumpets and roll of drums, and in the midst of its feint, had been caught by the sudden unexpected charge of the Tatar left. Ak Boga had swept through the light spahis, and losing his head momentarily in the lust of slaughter, he drove them flying before him until pursued and pursuers vanished over the slopes in the distance.

Timour sent Prince Muhammad with a reserve squadron to support the left wing and bring it back, while Nur ad-Din, sweeping aside the remnants of Bayazid's cavalry, swung in a pivot-like movement and thundered against the locked ranks of the janizaries. They held like a wall of iron, and Ak Boga, galloping back from his pursuit of the spahis, smote them on the other flank. And now Timour himself mounted his war-steed, and the center rolled like an iron wave against the staggering Turks. And now the real death-grip came to be.

Charge after charge crashed on those serried ranks, surging on and rolling back like onsweeping and receding waves. In clouds of fire-shot dust the janizaries stood unshaken, thrusting with reddened spears, smiting with dripping ax and notched scimitar. The wild riders swept in like blasting whirlwinds, raking the ranks with the storms of their arrows as they drew and loosed too swiftly for the eye to follow, rushing headlong into the press, screaming and hacking like madmen as their scimitars sheared through buckler, helmet and skull. And the Turks beat them back, overthrowing horse and rider; hacked them down and trampled them under, treading their own dead under foot to close the ranks, until both hosts trod on a carpet of the slain and the hoofs of the Tatar steeds splashed blood at every leap.

Repeated charges tore the Turkish host apart at last, and all over the plain the fight raged on, where clumps of spearmen stood back to back, slaying and dying beneath the arrows and scimitars of the riders from the steppes. Through the clouds of rising dust stalked the elephants trumpeting like Doom, while the archers on their backs rained down blasts of arrows and sheets of fire that withered men in their mail like burnt grain.

All day Bayazid had fought grimly on foot at the head of his men. At his side fell King Peter, pierced by a score of arrows. With a thousand of his janizaries the Sultan held the highest hill upon the plain, and through the blazing hell of that long afternoon he held it still, while his men died beside him. In a hurricane of splintering spears, lashing axes and ripping scimitars, the Sultan's warriors held the victorious Tatars to a gasping deadlock. And then Donald MacDeesa, on foot, eyes glaring like a mad dog's, rushed headlong through the melee and smote the Sultan with such hate-driven fury that the crested helmet shattered beneath the claymore's whistling edge and Bayazid fell like a dead man. And over the weary groups of bloodstained defenders rolled the dark tide, and the kettle drums of the Tatars thundered victory.

Chapter 6

"The searing glory which hath shone
Amid the jewels of my throne.
Halo of Hell! and with a pain
Not Hell shall make me fear again."
--Poe Tamerlane.

The power of the Osmanli was broken, the heads of the emirs heaped before Timour's tent. But the Tatars swept on; at the heels of the flying Turks they burst into Brusa, Bayazid's capital, sweeping the streets with sword and flame. Like a whirlwind they came and like a whirlwind they went, laden with treasures of the palace and the women of the vanished Sultan's seraglio.

Riding back to the Tatar camp beside Nur ad-Din and Ak Boga, Donald MacDeesa learned that Bayazid lived. The stroke which had felled him had only stunned, and the Turk was captive to the Amir he had mocked. MacDeesa cursed; the Gael was dusty and stained with hard riding and harder fighting; dried blood darkened his mail and clotted his scabbard mouth. A red-soaked scarf was bound about his thigh as a rude bandage; his eyes were bloodshot, his thin lips frozen in a snarl of battle-fury.

"By God, I had not thought a bullock could survive that blow. Is he to be crucified--as he swore to deal with Timour thus?"

"Timour gave him good welcome and will do him no hurt," answered the courtier who brought the news. "The Sultan will sit at the feast."

Ak Boga shook his head, for he was merciful except in the rush of battle, but in Donald's ears were ringing the screams of the butchered captives at Nicopolis, and he laughed shortly--a laugh that was not pleasant to hear.

To the fierce heart of the Sultan, death was easier than sitting a captive at the feast which always followed a Tatar victory. Bayazid sat like a grim image, neither speaking nor seeming to hear the crash of the kettle-drums, the roar of barbaric revelry. On his head was the jeweled turban of sovereignty, in his hand the gem-starred scepter of his vanished empire.

He did not touch the great golden goblet before him. Many and many a time had he exulted over the agony of the vanquished, with much less mercy than was now shown him; now the unfamiliar bite of defeat left him frozen.

He stared at the beauties of his seraglio, who, according to Tatar custom, tremblingly served their new masters: black-haired Jewesses with slumberous, heavy-lidded eyes; lithe tawny Circassians and golden-haired Russians; dark-eyed Greek girls and Turkish women with figures like Juno--all naked as the day they were born, under the burning eyes of the Tatar lords.

He had sworn to ravish Timour's wives--the Sultan writhed as he saw the Despina, sister of Peter Lazarus and his favorite, nude like the rest, kneel and in quivering fear offer Timour a goblet of wine. The Tatar absently wove his fingers in her golden locks and Bayazid shuddered as if those fingers were locked in his own heart.

And he saw Donald MacDeesa sitting next to Timour, his stained dusty garments contrasting strangely with the silk-and-gold splendor of the Tatar lords--his savage eyes ablaze, his dark face wilder and more passionate than ever as he ate like a ravenous wolf and drained goblet after goblet of stinging wine. And Bayazid's iron control snapped. With a roar that struck the clamor dumb, the Thunderer lurched upright, breaking the heavy scepter like a twig between his hands and dashing the fragments to the floor.

All eyes turned toward him and some of the Tatars stepped quickly between him and their Amir, who only looked at him impassively.

"Dog and spawn of a dog!" roared Bayazid. "You came to me as one in need and I sheltered you! The curse of all traitors rest on your black heart!"

MacDeesa heaved up, scattered goblets and bowls.

"Traitors?" he yelled. "Is six years so long you forget the headless corpses that molder at Nicopolis? Have you forgotten the ten thousand captives you slew there, naked and with their hands bound? I fought you there with steel; and since I have fought you with guile! Fool, from the hour you marched from Brusa, you were doomed! It was I who spoke softly to the Kalmucks, who hated you; so they were content and seemed willing to serve you. With them I communicated with Timour from the time we first left Angora--sending riders forth secretly or feigning to hunt for antelopes.

"Through me, Timour tricked you--even put into your head the plan of your battle! I caught you in a web of truths, knowing that you would follow your own course, regardless of what I or any one else said. I told you but two lies--when I said I sought revenge on Timour, and when I said the Amir would bide in the hills and fall upon us. Before battle joined I knew what Timour wished, and by my advice led you into a trap. So Timour, who had drawn out the plan you thought part yours and part mine, knew beforehand every move you would make. But in the end, it hinged on me, for it was I who turned the Kalmucks against you, and their arrows in the backs of your horsemen which tipped the scales when the battle hung in the balance.

"I paid high for my vengeance, Turk! I played my part under the eyes of your spies, in your court, every instant, even when my head was reeling with wine. I fought for you against the Greeks and took wounds. In the wilderness beyond the Halys I suffered with the rest. And I would have gone through greater hells to bring you to the dust!"

"Serve well your master as you have served me, traitor," retorted the Sultan. "In the end, Timour-il-leng, you will rue the day you took this adder into your naked hands. Aye, may each of you bring the other down to death!"

"Be at ease, Bayazid," said Timour impassively. "What is written, is written."

"Aye!" answered the Turk with a terrible laugh. "And it is not written that the Thunderer should live a buffoon for a crippled dog! Lame One, Bayazid gives you--hail and farewell!"

And before any could stay him, the Sultan snatched a carving-knife from a table and plunged it to the hilt in his throat. A moment he reeled like a mighty tree, spurting blood, and then crashed thunderously down. All noise was hushed as the multitude stood aghast. A pitiful cry rang out as the young Despina ran forward, and dropping to her knees, drew the lion's head of her grim lord to her naked bosom, sobbing convulsively. But Timour stroked his beard measuredly and half-abstractedly. And Donald MacDeesa, seating himself, took up a great goblet that glowed crimson in the torchlight, and drank deeply.

Chapter 7

"Hath not the same fierce heirdom given
Rome to the Caesar--this to me?"
--Poe Tamerlane.

To understand the relationship of Donald MacDeesa to Timour, it is necessary to go back to that day, six years before, when in the turquoise-domed palace at Samarcand the Amir planned the overthrow of the Ottoman.

When other men looked days ahead, Timour looked years; and five years passed before he was ready to move against the Turk, and let Donald ride to Brusa ahead of a carefully trained pursuit. Five years of fierce fighting in the mountain snows and the desert dust, through which Timour moved like a mythical giant, and hard as he drove his chiefs, he drove the Highlander harder. It was as if he studied MacDeesa with the impersonally cruel eyes of a scientist, wringing every ounce of accomplishment from him, seeking to find the limit of man's endurance and valor--the final breaking-point. He did not find it.

The Gael was too utterly reckless to be trusted with hosts and armies. But in raids and forays, in the storming of cities, and in charges of battle, in any action requiring personal valor and prowess, the Highlander was all but invincible. He was a typical fighting-man of European wars, where tactics and strategy meant little and ferocious hand-to-hand fighting much, and where battles were decided by the physical prowess of the champions. In tricking the Turk, he had but followed the instructions given him by Timour.

There was scant love lost between the Gael and the Amir, to whom Donald was but a ferocious barbarian from the outlands of Frankistan. Timour never showered gifts and honors on Donald, as he did upon his Moslem chiefs. But the grim Gael scorned these gauds, seeming to derive his only pleasures from hard fighting and hard drinking. He ignored the formal reverence paid the Amir by his subjects, and in his cups dared beard the somber Tatar to his face, so that the people caught their breath.

"He is a wolf I unleash on my foes," said Timour on one occasion to his lords.

"He is a two-edged blade that might cut the wielder," ventured one of them.

"Not so long as the blade is forever smiting my enemies," answered Timour.

After Angora, Timour gave Donald command of the Kalmucks, who accompanied their kin back into high Asia, and a swarm of restless, turbulent Vigurs. That was his reward: a wider range and a greater capacity for grinding toil and heart-bursting warfare. But Donald made no comment; he worked his slayers into fighting shape, and experimented with various types of saddles and armor, with firelocks--finding them much inferior in actual execution to the bows of the Tatars--and with the latest type of firearm, the cumbrous wheel-lock pistols used by the Arabs a century before they made their appearance in Europe.

Timour hurled Donald against his foes as a man hurls a javelin, little caring whether the weapon be broken or not. The Gael's horsemen would come back bloodstained, dusty and weary, their armor hacked to shreds, their swords notched and blunted, but always with the heads of Timour's foes swinging at their high saddle-peaks. Their savagery, and Donald's own wild ferocity and superhuman strength, brought them repeatedly out of seemingly hopeless positions. And Donald's wild-beast vitality caused him again and again to recover from ghastly wounds, until the iron-thewed Tatars marveled at him.

As the years passed, Donald, always aloof and taciturn, withdrew more and more to himself. When not riding on campaigns, he sat alone in brooding silence in the taverns, or stalked dangerously through the streets, hand on his great sword, while the people slunk softly from in front of him. He had one friend, Ak Boga; but one interest outside of war and carnage. On a raid into Persia, a slim white wisp of a girl had run screaming across the path of the charging squadron and his men had seen Donald bend down and sweep her up into his saddle with one mighty hand. The girl was Zuleika, a Persian dancer.

Donald had a house in Samarcand, and a handful of servants, but only this one girl. She was comely, sensual and giddy. She adored her master in her way, and feared him with a very ecstasy of fear, but was not above secret amours with young soldiers when MacDeesa was away on the wars. Like most Persian women of her caste, she had a capacity for petty intrigue and an inability for keeping her small nose out of affairs which were none of her business. She became a tale-bearer for Shadi Mulkh, the Persian paramour of Khalil, Timour's weak grandson, and thereby indirectly changed the destiny of the world. She was greedy, vain and an outrageous liar, but her hands were soft as drifting snow-flakes when she dressed the wounds of sword and spear on Donald's iron body. He never beat or cursed her, and though he never caressed or wooed her with gentle words as other men might, it was well known that he treasured her above all worldly possessions and honors.

Timour was growing old; he had played with the world as a man plays with a chessboard, using kings and armies for pawns. As a young chief without wealth or power, he had overthrown his Mongol masters, and mastered them in his turn. Tribe after tribe, race after race, kingdom after kingdom he had broken and molded into his growing empire, which stretched from the Gobi to the Mediterranean, from Moscow to Delhi--the mightiest empire the world ever knew. He had opened the doors of the South and East, and through them flowed the wealth of the earth. He had saved Europe from an Asiatic invasion, when he checked the tide of Turkish conquest--a fact of which he neither knew nor cared. He had built cities and he had destroyed cities. He had made the desert blossom like a garden, and he had turned flowering lands into desert. At his command pyramids of skulls had reared up, and lives flowed out like rivers. His helmeted warlords were exalted above the multitudes and nations cried out in vain beneath his grinding heel, like lost women crying in the mountains at night.

Now he looked eastward, where the purple empire of Cathay dreamed away the centuries. Perhaps, with the waning of life's tide, it was the old sleeping home-calling of his race; perhaps he remembered the ancient heroic khans, his ancestors, who had ridden southward out of the barren Gobi into the purple kingdoms.

The Grand Vizier shook his head, as he played at chess with his imperial master. He was old and weary, and he dared speak his mind even to Timour.

"My lord, of what avail these endless wars? You have already subjugated more nations than Genghis Khan or Alexander. Rest in the peace of your conquests and complete the work you have begun in Samarcand. Build more stately palaces. Bring here the philosophers, the artists, the poets of the world--"

Timour shrugged his massive shoulders.

"Philosophy and poetry and architecture are good enough in their way, but they are mist and smoke to conquest, for it is on the red splendor of conquest that all these things rest."

The Vizier played with the ivory pawns, shaking his hoary head.

"My lord, you are like two men--one a builder, the other a destroyer."

"Perhaps I destroy so that I may build on the ruins of my destruction," the Amir answered. "I have never sought to reason out this matter. I only know that I am a conqueror before I am a builder, and conquest is my life's blood."

"But what reason to overthrow this great weak bulk of Cathay?" protested the Vizier. "It will mean but more slaughter, with which you have already crimsoned the earth--more woe and misery, with helpless people dying like sheep beneath the sword."

Timour shook his head, half-absently. "What are their lives? They die anyway, and their existence is full of misery. I will draw a band of iron about the heart of Tatary. With this Eastern conquest I will strengthen my throne, and kings of my dynasty shall rule the world for ten thousand years. All the roads of the world shall lead to Samarcand, and there shall be gathered the wonder and mystery and glory of the world--colleges and libraries and stately mosques--marble domes and sapphire towers and turquoise minarets. But first I shall carry out my destiny--and that is Conquest!"

"But winter draws on," urged the Vizier. "At least wait until spring."

Timour shook his head, unspeaking. He knew he was old; even his iron frame was showing signs of decay. And sometimes in his sleep he heard the singing of Aljai the Dark-eyed, the bride of his youth, dead for more than forty years. So through the Blue City ran the word, and men left their lovemaking and their wine-bibbing, strung their bows, looked to their harness and took up again the worn old road of conquest.

Timour and his chiefs took with them many of their wives and servants, for the Amir intended to halt at Otrar, his border city, and from thence strike into Cathay when the snows melted in the spring. Such of his lords as remained rode with him--war took a heavy toll of Timour's hawks.

As usual Donald MacDeesa and his turbulent rogues led the advance. The Gael was glad to take the road after months of idleness, but he brought Zuleika with him. The years were growing more bitter for the giant Highlander, an outlander among alien races. His wild horsemen worshipped him in their savage way, but he was an alien among them, after all, and they could never understand his inmost thoughts. Ak Boga with his twinkling eyes and jovial laughter had been more like the men Donald had known in his youth, but Ak Boga was dead, his great heart stilled forever by the stroke of an Arab scimitar, and in his growing loneliness Donald more and more sought solace in the Persian girl, who could never understand his strange wayward heart, but who somehow partly filled an aching void in his soul. Through the long lonely nights his hands sought her slim form with a dim formless unquiet hunger even she could dimly sense.

In a strange silence Timour rode out of Samarcand at the head of his long glittering columns and the people did not cheer as of old. With bowed heads and hearts crowded with emotions they could not define, they watched the last conqueror ride forth, and then turned again to their petty lives and commonplace, dreary tasks, with a vague instinctive sense that something terrible and splendid and awesome had gone out of their lives forever.

In the teeth of the rising winter the hosts moved, not with the speed of other times when they passed through the land like windblown clouds. They were two hundred thousand strong and they bore with them herds of spare horses, wagons of supplies and great tent-pavilions.

Beyond the pass men call the Gates of Timour, snow fell, and into the teeth of the blizzard the army toiled doggedly. At last it became apparent that even Tatars could not march in such weather, and Prince Khalil went into winter quarters in that strange town called the Stone City, but Timour plunged on with his own troops. Ice lay three feet deep on the Syr when they crossed, and in the hill-country beyond the going became fiercer, and horses and camels stumbled through the drifts, the wagons lurching and rocking. But the will of Timour drove them grimly onward, and at last they came upon the plain and saw the spires of Otrar gleaming through the whirling snow-wrack.

Timour installed himself and his nobles in the palace, and his warriors went thankfully into winter quarters. But he sent for Donald MacDeesa.

"Ordushar lies in our road," said Timour. "Take two thousand men and storm that city that our road be clear to Cathay with the coming of spring."

When a man casts a javelin he little cares if it splinter on the mark. Timour would not have sent his valued emirs and chosen warriors on this, the maddest quest he had yet given even Donald. But the Gael cared not; he was more than ready to ride on any adventure which might drown the dim bitter dreams that gnawed deeper and deeper at his heart. At the age of forty MacDeesa's iron frame was unweakened, his ferocious valor undimmed. But at times he felt old in his heart. His thoughts turned more and more back over the black and crimson pattern of his life with its violence and treachery and savagery; its woe and waste and stark futility. He slept fitfully and seemed to hear half-forgotten voices crying in the night. Sometimes it seemed the keening of Highland pipes skirled through the howling winds.

He roused his wolves, who gaped at the command but obeyed without comment, and rode out of Otrar in a roaring blizzard. It was a venture of the damned.

In the palace of Otrar, Timour drowsed on his divan over his maps and charts, and listened drowsily to the everlasting disputes between the women of his household. The intrigues and jealousies of the Samarcand palaces reached to isolated Otrar. They buzzed about him, wearying him to death with their petty spite. As age stole on the iron Amir, the women looked eagerly to his naming of a successor--his queen Sarai Mulkh Khanum; Khan Zade, wife of his dead son Jahangir. Against the queen's claim for her son--and Timour's--Shah Ruhk, was opposed the intrigue of Khan Zade for her son, Prince Khalil, whom the courtesan Shadi Mulkh wrapped about her pink finger.

The Amir had brought Shadi Mulkh with him to Otrar, much against Khalil's will. The Prince was growing restless in the bleak Stone City and hints reached Timour of discord and threats of insubordination. Sarai Khanum came to the Amir, a gaunt weary woman, grown old in wars and grief.

"The Persian girl sends secret messages to Prince Khalil, stirring him up to deeds of folly," said the Great Lady. "You are far from Samarcand. Were Khalil to march thither before you--there are always fools ready to revolt, even against the Lord of Lords."

"At another time," said Timour wearily, "I would have her strangled. But Khalil in his folly would rise against me, and a revolt at this time, however quickly put down, would upset all my plans. Have her confined and closely guarded, so that she can send no more messages."

"This I have already done," replied Sarai Khanum grimly, "but she is clever and manages to get messages out of the palace by means of the Persian girl of the Caphar, lord Donald."

"Fetch this girl," ordered Timour, laying aside his maps with a sigh.

They dragged Zuleika before the Amir, who looked somberly upon her as she groveled whimpering at his feet, and with a weary gesture, sealed her doom--and immediately forgot her, as a king forgets the fly he has crushed.

They dragged the girl screaming from the imperial presence and hurled her upon her knees in a hall which had no windows and only bolted doors. Groveling on her knees she wailed frantically for Donald and screamed for mercy, until terror froze her voice in her pulsing throat, and through a mist of horror she saw the stark half-naked figure and the mask-like face of the grim executioner advancing, knife in hand....

Zuleika was neither brave nor admirable. She neither lived with dignity nor met her fate with courage. She was cowardly, immoral and foolish. But even a fly loves life, and a worm would cry out under the heel that crushed it. And perhaps, in the grim inscrutable books of Fate, even an emperor may not forever trample insects with impunity.

Chapter 8

"But I have dreamed a dreary dream.
Beyond the Vale of Skye;
I saw a dead man win a fight.
And I think that man was I."
--Battle of Otterbourne.

And at Ordushar the siege dragged on. In the freezing winds that swept down the pass, driving snow in blinding, biting blasts, the stocky Kalmucks and the lean Vigurs strove and suffered and died in bitter anguish. They set scaling-ladders against the walls and struggled upward, and the defenders, suffering no less, speared them, hurled down boulders that crushed the mailed figures like beetles, and thrust the ladders from the walls so that they crashed down, bearing death to men below. Ordushar was actually but a stronghold of the Jat Mongols, set sheer in the pass and flanked by towering cliffs.

Donald's wolves hacked at the frozen ground with frost-bitten raw hands which scarce could hold the picks, striving to sink a mine under the walls. They pecked at the towers while molten lead and weighted javelins fell in a rain upon them; driving their spear-points between the stones, tearing out pieces of masonry with their naked hands. With stupendous toil they had constructed makeshift siege-engines from felled trees and the leather of their harness and woven hair from the manes and tails of their warhorses. The rams battered vainly at the massive stones, the ballistas groaned as they launched tree-trunks and boulders against the towers or over the walls. Along the parapets the attackers fought with the defenders, until their bleeding hands froze to spear-shaft and sword-hilt, and the skin came away in great raw strips. And always, with superhuman fury rising above their agony, the defenders hurled back the attack.

A storming-tower was built and rolled up to the walls, and from the battlements the men of Ordushar poured a drenching torrent of naphtha that sent it up in flame and burnt the men in it, shriveling them in their armor like beetles in a fire. Snow and sleet fell in blinding flurries, freezing to sheets of ice. Dead men froze stiffly where they fell, and wounded men died in their sleeping-furs. There was no rest, no surcease from agony. Days and nights merged into a hell of pain. Donald's men, with tears of suffering frozen on their faces, beat frenziedly against the frosty stone walls, fought with raw hands gripping broken weapons, and died cursing the gods that created them.

The misery inside the city was no less, for there was no more food. At night Donald's warriors heard the wailing of the starving people in the streets. At last in desperation the men of Ordushar cut the throats of their women and children and sallied forth, and the haggard Tatars fell on them weeping with the madness of rage and woe, and in a welter of battle that crimsoned the frozen snow, drove them back through the city gates. And the struggle went hideously on.

Donald used up the last wood in the vicinity to erect another storming-tower higher than the city wall. After that there was no more wood for the fires. He himself stood at the uplifted bridge which was to be lowered to rest on the parapets. He had not spared himself. Day and night he had toiled beside his men, suffering as they had suffered. The tower was rolled to the wall in a hail of arrows that slew half the warriors who had not found shelter behind the thick bulwark. A crude cannon bellowed from the walls, but the clumsy round shot whistled over their heads. The naphtha and Greek fire of the Jats was exhausted. In the teeth of the singing shafts the bridge was dropped.

Drawing his claymore, Donald strode out upon it. Arrows broke on his corselet and glanced from his helmet. Firelocks flashed and bellowed in his face but he strode on unhurt. Lean armored men with eyes like mad dogs' swarmed upon the parapet, seeking to dislodge the bridge, to hack it asunder. Among them Donald sprang, his claymore whistling. The great blade sheared through mail-mesh, flesh and bone, and the struggling clump fell apart. Donald staggered on the edge of the wall as a heavy ax crashed on his shield, and he struck back, cleaving the wielder's spine. The Gael recovered his balance, tossing away his riven shield. His wolves were swarming over the bridge behind him, hurling the defenders from the parapet, cutting them down. Into a swirl of battle Donald strode, swinging his heavy blade. He thought fleetingly of Zuleika, as men in the madness of battle will think of irrelevant things, and it was as if the thought of her had hurt him fiercely under the heart. But it was a spear that had girded through his mail, and Donald struck back savagely; the claymore splintered in his hand and he leaned against the parapet, his face briefly contorted. Around him swept the tides of slaughter as the pent-up fury of his warriors, maddened by the long weeks of suffering, burst all bounds.

Chapter 9

"While the red flashing of the light
From clouds that hung, like banners, o'er.
Appeared to my half-closing eye
The pageantry of monarchy."
--Poe Tamerlane.

To Timour on his throne in the palace of Otrar came the Grand Vizier. "The survivors of the men sent to the Pass of Ordushar are returning, my lord. The city in the mountains is no more. They bear the lord Donald on a litter, and he is dying."

They brought the litter into Timour's presence, weary, dull-eyed men, with raw wounds tied up with blood-crusted rags, their garments and mail in tatters. They flung before the Amir's feet the golden-scaled corselets of chiefs, and chests of jewels and robes of silk and silver braid; the loot of Ordushar where men had starved among riches. And they set the litter down before Timour.

The Amir looked at the form of Donald. The Highlander was pale, but his sinister face showed no hint of weakness in that wild spirit, his cold eyes gleamed unquenched.

"The road to Cathay is clear," said Donald, speaking with difficulty. "Ordushar lies in smoking ruins. I have carried out your last command."

Timour nodded, his eyes seeming to gaze through and beyond the Highlander. What was a dying man on a litter to the Amir, who had seen so many die? His mind was on the road to Cathay and the purple kingdoms beyond. The javelin had shattered at last, but its final cast had opened the imperial path. Timour's dark eyes burned with strange depths and leaping shadows, as the old fire stole through his blood. Conquest! Outside the winds howled, as if trumpeting the roar of nakars, the clash of cymbals, the deep-throated chant of victory.

"Send Zuleika to me," the dying man muttered. Timour did not reply; he scarcely heard, sitting lost in thunderous visions. He had already forgotten Zuleika and her fate. What was one death in the awesome and terrible scheme of empire.

"Zuleika, where is Zuleika?" the Gael repeated, moving restlessly on his litter. Timour shook himself slightly and lifted his head, remembering.

"I had her put to death," he answered quietly. "It was necessary."

"Necessary!" Donald strove to rear upright, his eyes terrible, but fell back, gagging, and spat out a mouthful of crimson. "You bloody dog, she was mine!"

"Yours or another's," Timour rejoined absently, his mind far away. "What is a woman in the plan of imperial destinies?"

For answer Donald plucked a pistol from among his robes and fired point-blank. Timour started and swayed on his throne, and the courtiers cried out, paralyzed with horror. Through the drifting smoke they saw that Donald lay dead on the litter, his thin lips frozen in a grim smile. Timour sat crumpled on his throne, one hand gripping his breast; through those fingers blood oozed darkly. With his free hand he waved back his nobles.

"Enough; it is finished. To every man comes the end of the road. Let Pir Muhammad reign in my stead, and let him strengthen the lines of the empire I have reared with my hands."

A rack of agony twisted his features. "Allah, that this should be the end of empire!" It was a fierce cry of anguish from his inmost soul. "That I, who have trodden upon kingdoms and humbled sultans, come to my doom because of a cringing trull and a Caphar renegade!" His helpless chiefs saw his mighty hands clench like iron as he held death at bay by the sheer power of his unconquered will. The fatalism of his accepted creed had never found resting-place in his instinctively pagan soul; he was a fighter to the red end.

"Let not my people know that Timour died by the hand of a Caphar," he spoke with growing difficulty. "Let not the chronicles of the ages blazon the name of a wolf that slew an emperor. Ah God, that a bit of dust and metal can dash the Conqueror of the World into the dark! Write, scribe, that this day, by the hand of no man, but by the will of Allah, died Timour, Servant of God."

The chiefs stood about in dazed silence, while the pallid scribe took up parchment and wrote with a shaking hand. Timour's somber eyes were fixed on Donald's still features that seemed to give back his stare, as the dead on the litter faced the dying on the throne. And before the scratching of the quill had ceased, Timour's lion head had sunk upon his mighty chest. And without the wind howled a dirge, drifting the snow higher and higher about the walls of Otrar, even as the sands of oblivion drifted already about the crumbling empire of Timour, the Last Conqueror, Lord of the World.

Why, if the Soul can fling the Dust aside.
And naked on the Air of Heaven ride.
Were't not a Shame--were't not a Shame for him
In this clay carcase crippled to abide?
'Tis but a Tent where takes his one day's rest
A Sultan to the realm of Death addrest;
The Sultan rises, and the dark Ferrash
Strikes, and prepares it for another Guest.
--Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.

THE END

Contents

GATES OF EMPIRE

By Robert E. Howard

The clank of the sour sentinels on the turrets, the gusty uproar of the spring winds, were not heard by those who reveled in the cellar of Godfrey de Courtenay's castle; and the noise these revelers made was bottled up deafeningly within the massive walls.

A sputtering candle lighted those rugged walls, damp and uninviting, flanked with wattled casks and hogsheads over which stretched a veil of dusty cobwebs. From one barrel the head had been knocked out, and leathern drinking-jacks were immersed again and again in the foamy tide, in hands that grew increasingly unsteady.

Agnes, one of the serving wenches, had stolen the massive iron key to the cellar from the girdle of the steward; and rendered daring by the absence of their master, a small but far from select group were making merry with characteristic heedlessness of the morrow.

Agnes, seated on the knee of the varlet Peter, beat erratic time with a jack to a ribald song both were bawling in different tunes and keys. The ale slopped over the rim of the wobbling jack and down Peter's collar, a circumstance he was beyond noticing.

The other wench, fat Marge, rolled on her bench and slapped her ample thighs in uproarious appreciation of a spicy tale just told by Giles Hobson. This individual might have been the lord of the castle from his manner, instead of a vagabond rapscallion tossed by every wind of adversity. Tilted back on a barrel, booted feet propped on another, he loosened the belt that girdled his capacious belly in its worn leather jerkin, and plunged his muzzle once more into the frothing ale.

"Giles, by Saint Withold his beard," quoth Marge, "madder rogue never wore steel. The very ravens that pick your bones on the gibbet tree will burst their sides a-laughing. I hail ye--prince of all bawdy liars!"

She flourished a huge pewter pot and drained it as stoutly as any man in the realm.

At this moment another reveler, returning from an errand, came into the scene. The door at the head of the stairs admitted a wobbly figure in close-fitting velvet. Through the briefly opened door sounded noises of the night--slap of hangings somewhere in the house, sucking and flapping in the wind that whipped through the crevices; a faint disgruntled hail from a watchman on a tower. A gust of wind whooped down the stair and set the candle to dancing.

Guillaume, the page, shoved the door shut and made his way with groggy care down the rude stone steps. He was not so drunk as the others, simply because, what of his extreme youth, he lacked their capacity for fermented liquor.

"What's the time, boy?" demanded Peter.

"Long past midnight," the page answered, groping unsteadily for the open cask. "The whole castle is asleep, save for the watchmen. But I heard a clatter of hoofs through the wind and rain; methinks 'tis Sir Godfrey returning."

"Let him return and be damned!" shouted Giles, slapping Marge's fat haunch resoundingly. "He may be lord of the keep, but at present we are keepers of the cellar! More ale! Agnes, you little slut, another song!"

"Nay, more tales!" clamored Marge. "Our mistress's brother, Sir Guiscard de Chastillon, has told grand tales of Holy Land and the infidels, but by Saint Dunstan, Giles' lies outshine the knight's truths!"

"Slander not a--hic!--holy man as has been on pilgrimage and Crusade," hiccuped Peter. "Sir Guiscard has seen Jerusalem and foughten beside the King of Palestine--how many years?"

"Ten year come May Day, since he sailed to Holy Land," said Agnes. "Lady Eleanor had not seen him in all that time, till he rode up to the gate yesterday morn. Her husband, Sir Godfrey, never has seen him."

"And wouldn't know him?" mused Giles; "nor Sir Guiscard him?"

He blinked, raking a broad hand through his sandy mop. He was drunker than even he realized. The world spun like a top and his head seemed to be dancing dizzily on his shoulders. Out of the fumes of ale and a vagrant spirit, a madcap idea was born.

A roar of laughter burst gustily from Giles' lips. He reeled upright, spilling his jack in Marge's lap and bringing a burst of rare profanity from her. He smote a barrelhead with his open hand, strangling with mirth.

"Good lack!" squawked Agnes. "Are you daft, man?"

"A jest!" The roof reverberated to his bull's bellow. "Oh, Saint Withold, a jest! Sir Guiscard knows not his brother-in-law, and Sir Godfrey is now at the gate. Hark ye!"

Four heads, bobbing erratically, inclined toward him as he whispered as if the rude walls might hear. An instant's bleary silence was followed by boisterous guffaws. They were in the mood to follow the maddest course suggested to them. Only Guillaume felt some misgivings, but he was swept away by the alcoholic fervor of his companions.

"Oh, a devil's own jest!" cried Marge, planting a loud, moist kiss on Giles' ruddy cheek. "On, rogues, to the sport!"

"En avant!" bellowed Giles, drawing his sword and waving it unsteadily, and the five weaved up the stairs, stumbling, blundering, and lurching against one another. They kicked open the door, and shortly were running erratically up the wide hall, giving tongue like a pack of hounds.

The castles of the Twelfth Century, fortresses rather than mere dwellings, were built for defense, not comfort.

The hall through which the drunken band was hallooing was broad, lofty, windy, strewn with rushes, now but faintly lighted by the dying embers in a great ill-ventilated fireplace. Rude, sail-like hangings along the walls rippled in the wind that found its way through. Hounds, sleeping under the great table, woke yelping as they were trodden on by blundering feet, and added their clamor to the din.

This din roused Sir Guiscard de Chastillon from dreams of Acre and the sun-drenched plains of Palestine. He bounded up, sword in hand, supposing himself to be beset by Saracen raiders, then realized where he was. But events seemed to be afoot. A medley of shouts and shrieks clamored outside his door, and on the stout oak panels boomed a rain of blows that bade fair to burst the portal inward. The knight heard his name called loudly and urgently.

Putting aside his trembling squire, he ran to the door and cast it open. Sir Guiscard was a tall gaunt man, with a great beak of a nose and cold grey eyes. Even in his shirt he was a formidable figure. He blinked ferociously at the group limned dimly in the glow from the coals at the other end of the hall. There seemed to be women, children, a fat man with a sword.

This fat man was bawling: "Succor, Sir Guiscard, succor! The castle is forced, and we are all dead men! The robbers of Horsham Wood are within the hall itself!"

Sir Guiscard heard the unmistakable tramp of mailed feet, saw vague figures coming into the hall--figures on whose steel the faint light gleamed redly. Still mazed by slumber, but ferocious, he went into furious action.

Sir Godfrey de Courtenay, returning to his keep after many hours of riding through foul weather, anticipated only rest and ease in his own castle. Having vented his irritation by roundly cursing the sleepy grooms who shambled up to attend his horses, and were too bemused to tell him of his guest, he dismissed his men-at-arms and strode into the donjon, followed by his squires and the gentlemen of his retinue. Scarcely had he entered when the devil's own bedlam burst loose in the hall. He heard a wild stampede of feet, crash of overturned benches, baying of dogs, and an uproar of strident voices, over which one bull-like bellow triumphed.

Swearing amazedly, he ran up the hall, followed by his knights, when a ravening maniac, naked but for a shirt, burst on him, sword in hand, howling like a werewolf.

Sparks flew from Sir Godfrey's basinet beneath the madman's furious strokes, and the lord of the castle almost succumbed to the ferocity of that onslaught before he could draw his own sword. He fell back, bellowing for his men-at-arms. But the madman was yelling louder than he, and from all sides swarmed other lunatics in shirts who assailed Sir Godfrey's dumfounded gentlemen with howling frenzy.

The castle was in an uproar--lights flashing up, dogs howling, women screaming, men cursing, and over all the clash of steel and the stamp of mailed feet.

The conspirators, sobered by what they had raised, scattered in all directions, seeking hiding-places--all except Giles Hobson. His state of intoxication was too magnificent to be perturbed by any such trivial scene. He admired his handiwork for a space; then, finding swords flashing too close to his head for comfort, withdrew, and following some instinct, departed for a hiding-place known to him of old. There he found with gentle satisfaction that he had all the time retained a cobwebbed bottle in his hand. This he emptied, and its contents, coupled with what had already found its way down his gullet, plunged him into extinction for an amazing period. Tranquilly he snored under the straw, while events took place above and around him, and matters moved not slowly.

There in the straw Friar Ambrose found him just as dusk was falling after a harassed and harrying day. The friar, ruddy and well paunched, shook the unpenitent one into bleary wakefulness.

"The saints defend us!" said Ambrose. "Up to your old tricks again! I thought to find you here. They have been searching the castle all day for you; they searched these stables, too. Well that you were hidden beneath a very mountain of hay."

"They do me too much honor," yawned Giles. "Why should they search for me?"

The friar lifted his hands in pious horror.

"Saint Denis is my refuge against Sathanas and his works! Is it not known how you were the ringleader in that madcap prank last night that pitted poor Sir Guiscard against his sister's husband?"

"Saint Dunstan!" quoth Giles, expectorating dryly. "How I thirst! Were any slain?"

"No, by the providence of God. But there is many a broken crown and bruised rib this day. Sir Godfrey nigh fell at the first onset, for Sir Guiscard is a woundy swordsman. But our lord being in full armor, he presently dealt Sir Guiscard a shrewd cut over the pate, whereby blood did flow in streams, and Sir Guiscard blasphemed in a manner shocking to hear. What had then chanced, God only knows, but Lady Eleanor, awakened by the noise, ran forth in her shift, and seeing her husband and her brother at swords' points, she ran between them and bespoke them in words not to be repeated. Verily, a flailing tongue hath our mistress when her wrath is stirred.

"So understanding was reached, and a leech was fetched for Sir Guiscard and such of the henchmen as had suffered scathe. Then followed much discussion, and Sir Guiscard had recognized you as one of those who banged on his door. Then Guillaume was discovered hiding, as from a guilty conscience, and he confessed all, putting the blame on you. Ah me, such a day as it has been!

"Poor Peter in the stocks since dawn, and all the villeins and serving-wenches and villagers gathered to clod him--they but just now left off, and a sorry sight he is, with nose a-bleeding, face skinned, an eye closed, and broken eggs in his hair and dripping over his features. Poor Peter!

"And as for Agnes, Marge and Guillaume, they have had whipping enough to content them all a lifetime. It would be hard to say which of them has the sorest posterior. But it is you, Giles, the masters wish. Sir Guiscard swears that only your life will anyways content him."

"Hmmmm," ruminated Giles. He rose unsteadily, brushed the straw from his garments, hitched up his belt and stuck his disreputable bonnet on his head at a cocky angle.

The friar watched him gloomily. "Peter stocked, Guillaume birched, Marge and Agnes whipped--what should be your punishment?"

"Methinks I'll do penance by a long pilgrimage," said Giles.

"You'll never get through the gates," predicted Ambrose.

"True," sighed Giles. "A friar may pass at will, where an honest man is halted by suspicion and prejudice. As further penance, lend me your robe."

"My robe?" exclaimed the friar. "You are a fool--"

A heavy fist clunked against his fat jaw, and he collapsed with a whistling sigh.

A few minutes later a lout in the outer ward, taking aim with a rotten egg at the dilapidated figure in the stocks, checked his arm as a robed and hooded shape emerged from the stables and crossed the open space with slow steps. The shoulders drooped as from a weight of weariness, the head was bent forward; so much so, in fact, that the features were hidden by the hood.

The lout doffed his shabby cap and made a clumsy leg.

"God go wi' 'ee, good faither," he said.

"Pax vobiscum, my son," came the answer, low and muffled from the depths of the hood.

The lout shook his head sympathetically as the robed figure moved on, unhindered, in the direction of the postern gate.

"Poor Friar Ambrose," quoth the lout. "He takes the sin o' the world so much to heart; there 'ee go, fair bowed down by the wickedness o' men."

He sighed, and again took aim at the glum countenance that glowered above the stocks.

Through the blue glitter of the Mediterranean wallowed a merchant galley, clumsy, broad in the beam. Her square sail hung limp on her one thick mast. The oarsmen, sitting on the benches which flanked the waist deck on either side, tugged at the long oars, bending forward and heaving back in machine-like unison. Sweat stood out on their sun-burnt skin, their muscles rolled evenly. From the interior of the hull came a chatter of voices, the complaint of animals, a reek as of barnyards and stables. This scent was observable some distance to leeward. To the south the blue waters spread out like molten sapphire. To the north, the gleaming sweep was broken by an island that reared up white cliffs crowned with dark green. Dignity, cleanliness and serenity reigned over all, except where that smelly, ungainly tub lurched through the foaming water, by sound and scent advertising the presence of man.

Below the waist-deck, passengers, squatted among bundles, were cooking food over small braziers. Smoke mingled with a reek of sweat and garlic. Horses, penned in a narrow space, whinnied wretchedly. Sheep, pigs and chickens added their aroma to the smells.

Presently, amidst the babble below decks, a new sound floated up to the people above--members of the crew, and the wealthier passengers who shared the patrono's cabin. The voice of the patrono came to them, strident with annoyance, answered by a loud rough voice with an alien accent.

The Venetian captain, prodding among the butts and bales of the cargo, had discovered a stowaway--a fat, sandy-haired man in worn leather, snoring bibulously among the barrels.

Ensued an impassioned oratory in lurid Italian, the burden of which at last focused in a demand that the stranger pay for his passage.

"Pay?" echoed that individual, running thick fingers through unkempt locks. "What should I pay with, Thin-shanks? Where am I? What ship is this? Where are we going?"

"This is the San Stefano, bound for Cyprus from Palermo."

"Oh, yes," muttered the stowaway. "I remember. I came aboard at Palermo--lay down beside a wine cask between the bales--"

The patrono hastily inspected the cask and shrieked with new passion.

"Dog! You've drunk it all!"

"How long have we been at sea?" demanded the intruder.

"Long enough to be out of sight of land," snarled the other. "Pig, how can a man lie drunk so long--"

"No wonder my belly's empty," muttered the other. "I've lain among the bales, and when I woke, I'd drink till I fell asleep again. Hmmm!"

"Money!" clamored the Italian. "Bezants for your fare!"

"Bezants!" snorted the other. "I haven't a penny to my name."

"Then overboard you go," grimly promised the patrono. "There's no room for beggars aboard the San Stefano ."

That struck a spark. The stranger gave vent to a warlike snort and tugged at his sword.

"Throw me overboard into all that water? Not while Giles Hobson can wield blade. A freeborn Englishman is as good as any velvet-breeched Italian. Call your bullies and watch me bleed them!"

From the deck came a loud call, strident with sudden fright. "Galleys off the starboard bow! Saracens!"

A howl burst from the patrono's lips and his face went ashy. Abandoning the dispute at hand, he wheeled and rushed up on deck. Giles Hobson followed and gaped about him at the anxious brown faces of the rowers, the frightened countenances of the passengers--Latin priests, merchants and pilgrims. Following their gaze, he saw three long low galleys shooting across the blue expanse toward them. They were still some distance away, but the people on the San Stefano could hear the faint clash of cymbals, see the banners stream out from the mast heads. The oars dipped into the blue water, came up shining silver.

"Put her about and steer for the island!" yelled the patrono. "If we can reach it, we may hide and save our lives. The galley is lost--and all the cargo! Saints defend me!" He wept and wrung his hands, less from fear than from disappointed avarice.

The San Stefano wallowed cumbrously about and waddled hurriedly toward the white cliffs jutting in the sunlight. The slim galleys came up, shooting through the waves like water snakes. The space of dancing blue between the San Stefano and the cliffs narrowed, but more swiftly narrowed the space between the merchant and the raiders. Arrows began to arch through the air and patter on the deck. One struck and quivered near Giles Hobson's boot, and he gave back as if from a serpent. The fat Englishman mopped perspiration from his brow. His mouth was dry, his head throbbed, his belly heaved. Suddenly he was violently seasick.

The oarsmen bent their backs, gasped, heaved mightily, seeming almost to jerk the awkward craft out of the water. Arrows, no longer arching, raked the deck. A man howled; another sank down without a word. An oarsman flinched from a shaft through his shoulder, and faltered in his stroke. Panic-stricken, the rowers began to lose rhythm. The San Stefano lost headway and rolled more wildly, and the passengers sent up a wail. From the raiders came yells of exultation. They separated in a fan-shaped formation meant to envelop the doomed galley.

On the merchant's deck the priests were shriving and absolving.

"Holy Saints grant me--" gasped a gaunt Pisan, kneeling on the boards--convulsively he clasped the feathered shaft that suddenly vibrated in his breast, then slumped sidewise and lay still.

An arrow thumped into the rail over which Giles Hobson hung, quivered near his elbow. He paid no heed. A hand was laid on his shoulder. Gagging, he turned his head, lifted a green face to look into the troubled eyes of a priest.

"My son, this may be the hour of death; confess your sins and I will shrive you."

"The only one I can think of," gasped Giles miserably, "is that I mauled a priest and stole his robe to flee England in."

"Alas, my son," the priest began, then cringed back with a low moan. He seemed to bow to Giles; his head inclining still further, he sank to the deck. From a dark welling spot on his side jutted a Saracen arrow.

Giles gaped about him; on either hand a long slim galley was sweeping in to lay the San Stefano aboard. Even as he looked, the third galley, the one in the middle of the triangular formation, rammed the merchant ship with a deafening splintering of timber. The steel beak cut through the bulwarks, rending apart the stern cabin. The concussion rolled men off their feet. Others, caught and crushed in the collision, died howling awfully. The other raiders ground alongside, and their steel-shod prows sheared through the banks of oars, twisting the shafts out of the oarsmen's hands, crushing the ribs of the wielders.

The grappling hooks bit into the bulwarks, and over the rail came dark naked men with scimitars in their hands, their eyes blazing. They were met by a dazed remnant who fought back desperately.

Giles Hobson fumbled out his sword, strode groggily forward. A dark shape flashed at him out of the melee. He got a dazed impression of glittering eyes, and a curved blade hissing down. He caught the stroke on his sword, staggering from the spark-showering impact. Braced on wide straddling legs, he drove his sword into the pirate's belly. Blood and entrails gushed forth, and the dying corsair dragged his slayer to the deck with him in his throes.

Feet booted and bare stamped on Giles Hobson as he strove to rise. A curved dagger hooked at his kidneys, caught in his leather jerkin and ripped the garment from hem to collar. He rose, shaking the tatters from him. A dusky hand locked in his ragged shirt, a mace hovered over his head. With a frantic jerk, Giles pitched backward, to a sound of rending cloth, leaving the torn shirt in his captor's hand. The mace met empty air as it descended, and the wielder went to his knees from the wasted blow. Giles fled along the blood-washed deck, twisting and ducking to avoid struggling knots of fighters.

A handful of defenders huddled in the door of the forecastle. The rest of the galley was in the hands of the triumphant Saracens. They swarmed over the deck, down into the waist. The animals squealed piteously as their throats were cut. Other screams marked the end of the women and children dragged from their hiding-places among the cargo.

In the door of the forecastle the bloodstained survivors parried and thrust with notched swords. The pirates hemmed them in, yelping mockingly, thrusting forward their pikes, drawing back, springing in to hack and slash.

Giles sprang for the rail, intending to dive and swim for the island. A quick step behind him warned him in time to wheel and duck a scimitar. It was wielded by a stout man of medium height, resplendent in silvered chain-mail and chased helmet, crested with egret plumes.

Sweat misted the fat Englishman's sight; his wind was short; his belly heaved, his legs trembled. The Moslem cut at his head. Giles parried, struck back. His blade clanged against the chief's mail. Something like a white-hot brand seared his temple, and he was blinded by a rush of blood. Dropping his sword, he pitched head-first against the Saracen, bearing him to the deck. The Moslem writhed and cursed, but Giles' thick arms clamped desperately about him.

Suddenly a wild shout went up. There was a rush of feet across the deck. Men began to leap over the rail, to cast loose the boarding-irons. Giles' captive yelled stridently, and men raced across the deck toward him. Giles released him, ran like a bulky cat along the bulwarks, and scrambled up over the roof of the shattered poop cabin. None heeded him. Men naked but for tarboushes hauled the mailed chieftain to his feet and rushed him across the deck while he raged and blasphemed, evidently wishing to continue the contest. The Saracens were leaping into their own galleys and pushing away. And Giles, crouching on the splintered cabin roof, saw the reason.

Around the western promontory of the island they had been trying to reach, came a squadron of great red dromonds, with battle-castles rearing at prow and stern. Helmets and spearheads glittered in the sun. Trumpets blared, drums boomed. From each masthead streamed a long banner bearing the emblem of the Cross.

From the survivors aboard the San Stefano rose a shout of joy. The galleys were racing southward. The nearest dromond swung ponderously alongside, and brown faces framed in steel looked over the rail.

"Ahoy, there!" rang a stern-voiced command. "You are sinking; stand by to come aboard."

Giles Hobson started violently at that voice. He gaped up at the battle-castle towering above the San Stefano. A helmeted head bent over the bulwark, a pair of cold grey eyes met his. He saw a great beak of a nose, a scar seaming the face from the ear down the rim of the jaw.

Recognition was mutual. A year had not dulled Sir Guiscard de Chastillon's resentment.

"So!" The yell rang bloodthirstily in Giles Hobson's ears. "At last I have found you, rogue--"

Giles wheeled, kicked off his boots, ran to the edge of the roof. He left it in a long dive, shot into the blue water with a tremendous splash. His head bobbed to the surface, and he struck out for the distant cliffs in long, pawing strokes.

A mutter of surprize rose from the dromond, but Sir Guiscard smiled sourly.

"A bow, varlet," he commanded.

It was placed in his hands. He nocked the arrow, waited until Giles' dripping head appeared again in a shallow trough between the waves. The bowstring twanged, the arrow flashed through the sunlight like a silver beam. Giles Hobson threw up his arms and disappeared. Nor did Sir Guiscard see him rise again, though the knight watched the waters for some time.

To Shawar, vizier of Egypt, in his palace in el Fustat, came a gorgeously robed eunuch who, with many abased supplications, as the due of the most powerful man in the caliphate, announced: "The Emir Asad ed din Shirkuh, lord of Emesa and Rahba, general of the armies of Nour ed din, Sultan of Damascus, has returned from the ships of el Ghazi with a Nazarene captive, and desires audience."

A nod of acquiescence was the vizier's only sign, but his slim white fingers twitched at his jewel-encrusted white girdle--sure evidence of mental unrest.

Shawar was an Arab, a slim, handsome figure, with the keen dark eyes of his race. He wore the silken robes and pearl-sewn turban of his office as if he had been born to them--instead of to the black felt tents from which his sagacity had lifted him.

The Emir Shirkuh entered like a storm, booming forth his salutations in a voice more fitted for the camp than for the council chamber. He was a powerfully built man of medium height, with a face like a hawk's. His khalat was of watered silk, worked with gold thread, but like his voice, his hard body seemed more fitted for the harness of war than the garments of peace. Middle age had dulled none of the restless fire in his dark eyes.

With him was a man whose sandy hair and wide blue eyes contrasted incongruously with the voluminous bag trousers, silken khalat and turned-up slippers which adorned him.

"I trust that Allah granted you fortune upon the sea, ya khawand ?" courteously inquired the vizier.

"Of a sort," admitted Shirkuh, casting himself down on the cushions. "We fared far, Allah knows, and at first my guts were like to gush out of my mouth with the galloping of the ship, which went up and down like a foundered camel. But later Allah willed that the sickness should pass.

"We sank a few wretched pilgrims' galleys and sent to Hell the infidels therein--which was good, but the loot was wretched stuff. But look ye, lord vizier, did you ever see a Caphar like to this man?"

The man returned the vizier's searching stare with wide guileless eyes.

"Such as he I have seen among the Franks of Jerusalem," Shawar decided.

Shirkuh grunted and began to munch grapes with scant ceremony, tossing a bunch to his captive.

"Near a certain island we sighted a galley," he said, between mouthfuls, "and we ran upon it and put the folk to the sword. Most of them were miserable fighters, but this man cut his way clear and would have sprung overboard had I not intercepted him. By Allah, he proved himself strong as a bull! My ribs are yet bruised from his hug.

"But in the midst of the melee up galloped a herd of ships full of Christian warriors, bound--as we later learned--for Ascalon; Frankish adventurers seeking their fortune in Palestine. We put the spurs to our galleys, and as I looked back I saw the man I had been fighting leap overboard and swim toward the cliffs. A knight on a Nazarene ship shot an arrow at him and he sank, to his death, I supposed.

"Our water butts were nearly empty. We did not run far. As soon as the Frankish ships were out of sight over the skyline, we beat back to the island for fresh water. And we found, fainting on the beach, a fat, naked, red-haired man whom I recognized as he whom I had fought. The arrow had not touched him; he had dived deep and swum far under the water. But he had bled much from a cut I had given him on the head, and was nigh dead from exhaustion.

"Because he had fought me well, I took him into my cabin and revived him, and in the days that followed he learned to speak the speech we of Islam hold with the accursed Nazarenes. He told me that he was a bastard son of the king of England, and that enemies had driven him from his father's court, and were hunting him over the world. He swore the king his father would pay a mighty ransom for him, so I make you a present of him. For me, the pleasure of the cruise is enough. To you shall go the ransom the malik of England pays for his son. He is a merry companion who can tell a tale, quaff a flagon, and sing a song as well as any man I have ever known."

Shawar scanned Giles Hobson with new interest. In that rubicund countenance he failed to find any evidence of royal parentage, but reflected that few Franks showed royal lineage in their features: ruddy, freckled, light-haired, the western lords looked much alike to the Arab.

He turned his attention again to Shirkuh, who was of more importance than any wandering Frank, royal or common. The old war-dog, with shocking lack of formality, was humming a Kurdish war song under his breath as he poured a goblet of Shiraz wine--the Shiite rulers of Egypt were no stricter in their morals than were their Mameluke successors.

Apparently Shirkuh had no thought in the world except to satisfy his thirst, but Shawar wondered what craft was revolving behind that bluff exterior. In another man Shawar would have despised the Emir's restless vitality as an indication of an inferior mentality. But the Kurdish right-hand man of Nour ed din was no fool. The vizier wondered if Shirkuh had embarked on that wild-goose chase with el Ghazi's corsairs merely because his restless energy would not let him be quiet, even during a visit to the caliph's court, or if there was a deeper meaning behind his voyaging. Shawar always looked for hidden motives, even in trivial things. He had reached his position by ignoring no possibility of intrigue. Moreover, events were stirring in the womb of Destiny in that early spring of 1167 A.D.

Shawar thought of Dirgham's bones rotting in a ditch near the chapel of Sitta Nefisa, and he smiled and said: "A thousand thanks for your gifts, my lord. In return a jade goblet filled with pearls shall be carried to your chamber. Let this exchange of gifts symbolize the everlasting endurance of our friendship."

"Allah fill thy mouth with gold, lord," boomed Shirkuh, rising; "I go to drink wine with my officers, and tell them lies of my voyagings. Tomorrow I ride for Damascus. Allah be with thee!"

"And with thee, ya khawand ."

After the Kurd's springy footfalls had ceased to rustle the thick carpets of the halls, Shawar motioned Giles to sit beside him on the cushions.

"What of your ransom?" he asked, in the Norman French he had learned through contact with the Crusaders.

"The king my father will fill this chamber with gold," promptly answered Giles. "His enemies have told him I was dead. Great will be the joy of the old man to learn the truth."

So saying, Giles retired behind a wine goblet and racked his brain for bigger and better lies. He had spun this fantasy for Shirkuh, thinking to make himself sound too valuable to be killed. Later--well, Giles lived for today, with little thought of the morrow.

Shawar watched, in some fascination, the rapid disappearance of the goblet's contents down his prisoner's gullet.

"You drink like a French baron," commented the Arab.

"I am the prince of all topers," answered Giles modestly--and with more truth than was contained in most of his boastings.

"Shirkuh, too, loves wine," went on the vizier. "You drank with him?"

"A little. He wouldn't get drunk, lest we sight a Christian ship. But we emptied a few flagons. A little wine loosens his tongue."

Shawar's narrow dark head snapped up; that was news to him.

"He talked? Of what?"

"Of his ambitions."

"And what are they?" Shawar held his breath.

"To be caliph of Egypt," answered Giles, exaggerating the Kurd's actual words, as was his habit. Shirkuh had talked wildly, though rather incoherently.

"Did he mention me?" demanded the vizier.

"He said he held you in the hollow of his hand," said Giles, truthfully, for a wonder.

Shawar fell silent; somewhere in the palace a lute twanged and a black girl lifted a weird whining song of the South. Fountains splashed silverly, and there was a flutter of pigeons' wings.

"If I send emissaries to Jerusalem, his spies will tell him," murmured Shawar to himself. "If I slay or constrain him, Nour ed din will consider it cause for war."

He lifted his head and stared at Giles Hobson.

"You call yourself king of topers; can you best the Emir Shirkuh in a drinking-bout?"

"In the palace of the king, my father," said Giles, "in one night I drank fifty barons under the table, the least of which was a mightier toper than Shirkuh."

"Would you win your freedom without ransom?"

"Aye, by Saint Withold!"

"You can scarcely know much of Eastern politics, being but newly come into these parts. But Egypt is the keystone of the arch of empire. It is coveted by Amalric, king of Jerusalem, and Nour ed din, sultan of Damascus. Ibn Ruzzik, and after him Dirgham, and after him, I, have played one against the other. By Shirkuh's aid I overthrew Dirgham; by Amalric's aid, I drove out Shirkuh. It is a perilous game, for I can trust neither.

"Nour ed din is cautious. Shirkuh is the man to fear. I think he came here professing friendship in order to spy me out, to lull my suspicions. Even now his army may be moving on Egypt.

"If he boasted to you of his ambitions and power, it is a sure sign that he feels secure in his plots. It is necessary that I render him helpless for a few hours; yet I dare not do him harm without true knowledge of whether his hosts are actually on the march. So this is your part."

Giles understood and a broad grin lit his ruddy face, and he licked his lips sensuously.

Shawar clapped his hands and gave orders, and presently, at request, Shirkuh entered, carrying his silk-girdled belly before him like an emperor of India.

"Our royal guest," purred Shawar, "has spoken of his prowess with the wine-cup. Shall we allow a Caphar to go home and boast among his people that he sat above the Faithful in anything? Who is more capable of humbling his pride than the Mountain Lion?"

"A drinking-bout?" Shirkuh's laugh was gusty as a sea blast. "By the beard of Muhammad, it likes me well! Come, Giles ibn Malik, let us to the quaffing!"

A procession began, of slaves bearing golden vessels brimming with sparkling nectar....

During his captivity on el Ghazi's galley, Giles had become accustomed to the heady wine of the East. But his blood was boiling in his veins, his head was singing, and the gold-barred chamber was revolving to his dizzy gaze before Shirkuh, his voice trailing off in the midst of an incoherent song, slumped sidewise on his cushions, the gold beaker tumbling from his fingers.

Shawar leaped into frantic activity. At his clap Sudanese slaves entered, naked giants with gold earrings and silk loinclouts.

"Carry him into the alcove and lay him on a divan," he ordered. "Lord Giles, can you ride?"

Giles rose, reeling like a ship in a high wind.

"I'll hold to the mane," he hiccuped. "But why should I ride?"

"To bear my message to Amalric," snapped Shawar. "Here it is, sealed in a silken packet, telling him that Shirkuh means to conquer Egypt, and offering him payment in return for aid. Amalric distrusts me, but he will listen to one of the royal blood of his own race, who tells him of Shirkuh's boasts."

"Aye," muttered Giles groggily, "royal blood; my grandfather was a horse-boy in the royal stables."

"What did you say?" demanded Shawar, not understanding, then went on before Giles could answer. "Shirkuh has played into our hands. He will lie senseless for hours, and while he lies there, you will be riding for Palestine. He will not ride for Damascus tomorrow; he will be sick of overdrunkenness. I dared not imprison him, or even drug his wine. I dare make no move until I reach an agreement with Amalric. But Shirkuh is safe for the time being, and you will reach Amalric before he reaches Nour ed din. Haste!"

In the courtyard outside sounded the clink of harness, the impatient stamp of horses. Voices blurred in swift whispers. Footfalls faded away through the halls. Alone in the alcove, Shirkuh unexpectedly sat upright. He shook his head violently, buffeted it with his hands as if to clear away the clinging cobwebs. He reeled up, catching at the arras for support. But his beard bristled in an exultant grin. He seemed bursting with a triumphant whoop he could scarcely restrain. Stumblingly he made his way to a gold-barred window. Under his massive hands the thin gold rods twisted and buckled. He tumbled through, pitching headfirst to the ground in the midst of a great rose bush. Oblivious of bruises and scratches, he rose, careening like a ship on a tack, and oriented himself. He was in a broad garden; all about him waved great white blossoms; a breeze shook the palm leaves, and the moon was rising.

None halted him as he scaled the wall, though thieves skulking in the shadows eyed his rich garments avidly as he lurched through the deserted streets.

By devious ways he came to his own quarters and kicked his slaves awake.

"Horses, Allah curse you!" His voice crackled with exultation.

Ali, his captain of horse, came from the shadows.

"What now, lord?"

"The desert and Syria beyond!" roared Shirkuh, dealing him a terrific buffet on the back. "Shawar has swallowed the bait! Allah, how drunk I am! The world reels--but the stars are mine!

"That bastard Giles rides to Amalric--I heard Shawar give him his instructions as I lay in feigned slumber. We have forced the vizier's hand! Now Nour ed din will not hesitate, when his spies bring him news from Jerusalem of the marching of the iron men! I fumed in the caliph's court, checkmated at every turn by Shawar, seeking a way. I went into the galleys of the corsairs to cool my brain, and Allah gave into my hands a red-haired tool! I filled the lord Giles full of 'drunken' boastings, hoping he would repeat them to Shawar, and that Shawar would take fright and send for Amalric--which would force our overly cautious sultan to act. Now follow marching and war and the glutting of ambition. But let us ride, in the devil's name!"

A few minutes later the Emir and his small retinue were clattering through the shadowy streets, past gardens that slept, a riot of color under the moon, lapping six-storied palaces that were dreams of pink marble and lapis lazuli and gold.

At a small, secluded gate, a single sentry bawled a challenge and lifted his pike.

"Dog!" Shirkuh reined his steed back on its haunches and hung over the Egyptian like a silk-clad cloud of death. "It is Shirkuh, your master's guest!"

"But my orders are to allow none to pass without written order, signed and sealed by the vizier," protested the soldier. "What shall I say to Shawar--"

"You will say naught," prophesied Shirkuh. "The dead speak not."

His scimitar gleamed and fell, and the soldier crumpled, cut through helmet and head.

"Open the gate, Ali," laughed Shirkuh. "It is Fate that rides tonight--Fate and Destiny!"

In a cloud of moon-bathed dust they whirled out of the gate and over the plain. On the rocky shoulder of Mukattam, Shirkuh drew rein to gaze back over the city, which lay like a legendary dream under the moonlight, a waste of masonry and stone and marble, splendor and squalor merging in the moonlight, magnificence blent with ruin. To the south the dome of Imam Esh Shafi'y shone beneath the moon; to the north loomed up the gigantic pile of the Castle of El Kahira, its walls carved blackly out of the white moonlight. Between them lay the remains and ruins of three capitals of Egypt; palaces with their mortar yet undried reared beside crumbling walls haunted only by bats.

Shirkuh laughed, and yelled with pure joy. His horse reared and his scimitar glittered in the air.

"A bride in cloth-of-gold! Await my coming, oh Egypt, for when I come again, it will be with spears and horsemen, to seize ye in my hands!"

Allah willed it that Amalric, king of Jerusalem, should be in Darum, personally attending to the fortifying of that small desert outpost, when the envoys from Egypt rode through the gates. A restless, alert and wary king was Amalric, bred to war and intrigue.

In the castle hall the Egyptian emissaries salaamed before him like corn bending before a wind, and Giles Hobson, grotesque in his dusty silks and white turban, louted awkwardly and presented the sealed packet of Shawar.

Amalric took it with his own hands and read it, striding absently up and down the hall, a gold-maned lion, stately, yet dangerously supple.

"What talk is this of royal bastards?" he demanded suddenly, staring at Giles, who was nervous but not embarrassed.

"A lie to cozen the paynim, your majesty," admitted the Englishman, secure in his belief that the Egyptians did not understand Norman French. "I am no illegitimate of the blood, only the honest-born younger son of a baron of the Scottish marches."

Giles did not care to be kicked into the scullery with the rest of the varlets. The nearer the purple, the richer the pickings. It seemed safe to assume that the king of Jerusalem was not over-familiar with the nobility of the Scottish border.

"I have seen many a younger son who lacked coat-armor, war-cry and wealth, but was none the less worthy," said Amalric. "You shall not go unrewarded. Messer Giles, know you the import of this message?"

"The wazeer Shawar spoke to me at some length," admitted Giles.

"The ultimate fate of Outremer hangs in the balance," said Amalric. "If the same man holds both Egypt and Syria, we are caught in the jaws of the vise. Better for Shawar to rule in Egypt, than Nour ed din. We march for Cairo. Would you accompany the host?"

"In sooth, lord," began Giles, "it has been a wearisome time--"

"True," broke in Amalric. "'Twere better that you ride on to Acre and rest from your travels. I will give you a letter for the lord commanding there. Sir Guiscard de Chastillon will give you service--"

Giles started violently.

"Nay, lord," he said hurriedly, "duty calls, and what are weary limbs and an empty belly beside duty? Let me go with you and do my devoir in Egypt!"

"Your spirit likes me well, Messer Giles," said Amalric with an approving smile. "Would that all the foreigners who come adventuring in Outremer were like you."

"And they were," quietly murmured an immobile-faced Egyptian to his mate, "not all the wine-vats of Palestine would suffice. We will tell a tale to the vizier concerning this liar."

But lies or not, in the grey dawn of a young spring day, the iron men of Outremer rode southward, with the great banner billowing over their helmeted heads, and their spear-points coldly glinting in the dim light.

There were not many; the strength of the Crusading kingdoms lay in the quality, not the quantity, of their defenders. Three hundred and seventy-five knights took the road to Egypt: nobles of Jerusalem, barons whose castles guarded the eastern marches, Knights of Saint John in their white surcoats, grim Templars, adventurers from beyond the sea, their skins yet ruddy from the cold sun of the north.

With them rode a swarm of Turcoples, Christianized Turks, wiry men on lean ponies. After the horsemen lumbered the wagons, attended by the rag-and-tag camp followers, the servants, ragamuffins and trolls that tag after any host. With shining, steel-sheathed, banner-crowned van, and rear trailing out into picturesque squalor, the army of Jerusalem moved across the land.

The dunes of the Jifar knew again the tramp of shod horses, the clink of mail. The iron men were riding again the old road of war, the road their fathers had ridden so oft before them.

Yet when at last the Nile broke the monotony of the level land, winding like a serpent feathered with green palms, they heard the strident clamor of cymbals and nakirs, and saw egret feathers moving among gay-striped pavilions that bore the colors of Islam. Shirkuh had reached the Nile before them, with seven thousand horsemen.

Mobility was always an advantage possessed by the Moslems. It took time to gather the cumbrous Frankish host, time to move it.

Riding like a man possessed, the Mountain Lion had reached Nor ed din, told his tale, and then, with scarcely a pause, had raced southward again with the troops he had held in readiness since the first Egyptian campaign. The thought of Amalric in Egypt had sufficed to stir Nour ed din to action. If the Crusaders made themselves masters of the Nile, it meant the eventual doom of Islam.

Shirkuh's was the dynamic vitality of the nomad. Across the desert by Wadi el Ghizlan he had driven his riders until even the tough Seljuks reeled in their saddles. Into the teeth of a roaring sandstorm he had plunged, fighting like a madman for each mile, each second of time. He had crossed the Nile at Atfih, and now his riders were regaining their breath, while Shirkuh watched the eastern skyline for the moving forest of lances that would mark the coming of Amalric.

The king of Jerusalem dared not attempt a crossing in the teeth of his enemies; Shirkuh was in the same case. Without pitching camp, the Franks moved northward along the river bank. The iron men rode slowly, scanning the sullen stream for a possible crossing.

The Moslems broke camp and took up the march, keeping pace with the Franks. The fellaheen, peeking from their mud huts, were amazed by the sight of two hosts moving slowly in the same direction without hostile demonstration, with the river between.

So they came at last into sight of the towers of El Kahira.

The Franks pitched their camp close to the shores of Birket el Habash, near the gardens of el Fustat, whose six-storied houses reared their flat roofs among oceans of palms and waving blossoms. Across the river Shirkuh encamped at Gizeh, in the shadow of the scornful colossus reared by cryptic monarchs forgotten before his ancestors were born.

Matters fell at a deadlock. Shirkuh, for all his impetuosity, had the patience of the Kurd, imponderable as the mountains which bred him. He was content to play a waiting game, with the broad river between him and the terrible swords of the Europeans.

Shawar waited on Amalric with pomp and parade and the clamor of nakirs, and he found the lion as wary as he was indomitable. Two hundred thousand dinars and the caliph's hand on the bargain, that was the price he demanded for Egypt. And Shawar knew he must pay. Egypt slumbered as she had slumbered for a thousand years, inert alike under the heel of Macedonian, Roman, Arab, Turk or Fatimid. The fellah toiled in his field, and scarcely knew to whom he paid his taxes. There was no land of Egypt: it was a myth, a cloak for a despot. Shawar was Egypt; Egypt was Shawar; the price of Egypt was the price of Shawar's head.

So the Frankish ambassadors went to the hall of the caliph.

Mystery ever shrouded the person of the Incarnation of Divine Reason. The spiritual center of the Shiite creed moved in a maze of mystic inscrutability, his veil of supernatural awe increasing as his political power was usurped by plotting viziers. No Frank had ever seen the caliph of Egypt.

Hugh of Caesarea and Geoffrey Fulcher, Master of the Templars, were chosen for the mission, blunt war-dogs, grim as their own swords. A group of mailed horsemen accompanied them.

They rode through the flowering gardens of el Fustat, past the chapel of Sitta Nefisa, where Dirgham had died under the hands of the mob; through winding streets which covered the ruins of el Askar and el Katai; past the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, and the Lake of the Elephant, into the teeming streets of El Mansuriya, the quarter of the Sudanese, where weird native citterns twanged in the houses, and swaggering black men, gaudy in silk and gold, stared childishly at the grim horsemen.

At the Gate Zuweyla the riders halted, and the Master of the Temple and the lord of Caesarea rode on, attended by only one man--Giles Hobson. The fat Englishman wore good leather and chain-mail, and a sword at his thigh, though the portly arch of his belly somewhat detracted from his war-like appearance. Little thought was being taken in those perilous times of royal bastards or younger sons; but Giles had won the approval of Hugh of Caesarea, who loved a good tale and a bawdy song.

At Zuweyla gate Shawar met them with pomp and pageantry and escorted them through the bazaars and the Turkish quarter where hawk-like men from beyond the Oxus stared and silently spat. For the first time, Franks in armor were riding through the streets of El Kahira.

At the gates of the Great East Palace the ambassadors gave up their swords, and followed the vizier through dim tapestry-hung corridors and gold arched doors where tongueless Sudanese stood like images of black silence, sword in hand. They crossed an open court bordered by fretted arcades supported by marble columns; their iron-clad feet rang on mosaic paving. Fountains jetted their silver sheen into the air, peacocks spread their iridescent plumage, parrots fluttered on gold threads. In broad halls jewels glittered for eyes of birds wrought of silver or gold. So they came at last to the vast audience room, with its ceiling of carved ebony and ivory. Courtiers in silks and jewels knelt facing a broad curtain heavy with gold and sewn with pearls that gleamed against its satin darkness like stars in a midnight sky.

Shawar prostrated himself thrice to the carpeted floor. The curtains were swept apart, and the wondering Franks gazed on the gold throne, where, in robes of white silk, sat al Adhid, caliph of Egypt.

They saw a slender youth, dark almost to negroid, whose hands lay limp, whose eyes seemed already shadowed by ultimate sleep. A deadly weariness clung about him, and he listened to the representations of his vizier as one who heeds a tale too often told.

But a flash of awakening came to him when Shawar suggested, with extremest delicacy, that the Franks wished his hand upon the pact. A visible shudder passed through the room. Al Adhid hesitated, then extended his gloved hand. Sir Hugh's voice boomed through the breathless hall.

"Lord, the good faith of princes is naked; troth is not clothed."

All about came a hissing intake of breath. But the caliph smiled, as at the whims of a barbarian, and stripping the glove from his hand, laid his slender fingers in the bear-like paw of the Crusader.

All this Giles Hobson observed from his discreet position in the background. All eyes were centered on the group clustered about the golden throne. From near his shoulder a soft hiss reached Giles' ear. Its feminine note brought him quickly about, forgetful of kings and caliphs. A heavy tapestry was drawn slightly aside, and in the sweet-smelling gloom, a slender white hand waved invitingly. Another scent made itself evident, a luring perfume, subtle yet unmistakable.

Giles turned silently and pulled aside the tapestry, straining his eyes in the semidarkness. There was an alcove behind the hangings, and a narrow corridor meandering away. Before him stood a figure whose vagueness did not conceal its lissomeness. A pair of eyes glowed and sparkled at him, and his head swam with the power of that diabolical perfume.

He let the tapestry fall behind him. Through the hangings the voices in the throne room came vague and muffled.

The woman spoke not; her little feet made no sound on the thickly carpeted floor over which he stumbled. She invited, yet retreated; she beckoned, yet she withheld herself. Only when, baffled, he broke into earnest profanity, she admonished him with a finger to her lips and a warning: "Sssssh!"

"Devil take you, wench!" he swore, stopping short. "I'll follow you no more. What manner of game is this, anyway? If you don't want to deal with me, why did you wave at me? Why do you beckon and then run away? I'm going back to the audience hall and may the dogs bite your--"

"Wait!" The voice was liquid sweet.

She glided close to him, laying her hands on his shoulders. What light there was in the winding tapestried corridor was behind her, outlining her supple figure through her filmy garments. Her flesh shone like dim ivory in the purple gloom.

"I could love you," she whispered.

"Well, what detains you?" he demanded uneasily.

"Not here; follow me." She glided out of his groping arms and drifted ahead of him, a lithely swaying ghost among the velvet hangings.

He followed, burning with impatience and questing not at all for the reason of the whole affair, until she came out into an octagonal chamber, almost as dimly lighted as had been the corridor. As he pushed after her, a hanging slid over the opening behind him. He gave it no heed. Where he was he neither knew nor cared. All that was important to him was the supple figure that posed shamelessly before him, veilless, naked arms uplifted and slender fingers intertwined behind her nape over which fell a mass of hair that was like black burnished foam.

He stood struck dumb with her beauty. She was like no other woman he had ever seen; the difference was not only in her dark eyes, her dusky tresses, her long kohl -tinted lashes, or the warm ivory of her roundly slender limbs. It was in every glance, each movement, each posture, that made voluptuousness an art. Here was a woman cultured in the arts of pleasure, a dream to madden any lover of the fleshpots of life. The English, French and Venetian women he had nuzzled seemed slow, stolid, frigid beside this vibrant image of sensuality. A favorite of the caliph! The implication of the realization sent the blood pounding suffocatingly through his veins. He panted for breath.

"Am I not fair?" Her breath, scented with the perfume that sweetened her body, fanned his face. The soft tendrils of her hair brushed against his cheek. He groped for her, but she eluded him with disconcerting ease. "What will you do for me?"

"Anything!" he swore ardently, and with more sincerity than he usually voiced the vow.

His hand closed on her wrist and he dragged her to him; his other arm bent about her waist, and the feel of her resilient flesh made him drunk. He pawed for her lips with his, but she bent supplely backward, twisting her head this way and that, resisting him with unexpected strength; the lithe pantherish strength of a dancing-girl. Yet even while she resisted him, she did not repulse him.

"Nay," she laughed, and her laughter was the gurgle of a silver fountain; "first there is a price!"

"Name it, for the love of the Devil!" he gasped. "Am I a frozen saint? I can not resist you forever!" He had released her wrist and was pawing at her shoulder straps.

Suddenly she ceased to struggle; throwing both arms about his thick neck, she looked into his eyes. The depths of hers, dark and mysterious, seemed to drown him; he shuddered as a wave of something akin to fear swept over him.

"You are high in the council of the Franks!" she breathed. "We know you disclosed to Shawar that you are a son of the English king. You came with Amalric's ambassadors. You know his plans. Tell what I wish to know, and I am yours! What is Amalric's next move?"

"He will build a bridge of boats and cross the Nile to attack Shirkuh by night," answered Giles without hesitation.

Instantly she laughed, with mockery and indescribable malice, struck him in the face, twisted free, sprang back, and cried out sharply. The next moment the shadows were alive with rushing figures as from the tapestries leaped naked black giants.

Giles wasted no time in futile gestures toward his empty belt. As great dusky hands fell on him, his massive fist smashed against bone, and the Negro dropped with a fractured jaw. Springing over him, Giles scudded across the room with unexpected agility. But to his dismay he saw that the doorways were hidden by the tapestries. He groped frantically among the hangings; then a brawny arm hooked throttlingly about his throat from behind, and he felt himself dragged backward and off his feet. Other hands snatched at him, woolly heads bobbed about him, white eyeballs and teeth glimmered in the semi-darkness. He lashed out savagely with his foot and caught a big black in the belly, curling him up in agony on the floor. A thumb felt for his eye and he mangled it between his teeth, bringing a whimper of pain from the owner. But a dozen pairs of hands lifted him, smiting and kicking. He heard a grating, sliding noise, felt himself swung up violently and hurled downward--a black opening in the floor rushed up to meet him. An ear-splitting yell burst from him, and then he was rushing headlong down a walled shaft, up which sounded the sucking and bubbling of racing water.

He hit with a tremendous splash and felt himself swept irresistibly onward. The well was wide at the bottom. He had fallen near one side of it, and was being carried toward the other in which, he had light enough to see as he rose blowing and snorting above the surface, another black orifice gaped. Then he was thrown with stunning force against the edge of that opening, his legs and hips were sucked through but his frantic fingers, slipping from the mossy stone lip, encountered something and clung on. Looking wildly up, he saw, framed high above him in the dim light, a cluster of woolly heads rimming the mouth of the well. Then abruptly all light was shut out as the trap was replaced, and Giles was conscious only of utter blackness and the rustle and swirl of the racing water that dragged relentlessly at him.

This, Giles knew, was the well into which were thrown foes of the caliph. He wondered how many ambitious generals, plotting viziers, rebellious nobles and importunate harim favorites had gone whirling through that black hole to come into the light of day again only floating as carrion on the bosom of the Nile. It was evident that the well had been sunk into an underground flow of water that rushed into the river, perhaps miles away.

Clinging there by his fingernails in the dank rushing blackness, Giles Hobson was so frozen with horror that it did not even occur to him to call on the various saints he ordinarily blasphemed. He merely hung on to the irregularly round, slippery object his hands had found, frantic with fear of being torn away and whirled down that black slimy tunnel, feeling his arms and fingers growing numb with the strain, and slipping gradually but steadily from their hold.

His last ounce of breath went from him in a wild cry of despair, and--miracle of miracles--it was answered. Light flooded the shaft, a light dim and grey, yet in such contrast with the former blackness that it momentarily dazzled him. Someone was shouting, but the words were unintelligible amidst the rush of the black waters. He tried to shout back, but he could only gurgle. Then, mad with fear lest the trap should shut again, he achieved an inhuman screech that almost burst his throat.

Shaking the water from his eyes and craning his head backward, he saw a human head and shoulders blocked in the open trap far above him. A rope was dangling down toward him. It swayed before his eyes, but he dared not let go long enough to seize it. In desperation, he mouthed for it, gripped it with his teeth, then let go and snatched, even as he was sucked into the black hole. His numbed fingers slipped along the rope. Tears of fear and helplessness rolled down his face. But his jaws were locked desperately on the strands, and his corded neck muscles resisted the terrific strain.

Whoever was on the other end of the rope was hauling like a team of oxen. Giles felt himself ripped bodily from the clutch of the torrent. As his feet swung clear, he saw, in the dim light, that to which he had been clinging: a human skull, wedged somehow in a crevice of the slimy rock.

He was drawn rapidly up, revolving like a pendant. His numbed hands clawed stiffly at the rope, his teeth seemed to be tearing from their sockets. His jaw muscles were knots of agony, his neck felt as if it were being racked.

Just as human endurance reached its limit, he saw the lip of the trap slip past him, and he was dumped on the floor at its brink.

He groveled in agony, unable to unlock his jaws from about the hemp. Someone was massaging the cramped muscles with skilful fingers, and at last they relaxed with a stream of blood from the tortured gums. A goblet of wine was pressed to his lips and he gulped it loudly, the liquid slopping over and spilling on his slime-smeared mail. Someone was tugging at it, as if fearing lest he injure himself by guzzling, but he clung on with both hands until the beaker was empty. Then only he released it, and with a loud gasping sigh of relief, looked up into the face of Shawar. Behind the vizier were several giant Sudani, of the same type as those who had been responsible for Giles' predicament.

"We missed you from the audience hall," said Shawar. "Sir Hugh roared treachery, until a eunuch said he saw you follow a woman slave off down a corridor. Then the lord Hugh laughed and said you were up to your old tricks, and rode away with the lord Geoffrey. But I knew the peril you ran in dallying with a woman in the caliph's palace; so I searched for you, and a slave told me he had heard a frightful yell in this chamber. I came, and entered just as a black was replacing the carpet above the trap. He sought to flee, and died without speaking." The vizier indicated a sprawling form that lay near, head lolling on half-severed neck. "How came you in this state?"

"A woman lured me here," answered Giles, "and set blackamoors upon me, threatening me with the well unless I revealed Amalric's plans."

"What did you tell her?" The vizier's eyes burned so intently on Giles that the fat man shuddered slightly and hitched himself further away from the yet open trap.

"I told them nothing! Who am I to know the king's plans, anyway? Then they dumped me into that cursed hole, though I fought like a lion and maimed a score of the rogues. Had I but had my trusty sword--"

At a nod from Shawar the trap was closed, the rug drawn over it. Giles breathed a sigh of relief. Slaves dragged the corpse away.

The vizier touched Giles' arm and led the way through a corridor concealed by the hangings.

"I will send an escort with you to the Frankish camp. There are spies of Shirkuh in this palace, and others who love him not, yet hate me. Describe me this woman--the eunuch saw only her hand."

Giles groped for adjectives, then shook his head.

"Her hair was black, her eyes moonfire, her body alabaster."

"A description that would fit a thousand women of the caliph," said the vizier. "No matter; get you gone, for the night wanes and Allah only knows what morn will bring."

The night was indeed late as Giles Hobson rode into the Frankish camp surrounded by Turkish memluks with drawn sabres. But a light burned in Amalric's pavilion, which the wary monarch preferred to the palace offered him by Shawar; and thither Giles went, confident of admittance as a teller of lusty tales who had won the king's friendship.

Amalric and his barons were bent above a map as the fat man entered, and they were too engrossed to notice his entry, or his bedraggled appearance.

"Shawar will furnish us men and boats," the king was saying; "they will fashion the bridge, and we will make the attempt by night--"

An explosive grunt escaped Giles' lips, as if he had been hit in the belly.

"What, Sir Giles the Fat!" exclaimed Amalric, looking up; "are you but now returned from your adventuring in Cairo? You are fortunate still to have head on your shoulders. Eh--what ails you, that you sweat and grow pale? Where are you going?"

"I have taken an emetic," mumbled Giles over his shoulder.

Beyond the light of the pavilion he broke into a stumbling run. A tethered horse started and snorted at him. He caught the rein, grasped the saddle peak; then, with one foot in the stirrup, he halted. Awhile he meditated; then at last, wiping cold sweat beads from his face, he returned with slow and dragging steps to the king's tent.

He entered unceremoniously and spoke forthwith: "Lord, is it your plan to throw a bridge of boats across the Nile?"

"Aye, so it is," declared Amalric.

Giles uttered a loud groan and sank down on a bench, his head in his hands. "I am too young to die!" he lamented. "Yet I must speak, though my reward be a sword in the belly. This night Shirkuh's spies trapped me into speaking like a fool. I told them the first lie that came into my head--and Saint Withold defend me, I spoke the truth unwittingly. I told them you meant to build a bridge of boats!"

A shocked silence reigned. Geoffrey Fulcher dashed down his cup in a spasm of anger. "Death to the fat fool!" he swore, rising.

"Nay!" Amalric smiled suddenly. He stroked his golden beard. "Our foe will be expecting the bridge, now. Good enough. Hark ye!"

And as he spoke, grim smiles grew on the lips of the barons, and Giles Hobson began to grin and thrust out his belly, as if his fault had been virtue, craftily devised.

All night the Saracen host had stood at arms; on the opposite bank fires blazed, reflected from the rounded walls and burnished roofs of el Fustat. Trumpets mingled with the clang of steel. The Emir Shirkuh, riding up and down the bank along which his mailed hawks were ranged, glanced toward the eastern sky, just tinged with dawn. A wind blew out of the desert.

There had been fighting along the river the day before, and all through the night drums had rumbled and trumpets blared their threat. All day Egyptians and naked Sudani had toiled to span the dusky flood with boats chained together, end to end. Thrice they had pushed toward the western bank, under the cover of their archers in the barges, only to falter and shrink back before the clouds of Turkish arrows. Once the end of the boat bridge had almost touched the shore, and the helmeted riders had spurred their horses into the water to slash at the shaven heads of the workers. Skirkuh had expected an onslaught of the knights across the frail span, but it had not come. The men in the boats had again fallen back, leaving their dead floating in the muddily churning wash.

Shirkuh decided that the Franks were lurking behind walls, saving themselves for a supreme effort, when their allies should have completed the bridge. The opposite bank was clustered with swarms of naked figures, and the Kurd expected to see them begin the futile task once more.

As dawn whitened the desert, there came a rider who rode like the wind, sword in hand, turban unbound, blood dripping from his beard.

"Woe to Islam!" he cried. "The Franks have crossed the river!"

Panic swept the Moslem camp; men jerked their steeds from the river bank, staring wildly northward. Only Shirkuh's bull-like voice kept them from flinging away their swords and bolting.

The Emir's profanity was frightful. He had been fooled and tricked. While the Egyptians held his attention with their useless labor, Amalric and the iron men had marched northward, crossed the prongs of the Delta in ships, and were now hastening vengefully southward. The Emir's spies had had neither time nor opportunity to reach him. Shawar had seen to that.

The Mountain Lion dared not await attack in this unsheltered spot. Before the sun was well up, the Turkish host was on the march; behind them the rising light shone on spear-points that gleamed in a rising cloud of dust.

This dust irked Giles Hobson, riding behind Amalric and his councilors. The fat Englishman was thirsty; dust settled greyly on his mail; gnats bit him, sweat got into his eyes, and the sun, as it rose, beat mercilessly on his basinet; so he hung it on his saddle peak and pushed back his linked coif, daring sunstroke. On either side of him leather creaked and worn mail clinked. Giles thought of the ale-pots of England, and cursed the man whose hate had driven him around the world.

And so they hunted the Mountain Lion up the valley of the Nile, until they came to el Baban, The Gates, and found the Saracen host drawn up for battle in the gut of the low sandy hills.

Word came back along the ranks, putting new fervor into the knights. The clatter of leather and steel seemed imbued with new meaning. Giles put on his helmet and rising in his stirrups, looked over the iron-clad shoulders in front of him.

To the left were the irrigated fields on the edge of which the host was riding. To the right was the desert. Ahead of them the terrain was broken by the hills. On these hills and in the shallow valleys between, bristled the banners of the Turks, and their nakirs blared. A mass of the host was drawn up in the plain between the Franks and the hills.

The Christians had halted: three hundred and seventy-five knights, plus half a dozen more who had ridden all the way from Acre and reached the host only an hour before, with their retainers. Behind them, moving with the baggage, their allies halted in straggling lines: a thousand Turcoples, and some five thousand Egyptians, whose gaudy garments outshone their courage.

"Let us ride forward and smite those on the plain," urged one of the foreign knights, newly come to the East.

Amalric scanned the closely massed ranks and shook his head. He glanced at the banners that floated among the spears on the slopes on either flank where the kettledrums clamored.

"That is the banner of Saladin in the center," he said. "Shirkuh's house troops are on yonder hill. If the center expected to stand, the Emir would be there. No, messers, I think it is their wish to lure us into a charge. We will wait their attack, under cover of the Turcoples' bows. Let them come to us; they are in a hostile land, and must push the war."

The rank and file had not heard his words. He lifted his hand, and thinking it preceded an order to charge, the forest of lances quivered and sank in rest. Amalric, realizing the mistake, rose in his stirrups to shout his command to fall back, but before he could speak, Giles' horse, restive, shouldered that of the knight next to him. This knight, one of those who had joined the host less than an hour before, turned irritably; Giles looked into a lean beaked face, seamed by a livid scar.

"Ha!" Instinctively the ogre caught at his sword.

Giles' action was also instinctive. Everything else was swept out of his mind at the sight of that dread visage which had haunted his dreams for more than a year. With a yelp he sank his spurs into his horse's belly. The beast neighed shrilly and leaped, blundering against Amalric's warhorse. That high-strung beast reared and plunged, got the bit between its teeth, broke from the ranks and thundered out across the plain.

Bewildered, seeing their king apparently charging the Saracen host single-handed, the men of the Cross gave tongue and followed him. The plain shook as the great horses stampeded across it, and the spears of the iron-clad riders crashed splinteringly against the shields of their enemies.

The movement was so sudden it almost swept the Moslems off their feet. They had not expected a charge so instantly to follow the coming up of the Christians. But the allies of the knights were struck by confusion. No orders had been given, no arrangement made for battle. The whole host was disordered by that premature onslaught. The Turcoples and Egyptians wavered uncertainly, drawing up about the baggage wagons.

The whole first rank of the Saracen center went down, and over their mangled bodies rode the knights of Jerusalem, swinging their great swords. An instant the Turkish ranks held; then they began to fall back in good order, marshaled by their commander, a slender, dark, self-contained young officer, Salah ed din, Shirkuh's nephew.

The Christians followed. Amalric, cursing his mischance, made the best of a bad bargain, and so well he plied his trade that the harried Turks cried out on Allah and turned their horses' heads from him.

Back into the gut of the hills the Saracens retired, and turning there, under cover of slope and cliff, darkened the air with their shafts. The headlong force of the knights' charge was broken in the uneven ground, but the iron men came on grimly, bending their helmeted heads to the rain.

Then on the flanks, kettledrums roared into fresh clamor. The riders of the right wing, led by Shirkuh, swept down the slopes and struck the horde which clustered loosely about the baggage train. That charge swept the unwarlike Egyptians off the field in headlong flight. The left wing began to close in to take the knights on the flank, driving before it the troops of the Turcoples. Amalric, hearing the kettledrums behind and on either side of him as well as in front, gave the order to fall back, before they were completely hemmed in.

To Giles Hobson it seemed the end of the world. He was deafened by the clang of swords and the shouts. He seemed surrounded by an ocean of surging steel and billowing dust clouds. He parried blindly and smote blindly, hardly knowing whether his blade cut flesh or empty air. Out of the defiles horsemen were moving, chanting exultantly. A cry of "Yala-l-Islam!" rose above the thunder--Saladin's war-cry, that was in later years to ring around the world. The Saracen center was coming into the battle again.

Abruptly the press slackened, broke; the plain was filled with flying figures. A strident ululation cut the din. The Turcoples' shafts had stayed the Saracens' left wing just long enough to allow the knights to retreat through the closing jaws of the vise. But Amalric, retreating slowly, was cut off with a handful of knights. The Turks swirled about him, screaming in exultation, slashing and smiting with mad abandon. In the dust and confusion the ranks of the iron men fell back, unaware of the fate of their king.

Giles Hobson, riding through the field like a man in a daze, came face to face with Guiscard de Chastillon.

"Dog!" croaked the knight. "We are doomed, but I'll send you to Hell ahead of me!"

His sword went up, but Giles leaned from his saddle and caught his arm. The fat man's eyes were bloodshot; he licked his dust-stained lips. There was blood on his sword, and his helmet was dinted.

"Your selfish hate and my cowardice has cost Amalric the field this day," Giles croaked. "There he fights for his life; let us redeem ourselves as best we may."

Some of the glare faded from de Chastillon's eyes; he twisted about, stared at the plumed heads that surged and eddied about a cluster of iron helmets; and he nodded his steel-clad head.

They rode together into the melee. Their swords hissed and crackled on mail and bone. Amalric was down, pinned under his dying horse. Around him whirled the eddy of battle, where his knights were dying under a sea of hacking blades.

Giles fell rather than jumped from his saddle, gripped the dazed king and dragged him clear. The fat Englishman's muscles cracked under the strain, a groan escaped his lips. A Seljuk leaned from the saddle, slashed at Amalric's unhelmeted head. Giles bent his head, took the blow on his own crown; his knees sagged and sparks flashed before his eyes. Guiscard de Chastillon rose in his stirrups, swinging his sword with both hands. The blade crunched through mail, gritted through bone. The Seljuk dropped, shorn through the spine. Giles braced his legs, heaved the king up, slung him over his saddle.

"Save the king!" Giles did not recognize that croak as his own voice.

Geoffrey Fulcher loomed through the crush, dealing great strokes. He seized the rein of Giles' steed; half a dozen reeling, blood-dripping knights closed about the frantic horse and its stunned burden. Nerved to desperation they hacked their way clear. The Seljuks swirled in behind them to be met by Guiscard de Chastillon's flailing blade.

The waves of wild horsemen and flying blades broke on him. Saddles were emptied and blood spurted. Giles rose from the red-splashed ground among the lashing hoofs. He ran in among the horses, stabbing at bellies and thighs. A sword stroke knocked off his helmet. His blade snapped under a Seljuk's ribs.

Guiscard's horse screamed awfully and sank to the earth. His grim rider rose, spurting blood at every joint of his armor. Feet braced wide on the blood-soaked earth, he wielded his great sword until the steel wave washed over him and he was hidden from view by waving plumes and rearing steeds.

Giles ran at a heron-feathered chief, gripped his leg with his naked hands. Blows rained on his coif, bringing fire-shot darkness, but he hung grimly on. He wrenched the Turk from his saddle, fell with him, groping for his throat. Hoofs pounded about him, a steed shouldered against him, knocking him rolling in the dust. He clambered painfully to his feet, shaking the blood and sweat from his eyes. Dead men and dead horses lay heaped in a ghastly pile about him.

A familiar voice reached his dulled ears. He saw Shirkuh sitting his white horse, gazing down at him. The Mountain Lion's beard bristled in a grin.

"You have saved Amalric," said he, indicating a group of riders in the distance, closing in with the retreating host; the Saracens were not pressing the pursuit too closely. The iron men were falling back in good order. They were defeated, not broken. The Turks were content to allow them to retire unmolested.

"You are a hero, Giles ibn Malik," said Shirkuh.

Giles sank down on a dead horse and dropped his head in his hands. The marrow of his legs seemed turned to water, and he was shaken with a desire to weep.

"I am neither a hero nor the son of a king," said Giles. "Slay me and be done with it."

"Who spoke of slaying?" demanded Shirkuh. "I have just won an empire in this battle, and I would quaff a goblet in token of it. Slay you? By Allah, I would not harm a hair of such a stout fighter and noble toper. You shall come and drink with me in celebration of a kingdom won when I ride into El Kahira in triumph."

THE END

Contents

THE LION OF TIBERIAS

By Robert E. Howard

Chapter 1

The battle in the meadowlands of the Euphrates was over, but not the slaughter. On that bloody field where the Caliph of Bagdad and his Turkish allies had broken the onrushing power of Doubeys ibn Sadaka of Hilla and the desert, the steel-clad bodies lay strewn like the drift of a storm. The great canal men called the Nile, which connected the Euphrates with the distant Tigris, was choked with the bodies of the tribesmen, and survivors were panting in flight toward the white walls of Hilla which shimmered in the distance above the placid waters of the nearer river. Behind them the mailed hawks, the Seljuks, rode down the fleeing, cutting the fugitives from their saddles. The glittering dream of the Arab emir had ended in a storm of blood and steel, and his spurs struck blood as he rode for the distant river.

Yet at one spot in the littered field the fight still swirled and eddied, where the emir's favorite son, Achmet, a slender lad of seventeen or eighteen, stood at bay with one companion. The mailed riders swooped in, struck and reined back, yelling in baffled rage before the lashing of the great sword in this man's hands. His was a figure alien and incongruous, his red mane contrasting with the black locks about him no less than his dusty gray mail contrasted with the plumed burnished headpieces and silvered hauberks of the slayers. He was tall and powerful, with a wolfish hardness of limbs and frame that his mail could not conceal. His dark, scarred face was moody, his blue eyes cold and hard as the blue steel whereof Rhineland gnomes forge swords for heroes in northern forests.

Little of softness had there been in John Norwald's life. Son of a house ruined by the Norman conquest, this descendant of feudal thanes had only memories of wattle-thatched huts and the hard life of a man-at-arms, serving for poor hire barons he hated. Born in north England, the ancient Danelagh, long settled by blue-eyed vikings, his blood was neither Saxon nor Norman, but Danish, and the grim unbreakable strength of the blue North was his. From each stroke of life that felled him, he rose fiercer and more unrelenting. He had not found existence easier in his long drift East which led him into the service of Sir William de Montserrat, seneschal of a castle on the frontier beyond Jordan.

In all his thirty years, John Norwald remembered but one kindly act, one deed of mercy; wherefore he now faced a whole host, desperate fury nerving his iron arms.

It had been Achmet's first raid, whereby his riders had trapped de Montserrat and a handful of retainers. The boy had not shrunk from the swordplay, but the savagery that butchers fallen foes was not his. Writhing in the bloody dust, stunned and half-dead, John Norwald had dimly seen the lifted scimitar thrust aside by a slender arm, and the face of the youth

bending above him, the dark eyes filled with tears of pity.

Too gentle for the age and his manner of life, Achmet had made his astounded warriors take up the wounded Frank and bring him with them. And in the weeks that passed while Norwald's wounds healed, he lay in Achmet's tent by an oasis of the Asad tribes, tended by the lad's own hakim. When he could ride again, Achmet had brought him to Hilla. Doubeys ibn Sadaka always tried to humor his son's whims, and now, though muttering pious horror in his beard, he granted Norwald his life. Nor did he regret it, for in the grim Englishman he found a fighting-man worth any three of his own hawks.

John Norwald felt no tugging of loyalty toward de Montserrat, who had fled out of the ambush leaving him in the hands of the Moslems, nor toward the race at whose hands he had had only hard knocks all his life. Among the Arabs he found an environment congenial to his moody, ferocious nature, and he plunged into the turmoil of desert feuds, forays and border wars as if he had been born under a Bedouin black felt tent instead of a Yorkshire thatch. Now, with the failure of ibn Sadaka's thrust at Bagdad and sovereignty, the Englishman found himself once more hemmed in by chanting foes, mad with the tang of blood. About him and his youthful comrade swirled the wild riders of Mosul; the mailed hawks of Wasit and Bassorah, whose lord, Zenghi Imad ed din, had that day out-maneuvered ibn Sadaka and slashed his shining host to pieces.

On foot among the bodies of their warriors, their backs to a wall of dead horses and men, Achmet and John Norwald beat back the onslaught. A heron-feathered emir reined in his Turkoman steed, yelling his war-cry, his house-troops swirling in behind him.

"Back, boy; leave him to me!" grunted the Englishman, thrusting Achmet behind him. The slashing scimitar struck blue sparks from his basinet and his great sword dashed the Seljuk dead from his saddle. Bestriding the chieftain's body, the giant Frank lashed up at the shrieking swordsmen who spurred in, leaning from their saddles to swing their blades. The curved sabers shivered on his shield and armor, and his long sword crashed through bucklers, breastplates, and helmets, cleaving flesh and splintering bones, littering corpses at his iron-sheathed feet. Panting and howling the survivors reined back.

Then a roaring voice made them glance quickly about, and they fell back as a tall, strongly built horseman rode through them and drew rein before the grim Frank and his slender companion. John Norwald for the first time stood face to face with Zenghi esh Shami, Imad ed din, governor of Wasit and warden of Basorah, whom men called the Lion of Tiberias, because of his exploits at the siege of Tiberias.

The Englishman noted the breadth of the mighty steel-clad shoulders, the grip of the powerful hands on rein and sword-hilt; the blazing magnetic blue eyes, setting off the ruthless lines of the dark face. Under the thin black lines of the mustaches the wide lips smiled, but it was the merciless grin of the hunting panther.

Zenghi spoke and there was at the back of his powerful voice a hint of mockery or gargantuan mirth that rose above wrath and slaughter.

"Who are these paladins that they stand among their prey like tigers in their den, and none is found to go against them? Is it Rustem whose heel is on the necks of my emirs--or only a renegade Nazarene? And the other, by Allah, unless I am mad, it is the cub of the desert wolf! Are you not Achmet ibn Doubeys?"

It was Achmet who answered; for Norwald maintained a grim silence, watching the Turk through slit eyes, fingers locked on his bloody hilt.

"It is so, Zenghi esh Shami," answered the youth proudly, "and this is my brother at arms, John Norwald. Bid your wolves ride on, oh prince. Many of them have fallen. More shall fall before their steel tastes our hearts."

Zenghi shrugged his mighty shoulders, in the grip of the mocking devil that lurks at the heart of all the sons of high Asia.

"Lay down your weapons, wolf-cub and Frank. I swear by the honor of my clan, no sword shall touch you."

"I trust him not," growled John Norwald. "Let him come a pace nearer and I'll take him to Hell with us."

"Nay," answered Achmet. "The prince keeps his word. Lay down your sword, my brother. We have done all men might do. My father the emir will ransom us."

He tossed down his scimitar with a boyish sigh of unashamed relief, and Norwald grudgingly laid down his broadsword.

"I had rather sheathe it in his body," he growled.

Achmet turned to the conqueror and spread his hands.

"Oh, Zenghi--" he began, when the Turk made a quick gesture, and the two prisoners found themselves seized and their hands bound behind them with thongs that cut the flesh.

"There is no need of that, prince," protested Achmet. "We have given ourselves into your hands. Bid your men loose us. We will not seek to escape."

"Be silent, cub!" snapped Zenghi. The Turk's eyes still danced with dangerous laughter, but his face was dark with passion. He reined nearer. "No sword shall touch you, young dog," he said deliberately. "Such was my word, and I keep my oaths. No blade shall come near you, yet the vultures shall pluck your bones tonight. Your dog-sire escaped me, but you shall not escape, and when men tell him of your end, he will tear his locks in anguish."

Achmet, held in the grip of the powerful soldiers, looked up, paling, but answered without a quaver of fear.

"Are you then a breaker of oaths, Turk?"

"I break no oath," answered the lord of Wasit. "A whip is not a sword."

His hand came up, gripping a terrible Turkoman scourge, to the seven rawhide thongs of which bits of lead were fastened. Leaning from his saddle as he struck, he brought those metal-weighted thongs down across the boy's face with terrible force. Blood spurted and one of Achmet's eyes was half torn from its socket. Held helpless, the boy could not evade the blows Zenghi rained upon him. But not a whimper escaped him, though his features turned to a bloody, raw, ghastly and eyeless ruin beneath the ripping strokes that shredded the flesh and splintered the bones beneath. Only at last a low animal-like moaning drooled from his mangled lips as he hung senseless and dying in the hands of his captors.

Without a cry or a word John Norwald watched, while the heart in his breast shriveled and froze and turned to ice that naught could touch or thaw or break. Something died in his soul and in its place rose an elemental spirit unquenchable as frozen fire and bitter as hoarfrost.

The deed was done. The mangled broken horror that had been Prince Achmet iby Doubeys was cast carelessly on a heap of dead, a touch of life still pulsing through the tortured limbs. On the crimson mask of his features fell the shadow of vulture wings in the sunset. Zenghi threw aside the dripping scourge and turned to the silent Frank. But when he met the burning eyes of his captive, the smile faded from the prince's lips and the taunts died unspoken. In those cold, terrible eyes the Turk read hate beyond common conception--a monstrous, burning, almost tangible thing, drawn up from the lower pits of Hell, not to be dimmed by time or suffering.

The Turk shivered as from a cold unseen wind. Then he regained his composure. "I give you life, infidel," said Zenghi, "because of my oath. You have seen something of my power. Remember it in the long dreary years when you shall regret my mercy, and howl for death. And know that as I serve you, I will serve all Christendom. I have come into Outremer and left their castles desolate; I have ridden eastward with the heads of their chiefs swinging at my saddle. I will come again, not as a raider but as a conqueror. I will sweep their hosts into the sea. Frankistan shall howl for her dead kings, and my horses shall stamp in the citadels of the infidel; for on this field I set my feet on the glittering stairs that lead to empire."

"This is my only word to you, Zenghi, dog of Tiberias," answered the Frank in a voice he did not himself recognize. "In a year, or ten years, or twenty years, I will come again to you, to pay this debt."

"Thus spake the trapped wolf to the hunter," answered Zenghi, and turning to the memluks who held Norwald, he said, "Place him among the unransomed captives. Take him to Bassorah and see that he is sold as a galley-slave. He is strong and may live for four or five years."

The sun was setting in crimson, gloomy and sinister for the fugitives who staggered toward the distant towers of Hilla that the setting sun tinted in blood. But the land was as one flooded with the scarlet glory of imperial pageantry to the Caliph who stood on a hillock, lifting his voice to Allah who had once more vindicated the dominance of his chosen viceroy, and saved the sacred City of Peace from violation.

"Verily, verily, a young lion has risen in Islam, to be as a sword and shield to the Faithful, to revive the power of Muhammad, and to confound the infidels!"

Chapter 2

Prince Zenghi was the son of a slave, which was no great handicap in that day, when the Seljuk emperors, like the Ottomans after them, ruled through slave generals and satraps. His father, Ak Sunkur, had held high posts under the sultan Melik Shah, and as a young boy Zenghi had been taken under the special guidance of that war-hawk Kerbogha of Mosul. The young eagle was not a Seljuk; his sires were Turks from beyond the Oxus, of that people which men later called Tatars. Men of this blood were rapidly becoming the dominant factor in western Asia, as the empire of the Seljuks, who had enslaved and trained them in the art of ruling, began to crumble. Emirs were stirring restlessly under the relaxing yoke of the sultans. The Seljuks were reaping the yield of the seeds of the feudal system they had sown, and among the jealous sons of Melik Shah there was none strong enough to rebuild the crumbling lines.

So far the fiefs, held by feudal vassals of the sultans, were at least nominally loyal to the royal masters, but already there was beginning the slow swirling upheaval that ultimately reared kingdoms on the ruins of the old empire. The driving impetus of one man advanced this movement more than anything else--the vital dynamic power of Zenghi esh Shami--Zenghi the Syrian, so called because of his exploits against the Crusaders in Syria. Popular legendry has passed him by, to exalt Saladin who followed and overshadowed him; yet he was the forerunner of the great Moslem heroes who were to shatter the Crusading kingdoms, and but for him the shining deeds of Saladin might never have come to pass.

In the dim and misty pageantry of phantoms that move shadow-like through those crimson years, one figure stands out clear and bold-etched--a figure on a rearing black stallion, the black silken cloak flowing from his mailed shoulders, the dripping scimitar in his hand. He is Zenghi, son of the pagan nomads, the first of a glittering line of magnificent conquerors before whom the iron men of Christendom reeled--Nur-ad-din, Saladin, Baibars, Kalawun, Bayazid--aye, and Subotai, Genghis Khan, Hulagu, Tamerlane, and Suleiman the Great.

In 1124 the fall of Tyre to the Crusaders marked the high tide of Frankish power in Asia. Thereafter the hammer-strokes of Islam fell on a waning sovereignty. At the time of the battle of the Euphrates the kingdom of Outremer extended from Edessa in the north to Ascalon in the south, a distance of some five hundred miles. Yet it was in few places more than fifty miles broad, from east to west, and walled Moslem towns were within a day's ride of Christian keeps. Such a condition could not exist forever. That it existed as long as it did was owing partly to the indomitable valor of the cross-wearers, and partly to the lack of a strong leader among the Moslems.

In Zenghi such a leader was found. When he broke ibn Sadaka he was thirty-eight years of age, and had held his fief of Wasit but a year. Thirty-six was the minimum age at which the sultans allowed a man to hold a governorship, and most notables were much older when they were so honored than was Zenghi. But the honor only whetted his ambition.

The same sun that shone mercilessly on John Norwald, stumbling along in chains on the road that led to the galley's bench, gleamed on Zenghi's gilded mail as he rode north to enter the service of the sultan Muhammad at Hamadhan. His boast that his feet were set on the stairs of fame was no idle one. All orthodox Islam vied in honoring him.

To the Franks who had felt his talons in Syria, came faint tidings of that battle beside the Nile canal, and they heard other word of his growing power. There came tidings of a dispute between sultan and Caliph, and of Zenghi turning against his former master, riding into Bagdad with the banners of Muhammad. Honors rained like stars on his turban, sang the Arab minstrels. Warden of Bagdad, governor of Irak, prince of el Jezira, Atabeg of Mosul--on up the glittering stairs of power rode Zenghi, while the Franks ignored the tidings from the East with the perverse blindness of their race--until Hell burst along their borders and the roar of the Lion shook their towers.

Outposts and castles went up in flames, and Christian throats felt the knife edge, Christian necks the yoke of slavery. Outside the walls of doomed Athalib, Baldwin, king of Jerusalem, saw his picked chivalry swept broken and flying into the desert. Again at Barin the Lion drove Baldwin and his Damascene allies headlong in flight, and when the Emperor of Byzantium himself, John Comnene, moved against the victorious Turk, he found himself chasing a desert wind that turned unexpectedly and slaughtered his stragglers, and harried his lines until life was a burden and a stone about his royal neck. John Comnene decided that his Moslem neighbors were no more to be despised than his barbaric Frankish allies, and before he sailed away from the Syrian coast he held secret parleys with Zenghi that bore crimson fruit in later years. His going left the Turk free to move against his eternal enemies, the Franks. His objective was Edessa, northernmost stronghold of the Christians, and one of the most powerful of their cities. But like a crafty swordsman he blinded his foes by feints and gestures.

Outremer reeled before his blows. The land was filled with the chanting of the riders, the twang of bows, and the whine of swords. Zenghi's hawks swept through the land and their horses hoofs spattered blood on the standards of kings. Walled castles toppled in flame, sword-hacked corpses strewed the valleys, dark hands knotted in the yellow tresses of screaming women, and the lords of the Franks cried out in wrath and pain. Up the glittering stairs of empire rode Zenghi on his black stallion, his scimitar dripping in his hand, stars jeweling his turban.

And while he swept the land like a storm, and hurled down barons to make drinking-cups of their skulls and stables of their palaces, the galley-slaves, whispering to one another in their eternal darkness where the oars clacked everlastingly and the lap of the waves was a symphony of slow madness, spoke of a red-haired giant who never spoke, and whom neither labor, nor starvation, nor the dripping lash, nor the drag of the bitter years could break.

The years passed, glittering, star-strewn, gilt-spangled years to the rider in the shining saddle, to the lord in the golden-domed palace; black, silent, bitter years in the creaking, reeking, rat-haunted darkness of the galleys.

Chapter 3

"He rides on the wind with the stars in his hair;
Like Death falls his shadow on castles and towns;
And the kings of the Caphars cry out in despair.
For the hoofs of his stallion have trampled their crowns."

Thus sang a wandering Arab minstrel in the tavern of a little outpost village which stood on the ancient--and now little-traveled--road from Antioch to Aleppo. The village was a cluster of mud huts huddling about a castle-crowned hill. The population was mongrel--Syrians, Arabs, mixed breeds with Frankish blood in their veins.

Tonight a representative group was gathered in the inn--native laborers from the fields; a lean Arab herdsman or two; French men-at-arms in worn leather and rusty mail, from the castle on the hill; a pilgrim wandered off his route to the holy places of the south; the ragged minstrel. Two figures held the attention of casual lookers-on. They sat on opposite sides of a rudely carved table, eating meat and drinking wine, and they were evidently strangers to each other, since no word passed between them, though each glanced surreptitiously at the other from time to time.

Both were tall, hard limbed and broad shouldered, but there the resemblance ended. One was clean-shaven, with a hawk-like predatory face from which keen blue eyes gleamed coldly. His burnished helmet lay on the bench beside him with the kite-shaped shield, and his mail coif was pushed back, revealing a mass of red-gold hair. His armor gleamed with gilt-work and silver chasing, and the hilt of his broadsword sparkled with jewels.

The man opposite him seemed drab by comparison, with his dusty gray chain mail and worn sword-hilt untouched by any gleam of gem or gold. His square-cut tawny mane was matched by a short beard which masked the strong lines of jaw and chin.

The minstrel finished his song with an exultant clash of the strings, and eyed his audience half in insolence, half in uneasiness.

"And thus, masters," he intoned, one eye on possible alms, the other on the door. "Zenghi, prince of Wasit, brought his memluks up the Tigris on boats to aid the sultan Muhammad who lay encamped about the walls of Bagdad. Then, when the Caliph saw the banners of Zenghi, he said, 'Lo, now is come up against me the young lion who overthrew ibn Sadaka for me; open the gates, friends, and throw yourselves on his mercy, for there is none found to stand before him.' And it was done, and the sultan gave to Zenghi all the land of el Jezira.

"Gold and power flowed through his fingers. Mosul, his capital, which he found a waste of ruins, he made to bloom as roses blossom by an oasis. Kings trembled before him but the poor rejoiced, for he shielded them from the sword. His servants looked on him as upon God. Of him it is told that he gave a slave a husk to hold, and not for a year did he ask for it. Then when he demanded it, lo, the man gave it into his hands, wrapped in a napkin, and for his diligence Zenghi gave him command of a castle. For though the Atabeg is a hard master, yet he is just to True Believers."

The knight in the gleaming mail flung the minstrel a coin.

"Well sung, pagan!" he cried in a harsh voice that sounded the Norman-French words strangely. "Know you the song of the sack of Edessa?"

"Aye, my lord," smirked the minstrel, "and with the favor of your lordships I will essay it."

"Your head shall roll on the floor first," spoke the other knight suddenly in a voice deep and somber with menace. "It is enough that you praise the dog Zenghi in our teeth. No man sings of his butcheries at Edessa, beneath a Christian roof in my presence."

The minstrel blenched and gave back, for the cold gray eyes of the Frank were grim. The knight in the ornate mail looked at the speaker curiously, no resentment in his reckless dancing eyes.

"You speak as one to whom the subject is a sore one, friend," said he.

The other fixed his somber stare on his questioner, but made no reply save a slight shrug of his mighty mailed shoulders as he continued his meal.

"Come," persisted the stranger, "I meant no offense. I am newly come to these parts--I am Sir Roger d'Ibelin, vassal to the king of Jerusalem. I have fought Zenghi in the south, when Baldwin and Anar of Damascus made alliance against him, and I only wished to hear the details of the taking of Edessa. By God, there were few Christians who escaped to bear the tale."

"I crave pardon for my seeming discourtesy," returned the other. "I am Miles du Courcey, in the service of the prince of Antioch. I was in Edessa when it fell.

"Zenghi came up from Mosul and laid waste the Diyar Bekr, taking town after town from the Seljuks. Count Joscelin de Courtenay was dead, and the rule was in the hands of that sluggard, Joscelin II. In the late fall of the year Zenghi laid siege to Amid, and the count bestirred himself--but only to march away to Turbessel with all his household.

"We were left at Edessa with the town in charge of fat Armenian merchants who gripped their moneybags and trembled in fear of Zenghi, unable to overcome their swinish avarice enough to pay the mongrel mercenaries Joscelin had left to defend the city.

"Well, as anyone might know, Zenghi left Amid and marched against us as soon as word reached him that the poor fool Joscelin had departed. He reared his siege engines over against the walls, and day and night hurled assaults against the gates and towers, which had never fallen had we had the proper force to man them.

"But to give them their due, our wretched mercenaries did well. There was no rest or ease for any of us; day and night the ballistas creaked, stones and beams crashed against the towers, arrows blinded the sky in their whistling clouds, and Zenghi's chanting devils swarmed up the walls. We beat them back until our swords were broken, our mail hung in bloody tatters, and our arms were dead with weariness. For a month we kept Zenghi at bay, waiting for Count Joscelin, but he never came.

"It was on the morning of December 23rd that the rams and engines made a great breach in the outer wall, and the Moslems came through like a river bursting through a dam. The defenders died like flies along the broken ramparts, but human power could not stem that tide. The memluks rode into the streets and the battle became a massacre. The Turkish sword knew no mercy. Priests died at their altars, women in their courtyards, children at their play. Bodies choked the streets, the gutters ran crimson, and through it all rode Zenghi on his black stallion like a phantom of Death."

"Yet you escaped?"

The cold gray eyes became more somber.

"I had a small band of men-at-arms. When I was dashed senseless from my saddle by a Turkish mace, they took me up and rode for the western gate. Most of them died in the winding streets, but the survivors brought me to safety. When I recovered my senses the city lay far behind me.

"But I rode back." The speaker seemed to have forgotten his audience. His eyes were distant, withdrawn; his bearded chin rested on his mailed fist; he seemed to be speaking to himself. "Aye, I had ridden into the teeth of Hell itself. But I met a servant, fallen death-stricken among the straggling fugitives, and ere he died he told me that she whom I sought was dead--struck down by a memluk's scimitar."

Shaking his iron-clad shoulders he roused himself as from a bitter revelry. His eyes grew cold and hard again; the harsh timbre re-entered his voice.

"Two years have seen a great change in Edessa I hear. Zenghi rebuilt the walls and has made it one of his strongest holds. Our hold on the land is crumbling and tearing away. With a little aid, Zenghi will surge over Outremer and obliterate all vestiges of Christendom."

"That aid may come from the north," muttered a bearded man-at-arms. "I was in the train of the barons who marched with John Comnene when Zenghi outmaneuvered him. The emperor has no love for us."

"Bah! He is at least a Christian," laughed the man who called himself d'Ibelin, running his restless fingers through his clustering golden locks.

Du Courcey's cold eyes narrowed suddenly as they rested on a heavy golden ring of curious design on the other's finger, but he said nothing.

Heedless of the intensity of the Norman's stare, d'Ibelin rose and tossed a coin on the table to pay his reckoning. With a careless word of farewell to the idlers he rose and strode out of the inn with a clanking of armor. The men inside heard him shouting impatiently for his horse. And Sir Miles du Courcey rose, took up shield and helmet, and followed.

The man known as d'Ibelin had covered perhaps a half-mile, and the castle on the hill was but a faint bulk behind him, gemmed by a few points of light, when a drum of hoofs made him wheel with a guttural oath that was not French. In the dim starlight he made out the form of his recent inn companion, and he laid hand on his jeweled hilt. Du Courcey drew up beside him and spoke to the grimly silent figure.

"Antioch lies the other way, good sir. Perhaps you have taken the wrong road by mischance. Three hours' ride in this direction will bring you into Saracen territory."

"Friend," retorted the other, "I have not asked your advice concerning my road. Whether I go east or west is scarcely your affair."

"As vassal to the prince of Antioch it is my affair to inquire into suspicious actions within his domain. When I see a man traveling under false pretenses, with a Saracen ring on his finger, riding by night toward the border, it seems suspicious enough for me to make inquiries."

"I can explain my actions if I see fit," bruskly answered d'Ibelin, "but these insulting accusations I will answer at the sword's point. What mean you by false pretensions?"

"You are not Roger d'Ibelin. You are not even a Frenchman."

"No?" a sneer rasped in the other's voice as he slipped his sword from its sheath.

"No. I have been to Constantinople, and seen the northern mercenaries who serve the Greek emperor. I can not forget your hawk face. You are John Comnene's spy--Wulfgar Edric's son, a captain in the Varangian Guard."

A wild beast snarl burst from the masquerader's lips and his horse screamed and leaped convulsively as he struck in the spurs, throwing all his frame behind his sword arm as the beast plunged. But du Courcey was too seasoned a fighter to be caught so easily. With a wrench of his rein he brought his steed round, rearing. The Varangian's frantic horse plunged past, and the whistling sword struck fire from the Norman's lifted shield. With a furious yell the fierce Norman wheeled again to the assault, and the horses reared together while the swords of their riders hissed, circled in flashing arcs, and fell with ringing clash on mail-links or shield.

The men fought in grim silence, save for the panting of straining effort, but the clangor of their swords awoke the still night and sparks flew as from a blacksmith's anvil. Then with a deafening crash a broadsword shattered a helmet and splintered the skull within. There followed a loud clash of armor as the loser fell heavily from his saddle. A riderless horse galloped away, and the conqueror, shaking the sweat from his eyes, dismounted and bent above the motionless steel-clad figure.

Chapter 4

On the road that leads south from Edessa to Rakka, the Moslem host lay encamped, the lines of gay-colored pavilions spread out in the plains. It was a leisurely march, with wagons, luxurious equipment, and whole households with women and slaves. After two years in Edessa the Atabeg of Mosul was returning to his capital by the way of Rakka. Fires glimmered in the gathering dusk where the first stars were peeping; lutes twanged and voices were lifted in song and laughter about the cooking pots.

Before Zenghi, playing at chess with his friend and chronicler, the Arab Ousama of Sheyzar, came the eunuch Yaruktash, who salaamed low and in his squeaky voice intoned, "Oh, Lion of Islam, an emir of the infidels desires audience with thee--the captain of the Greeks who is called Wulfgar Edric's son. The chief Il-Ghazi and his memluks came upon him, riding alone, and would have slain him but he threw up his arm and on his hand they saw the ring thou gavest the emperor as a secret sign for his messengers."

Zenghi tugged his gray-shot black beard and grinned, well pleased.

"Let him be brought before me." The slave bowed and withdrew.

To Ousama, Zenghi said, "Allah, what dogs are these Christians, who betray and cut one another's throats for the promise of gold or land!"

"Is it well to trust such a man?" queried Ousama. "If he will betray his kind, he will surely betray you if he may."

"May I eat pork if I trust him," retorted Zenghi, moving a chessman with a jeweled finger. "As I move this pawn I will move the dog-emperor of the Greeks. With his aid I will crack the kings of Outremer like nutshells. I have promised him their seaports, and he will keep his promises until he thinks his prizes are in his hands. Ha! Not towns but the sword-edge I will give him. What we take together shall be mine, nor will that suffice me. By Allah, not Mesopotamia, nor Syria, nor all Asia Minor is enough! I will cross the Hellespont! I will ride my stallion through the palaces on the Golden Horn! Frankistan herself shall tremble before me!"

The impact of his voice was like that of a harsh-throated trumpet, almost stunning the hearers with its dynamic intensity. His eyes blazed, his fingers knotted like iron on the chessboard.

"You are old, Zenghi," warned the cautious Arab. "You have done much. Is there no limit to your ambitions?"

"Aye!" laughed the Turk. "The horn of the moon and the points of the stars! Old? Eleven years older than thyself, and younger in spirit than thou wert ever. My thews are steel, my heart is fire, my wits keener even than on the day I broke ibn Sadaka beside the Nile and set my feet on the shining stairs of glory! Peace, here comes the Frank."

A small boy of about eight years of age, sitting cross-legged on a cushion near the edge of the dais whereon lay Zenghi's divan, had been staring up in rapt adoration. His fine brown eyes sparkled as Zenghi spoke of his ambition, and his small frame quivered with excitement, as if his soul had taken fire from the Turk's wild words. Now he looked at the entrance of the pavilion with the others, as the memluks entered with the visitor between them, his scabbard empty. They had taken his weapons outside the royal tent.

The memluks fell back and ranged themselves on either side of the dais, leaving the Frank in an open space before their master. Zenghi's keen eyes swept over the tall form in its glittering gold-worked mail, took in the clean-shaven face with its cold eyes, and rested on the Koran-inscribed ring on the man's finger.

"My master, the emperor of Byzantium," said the Frank in Turki, "sends thee greeting, oh Zenghi, Lion of Islam."

As he spoke he took in the details of the impressive figure, clad in steel, silk and gold, before him; the strong dark face, the powerful frame which, despite the years, betokened steel-spring muscles and unquenchable vitality; above all the Atabeg's eyes, gleaming with unperishable youth and innate fierceness.

"And what said thy master, oh Wulfgar?" asked the Turk.

"He sends thee this letter," answered the Frank, drawing forth a packet and proffering it to Yaruktash, who in turn, and on his knees, delivered it to Zenghi. The Atabeg perused the parchment, signed in the Emperor's unmistakable hand and sealed with the royal Byzantine seal. Zenghi never dealt with underlings, but always with the highest power of friends or foes.

"The seals have been broken," said the Turk, fixing his piercing eyes on the inscrutable countenance of the Frank. "Thou hast read?"

"Aye. I was pursued by men of the prince of Antioch, and fearing lest I be seized and searched, I opened the missive and read it, so that if I were forced to destroy it lest it fall into enemy hands, I could repeat the message to thee by word of mouth."

"Let me hear, then, if thy memory be equal to thy discretion," commanded the Atabeg.

"As thou wilt. My master says to thee, 'Concerning that which hath passed between us, I must have better proof of thy good faith. Wherefore do thou send me by this messenger, who, though unknown to thee, is a man to be trusted, full details of thy desires and good proof of the aid thou hast promised us in the proposed movement against Antioch. Before I put to sea I must know that thou art ready to move by land, and there must be binding oaths between us.' And the missive is signed with the emperor's own hand."

The Turk nodded; a mirthful devil danced in his blue eyes.

"They are his very words. Blessed is the monarch who boasts such a vassal. Sit ye upon that heap of cushions; meat and drink shall be brought to you."

Calling Yaruktash, Zenghi whispered in his ear. The eunuch started, stared, and then salaamed and hastened from the pavilion. Slaves brought food and the forbidden wine in golden vessels, and the Frank broke his fast with unfeigned relish. Zenghi watched him inscrutably and the glittering memluks stood like statues of burnished steel.

"You came first to Edessa?" asked the Atabeg.

"Nay. When I left my ship at Antioch I set forth for Edessa, but I had scarce crossed the border when a band of wandering Arabs, recognizing your ring, told me you were on the march for Rakka, thence to Mosul. So I turned aside and rode to cut your line of march, and my way being made clear for me by virtue of the ring which all your subjects know, I was at last met by the chief Il-Ghazi who escorted me thither."

Zenghi nodded his leonine head slowly.

"Mosul calls me. I go back to my capital to gather my hawks, to brace my lines. When I return I will sweep the Franks into the sea with the aid of--thy master.

"But I forget the courtesy due a guest. This is the prince Ousama of Sheyzar, and this child is the son of my friend Nejm-ed-din, who saved my army and my life when I fled from Karaja the Cup-bearer--one of the few foes who ever saw my back. His father dwells at Baalbekk, which I gave him to rule, but I have taken Yusef with me to look on Mosul. Verily, he is more to me than my own sons. I have named him Salah-ed-din, and he shall be a thorn in the flesh of Christendom."

At this instant Yaruktash entered and whispered in Zenghi's ear, and the Atabeg nodded.

As the eunuch withdrew, Zenghi turned to the Frank. The Turk's manner had changed subtly. His lids drooped over his glittering eyes and a faint hint of mockery curled his bearded lips.

"I would show you one whose countenance you know of old," said he.

The Frank looked up in surprize.

"Have I a friend in the hosts of Mosul?"

"You shall see!" Zenghi clapped his hands, and Yaruktash, appearing at the door of the pavilion grasping a slender white wrist, dragged the owner into view and cast her from him so that she fell to the carpet almost at the Frank's feet. With a terrible cry he started up, his face deathly.

"Ellen! My God! Alive!"

"Miles!" she echoed his cry, struggling to her knees. In a mist of stupefaction he saw her white arms outstretched, her pale face framed in the golden hair which fell over the white shoulders the scanty harim garb left bare. Forgetting all else he fell to his knees beside her, gathering her into his arms.

"Ellen! Ellen de Tremont! I had scoured the world for you and hacked a path through the legions of Hell itself--but they said you were dead. Musa, before he died at my feet, swore he saw you lying in your blood among the corpses of your servants in your courtyard."

"Would God it had been so!" she sobbed, her golden head against his steel-clad breast. "But when they cut down my servants I fell among the bodies in a swoon, and their blood stained my garments; so men thought me dead. It was Zenghi himself who found me alive, and took me--" She hid her face in her hands.

"And so, Sir Miles du Courcey," broke in the sardonic voice of the Turk, "you have found a friend among the Mosuli! Fool! My senses are keener than a whetted sword. Think you I did not know you, despite your clean-shaven face? I saw you too often on the ramparts of Edessa, hewing down my memluks. I knew you as soon as you entered. What have you done with the real messenger?"

Grimly Miles disengaged himself from the girl's clinging arms and rose, facing the Atabeg. Zenghi likewise rose, quick and lithe as a great panther, and drew his scimitar, while from all sides the heron-feathered memluks began to edge in silently. Miles' hand fell away from his empty scabbard and his eyes rested for an instant on something close to his feet--a curved knife, used for carving fruit, and lying there forgotten, half-hidden under a cushion.

"Wulfgar Edric's son lies dead among the trees on the Antioch road," said Miles grimly. "I shaved off my beard and took his armor and the ring the dog bore."

"The better to spy on me," quoth Zenghi.

"Aye." There was no fear in Miles du Courcey. "I wished to learn the details of the plot you hatched with John Comnene, and to obtain proofs of his treachery and your ambitions to show to the lords of Outremer."

"I deduced as much," smiled Zenghi. "I knew you, as I said. But I wished you to betray yourself fully; hence the girl, who has spoken your name with weeping many times in the years of her captivity."

"It was an unworthy gesture and one in keeping with your character," said Miles somberly. "Yet I thank you for allowing me to see her once more, and to know that she is alive whom I thought long dead."

"I have done her great honor," answered Zenghi laughing. "She has been in my harim for two years."

Miles' grim eyes only grew more somber, but the great veins swelled almost to bursting along his temples. At his feet the girl covered her face with her white hands and wept silently. The boy on the cushion looked about uncertainly, not understanding. Ousama's fine eyes were touched with pity. But Zenghi grinned broadly. Such scenes were like wine to the Turk, shaking inwardly with the gargantuan laughter of his breed.

"You shall bless me for my bounty, Sir Miles," said Zenghi. "For my kingly generosity you shall give praise. Lo, the girl is yours! When I tear you between four wild horses tomorrow, she shall accompany you to Hell on a pointed stake--ha!"

Like a striking cobra Miles du Courcey had moved. Snatching the knife from beneath the cushion he leaped--not at the guarded Atabeg on the divan, but at the child on the edge of the dais. Before any could stop him, he caught up the boy Saladin with one hand, and with the other pressed the curved edge to his throat.

"Back, dogs!" His voice cracked with mad triumph. "Back, or I send this heathen spawn to Hell!"

Zenghi, his face livid, yelled a frenzied order, and the memluks fell back. Then while the Atabeg stood trembling and uncertain, at a loss for the first and only time of his whole wild career, du Courcey backed toward the door, holding his captive, who neither cried out nor struggled. The contemplative brown eyes showed no fear, only a fatalistic resignation of a philosophy beyond the owner's years.

"To me, Ellen!" snapped the Norman, his somber despair changed to dynamic action. "Out of the door behind me--back dogs, I say!"

Out of the pavilion he backed, and the memluks who ran up, sword in hand, stopped short as they saw the imminent peril of their lord's favorite. Du Courcey knew that the success of his action depended on speed. The surprize and boldness of his move had taken Zenghi off guard, that was all. A group of horses stood near by, saddled and bridled, always ready for the Atabeg's whim, and du Courcey reached them with a single long stride, the grooms falling back from his threat.

"Into a saddle, Ellen!" he snapped, and the girl, who had followed him like one in a daze, reacting mechanically to his orders, swung herself up on the nearest mount. Quickly he followed suit and cut the tethers that held their mounts. A bellow from inside the tent told him Zenghi's momentarily scattered wits were working again, and he dropped the child unhurt into the sand. His usefulness was past, as a hostage. Zenghi, taken by surprize, had instinctively followed the promptings of his unusual affection for the child, but Miles knew that with his ruthless reason dominating him again, the Atabeg would not allow even that affection to stand in the way of their recapture.

The Norman wheeled away, drawing Ellen's steed with him, trying to shield her with his own body from the arrows which were already whistling about them. Shoulder to shoulder they raced across the wide open space in front of the royal pavilion, burst through a ring of fires, floundered for an instant among tent-pegs, cords and scurrying yelling figures, then struck the open desert flying and heard the clamor die out behind them.

It was dark, clouds flying across the sky and drowning the stars. With the clatter of hoofs behind them, Miles reined aside from the road that led westward, and turned into the trackless desert. Behind them the hoof-beats faded westward. The pursuers had taken the old caravan road, supposing the fugitives to be ahead of them.

"What now, Miles?" Ellen was riding alongside, and clinging to his iron-sheathed arm as if she feared he might fade suddenly from her sight.

"If we ride straight for the border they will have us before dawn," he answered. "But I know this land as well as they--I have ridden all over it of old in foray and war with the counts of Edessa; so I know that Jabar Kal'at lies within our reach to the southwest. The commander of Jabar is a nephew of Muin-ed-din Anar, who is the real ruler of Damascus, and who, as perhaps you know, has made a pact with the Christians against Zenghi, his old rival. If we can reach Jabar, the commander will give us shelter and food, and fresh horses and an escort to the border."

The girl bowed her head in acquiescence. She was still like one dazed. The light of hope burned too feebly in her soul to sting her with new pangs. Perhaps in her captivity she had absorbed some of the fatalism of her masters. Miles looked at her, drooping in the saddle, humble and silent, and thought of the picture he retained of a saucy, laughing beauty, vibrant with vitality and mirth. And he cursed Zenghi and his works with sick fury. So through the night they rode, the broken woman and the embittered man, handiworks of the Lion who dealt in swords and souls and human hearts, and whose victims, living and dead, filled the land like a blight of sorrow, agony and despair.

All night they pressed forward as fast as they dared, listening for sounds that would tell them the pursuers had found their trail, and in the dawn, which lit the helmets of swift-following horsemen, they saw the towers of Jabar rising above the mirroring waters of the Euphrates. It was a strong keep, guarded with a moat that encircled it, connecting with the river at either end. At their hail the commander of the castle appeared on the wall, and a few words sufficed to cause the drawbridge to be lowered. It was not a moment too soon. As they clattered across the bridge, the drum of hoofs was in their ears, and as they passed through the gates, arrows fell in a shower about them.

The leader of the pursuers reined his rearing steed and called arrogantly to the commander on the tower. "Oh man, give up these fugitives, lest thy blood quench the embers of thy keep!"

"Am I then a dog that you speak to me thus?" queried the Seljuk, clutching his beard in passion. "Begone, or my archers will feather thy carcass with fifty shafts."

For answer the memluk laughed jeeringly and pointed to the desert. The commander paled. Far away the sun glinted on a moving ocean of steel. His practiced eye told him that a whole army was on the march.

"Zenghi has turned from his march to hunt down a pair of fleeing jackals," called the memluk mockingly. "Great honor he has done them, marching hard on their spoor all night. Send them out, oh fool, and my master will ride on in peace."

"Let it be as Allah wills," said the Seljuk, recovering his poise. "But the friends of my uncle have thrown themselves into my hands, and may shame rest on me and mine if I give them to the butcher."

Nor did he alter his resolution when Zenghi himself, his face dark with passion as the cloak that flowed from his steel-clad shoulders, sat his stallion beneath the towers and called: "Oh man, by receiving mine enemy thou hast forfeited thy castle and thy life. Yet I will be merciful. Send out those who fled and I will allow thee to march out unharmed with thy women and retainers. Persist in this madness and I will burn thee like a rat in thy castle."

"Let it be as Allah wills," repeated the Seljuk philosophically, and in an undertone spoke quietly to a crouching archer, "Drive quickly a shaft through yon dog."

The arrow glanced harmlessly from Zenghils breastplate and the Atabeg galloped out of range with a shout of mocking laughter. Now began the siege of Jabar Kal'at, unsung and unglorified, yet in the course of which the dice of Fate were cast.

Zenghi's riders laid waste the surrounding countryside and drew a cordon about the castle through which no courier could steal to ride for aid. While the emir of Damascus and the lords of Outremer remained in ignorance of what was taking place beyond the Euphrates, their ally waged his unequal battle.

By nightfall the wagons and siege engines came up, and Zenghi set to his task with the skill of long practice. The Turkish sappers dammed up the moat at the upper end, despite the arrows of the defenders, and filled up the drained ditch with earth and stone. Under cover of darkness they sank mines beneath the towers. Zenghi's ballistas creaked and crashed and huge rocks knocked men off the walls like tenpins or smashed through the roof of the towers. His rams gnawed and pounded at the walls, his archers plied the turrets with their arrows everlastingly, and on scaling-ladders and storming-towers his memluks moved unceasingly to the onset. Food waned in the castle's larders; the heaps of dead grew larger, the rooms became full of wounded men, groaning and writhing.

But the Seljuk commander did not falter on the path his feet had taken. He knew that he could not now buy safety from Zenghi, even by giving up his guests; to his credit, he never even considered giving them up. Du Courcey knew this, and though no word of the matter was spoken between them, the commander had evidence of the Norman's fierce gratitude. Miles showed his appreciation in actions, not words--in the fighting on the walls, in the slaughter in the gates, in the long night-watches on the towers; with whirring sword-strokes that clove bucklers and peaked helmets, that cleft spines and severed necks and limbs and shattered skulls; by the casting down of scaling-ladders when the clinging Turks howled as they crashed to their death, and their comrades cried out at the terrible strength in the Frank's naked hands. But the rams crunched, the arrows sang, the steel tides surged on again and again, and the haggard defenders dropped one by one until only a skeleton force held the crumbling walls of Jabar Kal'at.

Chapter 5

In his pavilion little more than a bowshot from the beleaguered walls, Zenghi played chess with Ousama. The madness of the day had given way to the brooding silence of night, broken only by the distant cries of wounded men in delirium.

"Men are my pawns, friend," said the Atabeg. "I turn adversity into triumph. I had long sought an excuse to attack Jabar Kal'at, which will make a strong outpost against the Franks once I have taken it and repaired the dents I have made, and filled it with my memluks. I knew my captives would ride hither; that is why I broke camp and took up the march before my scouts found their tracks. It was their logical refuge. I will have the castle and the Franks, which last is most vital. Were the Caphars to learn now of my intrigue with the emperor, my plans might well come to naught. But they will not know until I strike. Du Courcey will never bear news to them. If he does not fall with the castle, I will tear him between wild horses as I promised, and the infidel girl shall watch, sitting on a pointed stake."

"Is there no mercy in your soul, Zenghi?" protested the Arab.

"Has life shown mercy to me save what I wrung forth by the sword?" exclaimed Zenghi, his eyes blazing in a momentary upheaval of his passionate spirit. "A man must smite or be smitten--slay or be slain. Men are wolves, and I am but the strongest wolf of the pack. Because they fear me, men crawl and kiss my sandals. Fear is the only emotion by which they may be touched."

"You are a pagan at heart, Zenghi," sighed Ousama.

"It may be," answered the Turk with a shrug of his shoulders. "Had I been born beyond the Oxus and bowed to yellow Erlik as did my grandsire, I had been no less Zenghi the Lion. I have spilled rivers of gore for the glory of Allah, but I have never asked mercy or favor of Him. What care the gods if a man lives or dies? Let me live deep, let me know the sting of wine in my palate, the wind in my face, the glitter of royal pageantry, the bright madness of slaughter--let me burn and sting and tingle with the madness of life and living, and I quest not whether Muhammad's paradise, or Erlik's frozen hell, or the blackness of empty-oblivion lies beyond."

As if to give point to his words, he poured himself a goblet of wine and looked interrogatively at Ousama. The Arab, who had shuddered at Zenghi's blasphemous words, drew back in pious horror. The Atabeg emptied the goblet, smacking his lips loudly in relish, Tatar-fashion.

"I think Jabar Kal'at will fall tomorrow," he said. "Who has stood against me? Count them, Ousama--there was ibn Sadaka, and the Caliph, and the Seljuk Timurtash, and the sultan Dawud, and the king of Jerusalem, and the count of Edessa. Man after man, city after city, army after army, I broke them and brushed them from my path."

"You have waded through a sea of blood," said Ousama. "You have filled the slave-markets with Frankish girls, and the deserts with the bones of Frankish warriors. Nor have you spared your rivals among the Moslems."

"They stood in the way of my destiny," laughed the Turk, "and that destiny is to be sultan of Asia! As I will be. I have welded the swords of Irak, el Jezira, Syria and Roum, into a single blade. Now with the aid of the Greeks, all Hell can not save the Nazarenes. Slaughter? Men have seen naught; wait until I ride into Antioch and Jerusalem, sword in hand!"

"Your heart is steel," said the Arab. "Yet I have seen one touch of tenderness in you--your affection for Nejm-ed-din's son, Yusef. Is there a like touch of repentance in you? Of all your deeds, is there none you regret?"

Zenghi played with a pawn in silence, and his face darkened.

"Aye," he said slowly. "It was long ago, when I broke ibn Sadaka beside the lower reaches of this very river. He had a son, Achmet, a girl-faced boy. I beat him to death with my riding-scourge. It is the one deed I could wish undone. Sometimes I dream of it."

Then with an abrupt "Enough!" he thrust aside the board, scattering the chessmen. "I would sleep," said he, and throwing himself on his cushion-heaped divan, he was instantly locked in slumber. Ousama went quietly from the tent, passing between the four giant memluks in gilded mail who stood with wide-tipped scimitars at the pavilion door.

In the castle of Jabar, the Seljuk commander held counsel with Sir Miles du Courcey. "My brother, for us the end of the road has come. The walls are crumbling, the towers leaning to their fall. Shall we not fire the castle, cut the throats of our women and children, and go forth to die like men in the dawn?"

Sir Miles shook his head. "Let us hold the walls for one more day. In a dream I saw the banners of Damascus and of Antioch marching to our aid."

He lied in a desperate attempt to bolster up the fatalistic Seljuk. Each followed the instinct of his kind, and Miles was to cling with teeth and nails to the last vestige of life until the bitter end. The Seljuk bowed his head.

"If Allah wills, we will hold the walls for another day."

Miles thought of Ellen, into whose manner something of the old vibrant spirit was beginning to steal faintly again, and in the blackness of his despair no light gleamed from earth or heaven. The finding of her had stung to life a heart long frozen; now in death he must lose her again. With the taste of bitter ashes in his mouth he bent his shoulders anew to the burden of life.

In his tent Zenghi moved restlessly. Alert as a panther, even in sleep, his instinct told him that someone was moving stealthily near him. He woke and sat up glaring. The fat eunuch Yaruktash halted suddenly, the wine jug halfway to his lips. He had thought Zenghi lay helplessly drunk when he stole into the tent to filch the liquor he loved. Zenghi snarled like a wolf, his familiar devil rising in his brain.

"Dog! Am I a fat merchant that you steal into my tent to guzzle my wine? Begone! Tomorrow I will see to you!"

Cold sweat beaded Yaruktash's sleek hide as he fled from the royal pavilion. His fat flesh quivered with agonized anticipation of the sharp stake which would undoubtedly be his portion. In a day of cruel masters, Zenghi's name was a byword of horror among slaves and servitors.

One of the memluks outside the tent caught Yaruktash's arm and growled, "Why flee you, gelding?"

A great flare of light rose in the eunuch's brain, so that he gasped at its grandeur and audacity. Why remain here to be impaled, when the whole desert was open before him, and here were men who would protect him in his flight?

"Our lord discovered me drinking his wine," he gasped. "He threatens me with torture and death."

The memluks laughed appreciatively, their crude humor touched by the eunuch's fright. Then they started convulsively as Yaruktash added, "You too are doomed. I heard him curse you for not keeping better watch, and allowing his slaves to steal his wine."

The fact that they had never been told to bar the eunuch from the royal pavilion meant nothing to the memluks, their wits frozen with sudden fear. They stood dumbly, incapable of coherent thought, their minds like empty jugs ready to be filled with the eunuch's guile. A few whispered words and they slunk away like shadows on Yaruktash's heels, leaving the pavilion unguarded.

The night waned. Midnight hovered and was gone. The moon sank below the desert hills in a welter of blood. From dreams of imperial pageantry Zenghi again awoke, to stare bewilderedly about the dim-lit pavilion. Without, all was silence that seemed suddenly tense and sinister. The prince lay in the midst of ten thousand armed men; yet he felt suddenly apart and alone, as if he were the last man left alive on a dead world. Then he saw that he was not alone. Looking somberly down on him stood a strange and alien figure. It was a man, whose rags did not hide his gaunt limbs, at which Zenghi stared appalled. They were gnarled like the twisted branches of ancient oaks, knotted with masses of muscle and thews, each of which stood out distinct, like iron cables. There was no soft flesh to lend symmetry or to mask the raw savagery of sheer power. Only years of incredible labor could have produced this terrible monument of muscular over-development. White hair hung about the great shoulders, a white beard fell upon the mighty breast. His terrible arms were folded, and he stood motionless as a statue looking down upon the stupefied Turk. His features were gaunt and deep-lined, as if cut by some mad artist's chisel from bitter, frozen rock.

"Avaunt!" gasped Zenghi, momentarily a pagan of the steppes. "Spirit of evil--ghost of the desert--demon of the hills--I fear you not!"

"Well may you speak of ghosts, Turk!" The deep hollow voice woke dim memories in Zenghi's brain. "I am the ghost of a man dead twenty years, come up from darkness deeper than the darkness of Hell. Have you forgotten my promise, Prince Zenghi?"

"Who are you?" demanded the Turk.

"I am John Norwald."

"The Frank who rode with ibn Sadaka? Impossible!" ejaculated the Atabeg. "Twenty-three years ago I doomed him to the rower's bench. What galley-slave could live so long?"

"I lived," retorted the other. "Where others died like flies, I lived. The lash that scarred my back in a thousand overlying patterns could not kill me, nor starvation, nor storm, nor pestilence, nor battle. The years have been long, Zenghi esh Shami, and the darkness deep and full of mocking voices and haunting faces. Look at my hair, Zenghi--white as hoarfrost, though I am eight years younger than yourself. Look at these monstrous talons that were hands, these knotted limbs--they have driven the weighted oars for many a thousand leagues through storm and calm. Yet I lived, Zenghi, even when my flesh cried out to end the long agony. When I fainted on the oar, it was not ripping lash that roused me to life anew, but the hate that would not let me die. That hate has kept the soul in my tortured body for twenty-three years, dog of Tiberias. In the galleys I lost my youth, my hope, my manhood, my soul, my faith and my God. But my hate burned on, a flame that nothing could quench.

"Twenty years at the oars, Zenghi! Three years ago the galley in which I then toiled crashed on the reefs off the coast of India. All died but me, who, knowing my hour had come, burst my chains with the strength and madness of a giant, and gained the shore. My feet are yet unsteady from the shackles and the galley-bench, Zenghi, though my arms are strong beyond the belief of man. I have been on the road from India for three years. But the road ends here."

For the first time in his life Zenghi knew fear that froze his tongue to his palate and turned the marrow in his bones to ice.

"Ho, guards!" he roared. "To me, dogs!"

"Call louder, Zenghi!" said Norwald in his hollow resounding voice. "They hear thee not. Through thy sleeping host I passed like the Angel of Death, and none saw me. Thy tent stood unguarded. Lo, mine enemy, thou art delivered into my hand, and thine hour has come!"

With the ferocity of desperation Zenghi leaped from his cushions, whipping out a dagger, but like a great gaunt tiger the Englishman was upon him, crushing him back on the divan. The Turk struck blindly, felt the blade sink deep into the other's side; then as he wrenched the weapon free to strike again, he felt an iron grip on his wrist, and the Frank's right hand locked on his throat, choking his cry.

As he felt the inhuman strength of his attacker, blind panic swept the Atabeg. The fingers on his wrist did not feel like human bone and flesh and sinew. They were like the steel jaws of a vise that crushed through flesh and muscle. Over the inexorable fingers that sank into his bull-throat, blood trickled from skin torn like rotten cloth. Mad with the torture of strangulation, Zenghi tore at the wrist with his free hand, but he might have been wrenching at a steel bar welded to his throat. The massed muscles of Norwald's left arm knotted with effort, and with a sickening snap Zenghi's wrist bones gave way. The dagger fell from his nerveless hand, and instantly Norwald caught it up and sank the point into the Atabeg's breast.

The Turk released the arm that prisoned his throat, and caught the knife-wrist, but all his desperate strength could not stay the inexorable thrust. Slowly, slowly, Norwald drove home the keen point, while the Turk writhed in soundless agony. Approaching through the mists which veiled his glazing sight, Zenghi saw a face, raw, torn and bleeding. And then the dagger-point found his heart and visions and life ended together.

Ousama, unable to sleep, approached the Atabeg's tent, wondering at the absence of the guardsmen. He stopped short, an uncanny fear prickling the short hairs at the back of his neck, as a form came from the pavilion. He made out a tall white-bearded man, clad in rags. The Arab stretched forth a hand timidly, but dared not touch the apparition. He saw that the figure's hand was pressed against its left side, and blood oozed darkly from between the fingers.

"Where go you, old man?" stammered the Arab, involuntarily stepping back as the white-bearded stranger fixed weird blazing eyes upon him.

"I go back to the void which gave me birth," answered the figure in a deep ghostly voice, and as the Arab stared in bewilderment, the stranger passed on with slow, certain, unwavering steps, to vanish in the darkness.

Ousama ran into Zenghi's tent--to halt aghast at sight of the Atabeg's body lying stark among the torn silks and bloodstained cushions of the royal divan.

"Alas for kingly ambitions and high visions!" exclaimed the Arab. "Death is a black horse that may halt in the night by any tent, and life is more unstable than the foam on the sea! Woe for Islam, for her keenest sword is broken! Now may Christendom rejoice, for the Lion that roared against her lies lifeless!"

Like wildfire ran through the camp the word of the Atabeg's death, and like chaff blown on the winds his followers scattered, looting the camp as they fled. The power that had welded them together was broken, and it was every man for himself, and the plunder to the strong.

The haggard defenders on the walls, lifting their notched stumps of blades for the last death-grapple, gaped as they saw the confusion in the camp, the running to and fro, the brawling, the looting and shouting, and at last the scattering over the plain of emirs and retainers alike. These hawks lived by the sword, and they had no time for the dead, however regal. They turned their steeds aside to seek a new lord, in a race for the strongest.

Stunned by the miracle, not yet understanding the cast of Fate that had saved Jabar Kal'at and Outremer, Miles du Courcey stood with Ellen and their Seljuk friend, staring down on a silent and abandoned camp, where the torn deserted tent flapped idly in the morning breeze above the bloodstained body that had been the Lion of Tiberias.

THE END

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THE SHADOW OF THE VULTURE

By Robert E. Howard

"Are the dogs dressed and gorged?"
"Aye, Protector of the Faithful."
"Then let them crawl into the Presence."

Chapter 1

So they brought the envoys, pallid from months of imprisonment, before the canopied throne of Suleyman the Magnificent, Sultan of Turkey, and the mightiest monarch in an age of mighty monarchs. Under the great purple dome of the royal chamber gleamed the throne before which the world trembled--gold-paneled, pearl-inlaid. An emperor's wealth in gems was sewn into the silken canopy from which depended a shimmering string of pearls ending a frieze of emeralds which hung like a halo of glory above Suleyman's head. Yet the splendor of the throne was paled by the glitter of the figure upon it, bedecked in jewels, the aigrette feather rising above the diamonded white turban. About the throne stood his nine viziers, in attitudes of humility, and warriors of the imperial bodyguard ranged the dais--Solaks in armor, black and white and scarlet plumes nodding above the gilded helmets.

The envoys from Austria were properly impressed--the more so as they had had nine weary months for reflection in the grim Castle of the Seven Towers that overlooks the Sea of Marmora. The head of the embassy choked down his choler and cloaked his resentment in a semblance of submission--a strange cloak on the shoulders of Habordansky, general of Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria. His rugged head bristled incongruously from the flaming silk robes presented him by the contemptuous Sultan, as he was brought before the throne, his arms gripped fast by stalwart Janizaries. Thus were foreign envoys presented to the sultans, ever since that red day by Kossova when Milosh Kabilovitch, knight of slaughtered Serbia, had slain the conqueror Murad with a hidden dagger.

The Grand Turk regarded Habordansky with scant favor. Suleyman was a tall, slender man, with a thin down-curving nose and a thin straight mouth, the resolution of which his drooping mustachios did not soften. His narrow outward-curving chin was shaven. The only suggestion of weakness was in the slender, remarkably long neck, but that suggestion was belied by the hard lines of the slender figure, the glitter of the dark eyes. There was more than a suggestion of the Tatar about him--rightly so, since he was no more the son of Selim the Grim, than of Hafsza Khatun, princess of Crimea. Born to the purple, heir to the mightiest military power in the world, he was crested with authority and cloaked in pride that recognized no peer beneath the gods.

Under his eagle gaze old Habordansky bent his head to hide the sullen rage in his eyes. Nine months before, the general had come to Stamboul representing his master, the Archduke, with proposals for truce and the disposition of the iron crown of Hungary, torn from the dead king Louis' head on the bloody field of Mohacz, where the Grand Turk's armies

opened the road to Europe. There had been another emissary before him--Jerome Lasczky, the Polish count palatine. Habordansky, with the bluntness of his breed, had claimed the Hungarian crown for his master, rousing Suleyman's ire. Lasczky had, like a suppliant, asked on his bended knees that crown for his countrymen at Mohacz.

To Lasczky had been given honor, gold and promises of patronage, for which he had paid with pledges abhorrent even to his avaricious soul--selling his ally's subjects into slavery, and opening the road through the subject territory to the very heart of Christendom.

All this was made known to Habordansky, frothing with fury in the prison to which the arrogant resentment of the Sultan had assigned him. Now Suleyman looked contemptuously at the staunch old general, and dispensed with the usual formality of speaking through the mouthpiece of the Grand Vizier. A royal Turk would not deign to admit knowledge of any Frankish tongue, but Habordansky understood Turki. The Sultan's remarks were brief and without preamble.

"Say to your master that I now make ready to visit him in his own lands, and that if he fails to meet me at Mohacz or at Pesth, I will meet him beneath the walls of Vienna."

Habordansky bowed, not trusting himself to speak. At a scornful wave of the imperial hand, an officer of the court came forward and bestowed upon the general a small gilded bag containing two hundred ducats. Each member of his retinue, waiting patiently at the other end of the chamber, under the spears of the Janizaries, was likewise so guerdoned. Habordansky mumbled thanks, his knotty hands clenched about the gift with unnecessary vigor. The Sultan grinned thinly, well aware that the ambassador would have hurled the coins into his face, had he dared. He half-lifted his hand, in token of dismissal, then paused, his eyes resting on the group of men who composed the general's suite--or rather, on one of these men. This man was the tallest in the room, strongly built, wearing his Turkish gift-garments clumsily. At a gesture from the Sultan he was brought forward in the grasp of the soldiers.

Suleyman stared at him narrowly. The Turkish vest and voluminous khalat could not conceal the lines of massive strength. His tawny hair was close-cropped, his sweeping yellow mustaches drooping below a stubborn chin. His blue eyes seemed strangely clouded; it was as if the man slept on his feet, with his eyes open.

"Do you speak Turki?" The Sultan did the fellow the stupendous honor of addressing him directly. Through all the pomp of the Ottoman court there remained in the Sultan some of the simplicity of Tatar ancestors.

"Yes, your majesty," answered the Frank.

"Who are you?"

"Men name me Gottfried von Kalmbach."

Suleyman scowled and unconsciously his fingers wandered to his shoulder, where, under his silken robes, he could feel the outlines of an old scar.

"I do not forget faces. Somewhere I have seen yours--under circumstances that etched it into the back of my mind. But I am unable to recall those circumstances."

"I was at Rhodes," offered the German.

"Many men were at Rhodes," snapped Suleyman.

"Aye." agreed von Kalmbach tranquilly. "De l'Isle Adam was there."

Suleyman stiffened and his eyes glittered at the name of the Grand Master of the Knights of Saint John, whose desperate defense of Rhodes had cost the Turk sixty thousand men. He decided, however, that the Frank was not clever enough for the remark to carry any subtle thrust, and dismissed the embassy with a wave. The envoys were backed out of the Presence and the incident was closed. The Franks would be escorted out of Stamboul, and to the nearest boundaries of the empire. The Turk's warning would be carried posthaste to the Archduke, and soon on the heels of that warning would come the armies of the Sublime Porte. Suleyman's officers knew that the Grand Turk had more in mind than merely establishing his puppet Zapolya on the conquered Hungarian throne. Suleyman's ambitions embraced all Europe--that stubborn Frankistan which had for centuries sporadically poured forth hordes chanting and pillaging into the East, whose illogical and wayward peoples had again and again seemed ripe for Moslem conquest, yet who had always emerged, if not victorious, at least unconquered.

It was the evening of the morning on which the Austrian emissaries departed that Suleyman, brooding on his throne, raised his lean head and beckoned his Grand Vizier Ibrahim, who approached with confidence. The Grand Vizier was always sure of his master's approbation; was he not cup-companion and boyhood comrade of the Sultan? Ibrahim had but one rival in his master's favor--the red-haired Russian girl, Khurrem the Joyous, whom Europe knew as Roxelana, whom slavers had dragged from her father's house in Rogatino to be the Sultan's harim favorite.

"I remember the infidel at last," said Suleyman. "Do you recall the first charge of the knights at Mohacz?"

Ibrahim winced slightly at the allusion.

"Oh, Protector of the Pitiful, is it likely that I should forget an occasion on which the divine blood of my master was spilt by an unbeliever?"

"Then you remember that thirty-two knights, the paladins of the Nazarenes, drove headlong into our array, each having pledged his life to cut down our person. By Allah, they rode like men riding to a wedding, their great horses and long lances overthrowing all who opposed them, and their plate-armor turned the finest steel. Yet they fell as the firelocks spoke until only three were left in the saddle--the knight Marczali and two companions. These paladins cut down my Solaks like ripe grain, but Marczali and one of his companions fell--almost at my feet.

"Yet one knight remained, though his vizored helmet had been torn from his head and blood started from every joint in his armor. He rode full at me, swinging his great two-handed sword, and I swear by the beard of the Prophet, death was so nigh me that I felt the burning breath of Azrael on my neck!

"His sword flashed like lightning in the sky, and glancing from my casque, whereby I was half-stunned so that blood gushed from my nose, rent the mail on my shoulder and gave me this wound, which irks me yet when the rains come. The Janizaries who swarmed around him cut the hocks of his horse, which brought him to earth as it went down, and the remnants of my Solaks bore me back out of the melee. Then the Hungarian host came on, and I saw not what became of the knight. But today I saw him again."

Ibrahim started with an exclamation of incredulity.

"Nay, I could not mistake those blue eyes. How it is I know not, but the knight that wounded me at Mohacz was this German, Gottfried von Kalmbach."

"But, Defender of the Faith," protested Ibrahim, "the heads of those dog-knights were heaped before thy royal pavilion--"

"And I counted them and said nothing at the time, lest men think I held thee in blame," answered Suleyman. "There were but thirty-one. Most were so mutilated I could tell little of the features. But somehow the infidel escaped, who gave me this blow. I love brave men, but our blood is not so common that an unbeliever may with impunity spill it on the ground for the dogs to lap up. See ye to it."

Ibrahim salaamed deeply and withdrew. He made his way through broad corridors to a blue-tiled chamber whose gold-arched windows looked out on broad galleries, shaded by cypress and plane-trees, and cooled by the spray of silvery fountains. There at his summons came one Yaruk Khan, a Crim Tatar, a slant-eyed impassive figure in harness of lacquered leather and burnished bronze.

"Dog-brother," said the Vizier, "did thy koumiss-clouded gaze mark the tall German lord who served the emir Habordansky--the lord whose hair is tawny as a lion's mane?"

"Aye, noyon' he who is called Gombuk."

"The same. Take a chambul of thy dog-brothers and go after the Franks. Bring back this man and thou shalt be rewarded. The persons of envoys are sacred, but this matter is not official," he added cynically.

"To hear is to obey!" With a salaam as profound as that accorded to the Sultan himself, Yaruk Khan backed out of the presence of the second man of the empire.

He returned some days later, dusty, travel-stained, and without his prey. On him Ibrahim bent an eye full of menace, and the Tatar prostrated himself before the silken cushions on which the Grand Vizier sat, in the blue chamber with the gold-arched windows.

"Great khan, let not thine anger consume thy slave. The fault was not mine, by the beard of the Prophet."

"Squat on thy mangy haunches and bay out the tale," ordered Ibrahim considerately.

"Thus it was, my lord," began Yaruk Khan. "I rode swiftly, and though the Franks and their escort had a long start, and pushed on through the night without halting, I came up with them the next midday. But lo, Gombuk was not among them, and when I inquired after him, the paladin Habordansky replied only with many great oaths, like to the roaring of a cannon. So I spoke with various of the escort who understood the speech of these infidels, and learned what had come to pass. Yet I would have my lord remember that I only repeat the words of the Spahis of the escort, who are men without honor and lie like--"

"Like a Tatar," said Ibrahim.

Yaruk Khan acknowledged the compliment with a wide dog-like grin, and continued. "This they told me. At dawn Gombuk drew horse away from the rest, and the emir Habordansky demanded of him the reason. Then Gombuk laughed in the manner of the Franks--huh! huh! huh!--so. And Gombuk said, 'The devil of good your service has done me, so I cool my heels for nine months in a Turkish prison. Suleyman has given us safe conduct over the border and I am not compelled to ride with you.' 'You dog,' said the emir, 'there is war in the wind and the Archduke has need of your sword.' 'Devil eat the Archduke,' answered Gombuk; 'Zapolya is a dog because he stood aside at Mohacz, and let us, his comrades, be cut to pieces, but Ferdinand is a dog too. When I am penniless I sell him my sword. Now I have two hundred ducats and these robes which I can sell to any Jew for a handful of silver, and may the devil bite me if I draw sword for any man while I have a penny left. I'm for the nearest Christian tavern, and you and the Archduke may go to the devil.' Then the emir cursed him with many great curses, and Gombuk rode away laughing, huh! huh! huh!, and singing a song about a cockroach named--"

"Enough!" Ibrahim's features were dark with rage. He plucked savagely at his beard, reflecting that in the allusion to Mohacz, von Kalmbach had practically clinched Suleyman's suspicion. That matter of thirty-one heads when there should have been thirty-two was something no Turkish sultan would be likely to overlook. Officials had lost positions and their own heads over more trivial matters. The manner in which Suleyman had acted showed his almost incredible fondness and consideration for his Grand Vizier, but Ibrahim, vain though he was, was shrewd and wished no slightest shadow to come between him and his sovereign.

"Could you not have tracked him down, dog?" he demanded.

"By Allah," swore the uneasy Tatar, "he must have ridden on the wind. He crossed the border hours ahead of me, and I followed him as far as I dared--"

"Enough of excuses," interrupted Ibrahim. "Send Mikhal Oglu to me."

The Tatar departed thankfully. Ibrahim was not tolerant of failure in any man.

The Grand Vizier brooded on his silken cushions until the shadow of a pair of vulture wings fell across the marble-tiled floor, and the lean figure he had summoned bowed before him. The man whose very name was a shuddering watchword of horror to all western Asia was soft-spoken and moved with the mincing ease of a cat, but the stark evil of his soul showed in his dark countenance, gleamed in his narrow slit eyes. He was the chief of the Akinji, those wild riders whose raids spread fear and desolation throughout all lands beyond the Grand Turk's borders. He stood in full armor, a jeweled helmet on his narrow head, the wide vulture wings made fast to the shoulders of his gilded chain-mail hauberk. Those wings spread wide in the wind when he rode, and under their pinions lay the shadows of death and destruction. It was Suleyman's scimitar-tip, the most noted slayer of a nation of slayers, who stood before the Grand Vizier.

"Soon you will precede the hosts of our master into the lands of the infidel," said Ibrahim. "It will be your order, as always, to strike and spare not. You will waste the fields and the vineyards of the Caphars, you will burn their villages, you will strike down their men with arrows, and lead away their wenches captive. Lands beyond our line of march will cry out beneath your heel."

"That is good hearing, Favored of Allah," answered Mikhal Oglu in his soft courteous voice.

"Yet there is an order within the order," continued Ibrahim, fixing a piercing eye on the Akinji. "You know the German, von Kalmbach?"

"Aye--Gombuk as the Tatars call him."

"So. This is my command--whoever fights or flees, lives or dies--this man must not live. Search him out wherever he lies, though the hunt carry you to the very banks of the Rhine. When you bring me his head, your reward shall be thrice its weight in gold."

"To hear is to obey, my lord. Men say he is the vagabond son of a noble German family, whose ruin has been wine and women. They say he was once a Knight of Saint John, until cast forth for guzzling and--"

"Yet do not underrate him," answered Ibrahim grimly. "Sot he may be, but if he rode with Marczali, he is not to be despised. See thou to it!"

"There is no den where he can hide from me, oh Favored of Allah," declared Mikhal Oglu, "no night dark enough to conceal him, no forest thick enough. If I bring you not his head, I give him leave to send you mine."

"Enough!" Ibrahim grinned and tugged at his beard, well pleased. "You have my leave to go."

The sinister vulture-winged figure went springily and silently from the blue chamber, nor could Ibrahim guess that he was taking the first steps in a feud which should spread over years and far lands, swirling in dark tides to draw in thrones and kingdoms and red-haired women more beautiful than the flames of hell.

Chapter 2

In a small thatched hut in a village not far from the Danube, lusty snores resounded where a figure reclined in state on a ragged cloak thrown over a heap of straw. It was the paladin Gottfried von Kalmbach who slept the sleep of innocence and ale. The velvet vest, voluminous silken trousers, khalat and shagreen boots, gifts from a contemptuous sultan, were nowhere in evidence. The paladin was clad in worn leather and rusty mail. Hands tugged at him, breaking his sleep, and he swore drowsily.

"Wake up, my lord! Oh, wake, good knight--good pig--good dog-soul--will you wake, then?"

"Fill my flagon, host," mumbled the slumberer. "Who?--what? May the dogs bite you, Ivga! I've not another asper--not a penny. Go off like a good lass and let me sleep."

The girl renewed her tugging and shaking.

"Oh dolt! Rise! Gird on your spit! There are happenings forward!"

"Ivga," muttered Gottfried, pulling away from her attack, "take my burganet to the Jew. He'll give you enough for it to get drunk again."

"Fool!" she cried in despair. "It isn't money I want! The whole east is aflame, and none knows the reason thereof!"

"Has the rain ceased?" asked von Kalmbach, taking some interest in the proceedings at last.

"The rain ceased hours ago. You can only hear the drip from the thatch. Put on your sword and come out into the street. The men of the village are all drunk on your last silver, and the women know not what to think or do. Ah!"

The exclamation was broken from her by the sudden upleaping of a weird illumination which shone through the crevices of the hut. The German got unsteadily to his feet, quickly girt on the great two-handed sword and stuck his dented burganet on his cropped locks. Then he followed the girl into the straggling street. She was a slender young thing, barefooted, clad only in a short tunic-like garment, through the wide rents of which gleamed generous expanses of white flesh.

There seemed no life or movement in the village. Nowhere showed a light. Water dripped steadily from the eaves of the thatched roofs. Puddles in the muddy streets gleamed black. Wind sighed and moaned eerily through the black sodden branches of the trees which pressed in bulwarks of darkness about the little village, and in the southeast, towering higher into the leaden sky, rose the lurid crimson glow that set the dank clouds to smoldering. The girl Ivga cringed close to the tall German, whimpering.

"I'll tell you what it is, my girl," said he, scanning the glow. "It's Suleyman's devils. They've crossed the river and they're burning the villages. Aye, I've seen glares like that in the sky before. I've expected him before now, but these cursed rains we've had for weeks must have held him back. Aye, it's the Akinji, right enough, and they won't stop this side of Vienna. Look you, my girl, go quickly and quietly to the stable behind the hut and bring me my gray stallion. We'll slip out like mice from between the devil's fingers. The stallion will carry us both, easily."

"But the people of the village!" she sobbed, wringing her hands.

"Eh, well," he said, "God rest them; the men have drunk my ale valiantly and the women have been kind--but horns of Satan, girl, the gray nag won't carry a whole village!"

"Go you!" she returned. "I'll stay and die with my people!"

"The Turks won't kill you," he answered. "They'll sell you to a fat old Stamboul merchant who'll beat you. I won't stay to be cut open, and neither shall you--"

A terrible scream from the girl cut him short and he wheeled at the awful terror in her flaring eyes. Even as he did so, a hut at the lower end of the village sprang into flames, the sodden material burning slowly. A medley of screams and maddened yells followed the cry of the girl. In the sluggish light figures danced and capered wildly. Gottfried, straining his eyes in the shadows, saw shapes swarming over the low mud wall which drunkenness and negligence had left unguarded.

"Damnation!" he muttered. "The accursed ones have ridden ahead of their fire. They've stolen on the village in the dark--come on, girl!"

But even as he caught her white wrist to drag her away, and she screamed and fought against him like a wild thing, mad with fear, the mud wall crashed at the point nearest them. It crumpled under the impact of a score of horses, and into the doomed village reined the riders, distinct in the growing light. Huts were flaring up on all hands, screams rising to the dripping clouds as the invaders dragged shrieking women and drunken men from their hovels and cut their throats. Gottfried saw the lean figures of the horsemen, the firelight gleaming on their burnished steel; he saw the vulture wings on the shoulders of the foremost. Even as he recognized Mikhal Oglu, he saw the chief stiffen and point.

"At him, dogs!" yelled the Akinji, his voice no longer soft, but strident as the rasp of a drawn saber. "It is Gombuk! Five hundred aspers to the man who brings me his head!"

With a curse von Kalmbach bounded for the shadows of the nearest hut, dragging the screaming girl with him. Even as he leaped he heard the twang of bowstrings, and the girl sobbed and went limp in his grasp. She sank down at his feet, and in the lurid glare he saw the feathered end of an arrow quivering under her heart. With a low rumble he turned toward his assailants as a fierce bear turns at bay. An instant he stood, head out-thrust truculently, sword gripped in both hands; then, as a bear gives back from the onset of the hunters, he turned and fled about the hut, arrows whistling about him and glancing from the rings of his mail. There were no shots; the ride through that dripping forest had dampened the powder-flasks of the raiders.

Von Kalmbach quartered about the back of the hut, mindful of the fierce yells behind him, and gained the shed behind the hut he had occupied, wherein he stabled his gray stallion. Even as he reached the door, someone snarled like a panther in the semi-dark and cut viciously at him. He parried the stroke with the lifted sword and struck back with all the power of his broad shoulders. The great blade glanced stunningly from the Akinji's polished helmet and rent through the mail links of his hauberk, tearing arm from shoulder. The Muhammadan sank down with a groan, and the German sprang over his prostrate form. The gray stallion, wild with fear and excitement, neighed shrilly and reared as his master sprang on his back. No time for saddle or bridle. Gottfried dug his heels into the quivering flanks and the great steed shot through the door like a thunderbolt, knocking men right and left like tenpins. Across the firelit open space between the burning huts he raced, clearing crumpled corpses in his stride, splashing his rider from heel to head as he thrashed through the puddles.

The Akinji made after the flying rider, loosing their shafts and giving tongue like hounds. Those mounted spurred after him, while those who had entered the village on foot ran through the broken wall for their horses.

Arrows flickered about Gottfried's head as he put his steed at the only point open to him--the unbroken western wall. It was touch and go, for the footing was tricky and treacherous and never had the gray stallion attempted such a leap. Gottfried held his breath as he felt the great body beneath him gathering and tensing in full flight for the desperate effort; then with a volcanic heave of mighty thews the stallion rose in the air and cleared the barrier with scarce an inch to spare. The pursuers yelled in amazement and fury, and reined back. Born horsemen though they were, they dared not attempt that breakneck leap. They lost time seeking gates and breaks in the wall, and when they finally emerged from the village, the black, dank, whispering, dripping forest had swallowed up their prey.

Mikhal Oglu swore like a fiend and leaving his lieutenant Othman in charge with instructions to leave no living human being in the village, he pressed on after the fugitive, following the trail, by torches, in the muddy mold, and swearing to run him down, if the road led under the very walls of Vienna.

Chapter 3

Allah did not will it that Mikhal Oglu should take Gottfried von Kalmbach's head in the dark, dripping forest. He knew the country better than they, and in spite of their zeal, they lost his trail in the darkness. Dawn found Gottfried riding through terror-stricken farmlands, with the flame of a burning world lighting the east and south. The country was thronged with fugitives, staggering under pitiful loads of household goods, driving bellowing cattle, like people fleeing the end of the world. The torrential rains that had offered false promise of security had not long stayed the march of the Grand Turk.

With a quarter-million followers he was ravaging the eastern marches of Christendom. While Gottfried had loitered in the taverns of isolated villages, drinking up the Sultan's bounty, Pesth and Buda had fallen, the German soldiers of the latter having been slaughtered by the Janizaries, after promises of safety sworn by Suleyman, whom men named the Generous.

While Ferdinand and the nobles and bishops squabbled at the Diet of Spires, the elements alone seemed to war for Christendom. Rain fell in torrents, and through the floods that changed plains and forest-bed to dank morasses, the Turks struggled grimly. They drowned in raging rivers, and lost great stores of ammunition, ordnance and supplies when boats capsized, bridges gave way, and wagons mired. But on they came, driven by the implacable will of Suleyman, and now in September, 1529, over the ruins of Hungary, the Turk swept on Europe, with the Akinji--the Sackmen--ravaging the land like the drift ahead of a storm.

This in part Gottfried learned from the fugitives as he pushed his weary stallion toward the city which was the only sanctuary for the panting thousands. Behind him the skies flamed red and the screams of butchered victims came dimly down the wind to his ears. Sometimes he could even make out the swarming black masses of wild horsemen. The wings of the vulture beat horrifically over that butchered land and the shadows of those great wings fell across all Europe. Again the destroyer was riding out of the blue mysterious East as his brothers had ridden before him--Attila--Subotai--Bayazid--Muhammad the Conqueror. But never before had such a storm risen against the West.

Before the waving vulture wings the road thronged with wailing fugitives; behind them it ran red and silent, strewn with mangled shapes that cried no more. The killers were not a half-hour behind him when Gottfried von Kalmbach rode his reeling stallion through the gates of Vienna. The people on the walls had heard the wailing for hours, rising awfully on the wind, and now afar they saw the sun flicker on the points of lances as the horsemen rode in amongst the masses of fugitives toiling down from the hills into the plain which girdles the city. They saw the play of naked steel like sickles among ripe grain.

Von Kalmbach found the city in turmoil, the people swirling and screaming about Count Nikolas Salm, the seventy-year-old warhorse who commanded Vienna, and his aides, Roggendrof, Count Nikolas Zrinyi and Paul Bakics. Salm was working with frantic haste, leveling houses near the walls and using their material to brace the ramparts, which were old and unstable, nowhere more than six feet thick, and in many places crumbling and falling down. The outer palisade was so frail it bore the name of Stadtzaun--city hedge.

But under the lashing energy of Count Salm, a new wall twenty feet high was thrown up from the Stuben to the Karnthner Gate. Ditches interior to the old moat were dug, and ramparts erected from the drawbridge to the Salz Gate. Roofs were stripped of shingles, to lessen the chances of fire, and paving was ripped up to soften the impact of cannonballs.

The suburbs had been deserted, and now they were fired lest they give shelter to the besiegers. In the process, which was carried out in the very teeth of the oncoming Sackmen, conflagrations broke out in the city and added to the delirium. It was all hell and bedlam turned loose, and in the midst of it, five thousand wretched noncombatants, old men and women, and children, were ruthlessly driven from the gates to shift for themselves, and their screams, as the Akinjis swooped down, maddened the people within the walls. These hellions were

arriving by thousands, topping the skylines, and sweeping down on the city in irregular squadrons, like vultures gathering about a dying camel. Within an hour after the first swarm had appeared, not one Christian remained alive outside the gates, except those bound by long ropes to the saddle-peaks of their captors and forced to run at full speed or be dragged to death. The wild riders swirled about the walls, yelling and loosing their shafts. Men on the towers recognized the dread Mikhal Oglu by the wings on his cuirass, and noted that he rode from one heap of dead to another, avidly scanning each corpse in turn, pausing to glare questioningly at the battlements.

Meanwhile, from the west, a band of German and Spanish troops cut their way through a cordon of Sackmen and marched into the streets to the accompaniment of frenzied cheers, Philip the Palgrave at their head.

Gottfried von Kalmbach leaned on his sword and watched them pass in their gleaming breastplates and plumed crested helmets, with long matchlocks on their shoulders and two-handed swords strapped to their steel-clad backs. He was a curious contrast in his rusty chain-mail, old-fashioned harness picked up here and there and slovenly pieced together--he seemed like a figure out of the past, rusty and tarnished, watching a newer, brighter generation go by. Yet Philip saluted him, with a glance of recognition, as the shining column swung past.

Von Kalmbach started toward the walls, where the gunners were firing frugally at the Akinji, who showed some disposition to climb upon the bastions on lariats thrown from their saddles. But on the way he heard that Salm was impressing nobles and soldiers in the task of digging moats and rearing new earthworks, and in great haste he took refuge in a tavern, where he bullied the host, a knock-kneed and apprehensive Wallachian, into giving him credit, and rapidly drank himself into a state where no one would have considered asking him to do work of any kind.

Shots, shouts and screams reached his ears, but he paid scant heed. He knew that the Akinji would strike and pass on, to ravage the country beyond. He learned from the tavern talk that Salm had 20,000 pikemen, 2,000 horsemen and 1,000 volunteer citizens to oppose Suleyman's hordes, together with seventy guns--cannons, demi-cannons and culverins. The news of the Turks' numbers numbed all hearts with dread--all but von Kalmbach's. He was a fatalist in his way. But he discovered a conscience in ale, and was presently brooding over the people the miserable Viennese had driven forth to perish. The more he drank the more melancholy he became, and maudlin tears dripped from the drooping ends of his mustaches.

At last he rose unsteadily and took up his great sword, muzzily intent on challenging Count Salm to a duel because of the matter. He bellowed down the timid importunities of the Wallachian and weaved out on the street. To his groggy sight the towers and spires cavorted crazily; people jostled him, knocking him aside as they ran about aimlessly. Philip the Palgrave strode by clanking in his armor, the keen dark faces of his Spaniards contrasting with the square, florid countenances of the Lanzknechts.

"Shame upon you, von Kalmbach!" said Philip sternly. "The Turk is upon us, and you keep your snout shoved in an ale-pot!"

"Whose snout is in what ale-pot?" demanded Gottfried, weaving in an erratic half-circle as he fumbled at his sword. "Devil bite you, Philip, I'll rap your pate for that--"

The Palgrave was already out of sight, and eventually Gottfried found himself on the Karnthner Tower, only vaguely aware of how he had got there. But what he saw sobered him suddenly. The Turk was indeed upon Vienna. The plain was covered with his tents, thirty thousand, some said, and swore that from the lofty spire of Saint Stephen's cathedral a man could not see their limits. Four hundred of his boats lay on the Danube, and Gottfried heard men cursing the Austrian fleet which lay helpless far upstream, because its sailors, long unpaid, refused to man the ships. He also heard that Salm had made no reply at all to Suleyman's demand to surrender.

Now, partly as a gesture, partly to awe the Caphar dogs, the Grand Turk's array was moving in orderly procession before the ancient walls before settling down to the business of the siege. The sight was enough to awe the stoutest. The low-swinging sun struck fire from polished helmet, jeweled saber-hilt and lance-point. It was as if a river of shining steel flowed leisurely and terribly past the walls of Vienna.

The Akinji, who ordinarily formed the vanguard of the host, had swept on, but in their place rode the Tatars of Crimea, crouching on their high-peaked, short-stirruped saddles, their gnome-like heads guarded by iron helmets, their stocky bodies with bronze breastplates and lacquered leather. Behind them came the Azabs, the irregular infantry, Kurds and Arabs for the most part, a wild, motley horde. Then their brothers, the Delis, the Madcaps, wild men on tough ponies fantastically adorned with fur and feathers. The riders wore caps and mantles of leopard skin; their unshorn hair hung in tangled strands about their high shoulders, and over their matted beards their eyes glared the madness of fanaticism and bhang.

After them came the real body of the army. First the beys and emirs with their retainers--horsemen and footmen from the feudal fiefs of Asia Minor. Then the Spahis, the heavy cavalry, on splendid steeds. And last of all the real strength of the Turkish empire--the most terrible military organization in the world--the Janizaries. On the walls men spat in black fury, recognizing kindred blood. For the Janizaries were not Turks. With a few exceptions, where Turkish parents had smuggled their offspring into the ranks to save them from the grinding life of a peasant, they were sons of Christians--Greeks, Serbs, Hungarians--stolen in infancy and raised in the ranks of Islam, knowing but one master--the Sultan; but one occupation--slaughter.

Their beardless features contrasted with those of their Oriental masters. Many had blue eyes and yellow mustaches. But all their faces were stamped with the wolfish ferocity to which they had been reared. Under their dark blue cloaks glinted fine mail, and many wore steel skull-caps under their curious, high-peaked hats from which depended a white sleeve-like piece of cloth, and through which was thrust a copper spoon. Long bird-of-paradise plumes likewise adorned these strange head-pieces.

Besides scimitars, pistols and daggers, each Janizary bore a matchlock, and their officers carried pots of coals for the lighting of the matches. Up and down the ranks scurried the dervishes, clad only in kalpaks of camel-hair and green aprons fringed with ebony beads, exhorting the Faithful. Military bands, the invention of the Turk, marched with the columns, cymbals clashing, lutes twanging. Over the flowing sea the banners tossed and swayed--the crimson flag of the Spahis, the white banner of the Janizaries with its two-edged sword worked in gold, and the horse-tail standards of the rulers--seven tails for the Sultan, six for the Grand Vizier, three for the Agha of the Janizaries. So Suleyman paraded his power before despairing Caphar eyes.

But von Kalmbach's gaze was centered on the groups that labored to set up the ordnance of the Sultan. And he shook his head in bewilderment.

"Demi-culverins, sakers, and falconets!" he grunted. "Where the devil's all the heavy artillery Suleyman's so proud of?"

"At the bottom of the Danube!" A Hungarian pikeman grinned fiercely and spat as he answered. "Wulf Hagen sank that part of the Soldan's flotilla. The rest of his cannon and cannon royal, they say, were mired because of the rains."

A slow grin bristled Gottfried's mustache.

"What was Suleyman's word to Salm?"

"That he'd eat breakfast in Vienna day after tomorrow--the 29th."

Gottfried shook his head ponderously.

Chapter 4

The siege commenced, with the roaring of cannons, the whistling of arrows, and the blasting crash of matchlocks. The Janizaries took possession of the ruined suburbs, where fragments of walls gave them shelter. Under a screen of irregulars and a volley of arrow-fire, they advanced methodically just after dawn.

On a gun-turret on the threatened wall, leaning on his great sword and meditatively twisting his mustache, Gottfried von Kalmbach watched a Transylvanian gunner being carried off the wall, his brains oozing from a hole in his head; a Turkish matchlock had spoken too near the walls. The field-pieces of the Sultan were barking like deep-toned dogs, knocking chips off the battlements. The Janizaries were advancing, kneeling, firing, reloading as they came on. Bullets glanced from the crenelles and whined off venomously into space. One flattened against Gottfried's hauberk, bringing an outraged grunt from him. Turning toward the abandoned gun, he saw a colorful, incongruous figure bending over the massive breech.

It was a woman, dressed as von Kalmbach had not seen even the dandies of France dressed. She was tall, splendidly shaped, but lithe. From under a steel cap escaped rebellious tresses that rippled red gold in the sun over her compact shoulders. High boots of Cordovan leather came to her mid-thighs, which were cased in baggy breeches. She wore a shirt of fine Turkish mesh-mail tucked into her breeches. Her supple waist was confined by a flowing sash of green silk, into which were thrust a brace of pistols and a dagger, and from which depended a long Hungarian saber. Over all was carelessly thrown a scarlet cloak.

This surprizing figure was bending over the cannon, sighting it in a manner betokening more than a passing familiarity, at a group of Turks who were wheeling a carriage-gun just within range.

"Eh, Red Sonya!" shouted a man-at-arms, waving his pike. "Give 'em hell, my lass!"

"Trust me, dog-brother," she retorted as she applied the glowing match to the vent. "But I wish my mark was Roxelana's--"

A terrific detonation drowned her words and a swirl of smoke blinded every one on the turret, as the terrific recoil of the overcharged cannon knocked the firer flat on her back. She sprang up like a spring rebounding and rushed to the embrasure, peering eagerly through the smoke, which clearing, showed the ruin of the gun crew. The huge ball, bigger than a man's head, had smashed full into the group clustered about the saker, and now they lay on the torn ground, their skulls blasted by the impact, or their bodies mangled by the flying iron splinters from their shattered gun. A cheer went up from the towers, and the woman called Red Sonya yelled with a sincere joy and did the steps of a Cossack dance.

Gottfried approached, eying in open admiration the splendid swell of her bosom beneath the pliant mail, the curves of her ample hips and rounded limbs. She stood as a man might stand, booted legs braced wide apart, thumbs hooked into her girdle, but she was all woman. She was laughing as she faced him, and he noted with fascination the dancing sparkling lights and changing colors of her eyes. She raked back her rebellious locks with a powder-stained hand and he wondered at the clear pinky whiteness of her firm flesh where it was unstained.

"Why did you wish for the Sultana Roxelana for a target, my girl?" he asked.

"Because she's my sister, the slut!" answered Sonya.

At that instant a great cry thundered over the walls and the girl started like a wild thing, ripping out her blade in a long flash of silver in the sun.

"That bellow!" she cried. "The Janizaries--"

Gottfried was already on his way to the embrasures. He too had heard before the terrible soul-shaking shout of the charging Janizaries. Suleyman meant to waste no time on the city that barred him from helpless Europe. He meant to crush its frail walls in one storm. The bashi-bazouki, the irregulars, died like flies to screen the main advance, and over heaps of their dead, the Janizaries thundered against Vienna. In the teeth of cannonade and musket volley they surged on, crossing the moats on scaling-ladders laid across, bridge-like. Whole ranks went down as the Austrian guns roared, but now the attackers were under the walls and the cumbrous balls whirred over their heads, to work havoc in the rear ranks.

The Spanish matchlock men, firing almost straight down, took ghastly toll, but now the ladders gripped the walls, and the chanting madmen surged upward. Arrows whistled, striking down the defenders. Behind them the Turkish field-pieces boomed, careless of injury to friend as well as foe. Gottfried, standing at an embrasure, was overthrown by a sudden terrific impact. A ball had smashed the merlon, braining half a dozen defenders.

Gottfried rose, half-stunned, out of the debris of masonry and huddled corpses. He looked down into an uprushing waste of snarling, impassioned faces, where eyes glared like mad dogs' and blades glittered like sunbeams on water. Bracing his feet wide, he heaved up his great sword and lashed down. His jaw jutted out, his mustache bristled. The five-foot blade caved in steel caps and skulls, lashing through uplifted bucklers and iron shoulder-pieces. Men fell from the ladders, their nerveless fingers slipping from the bloody rungs.

But they swarmed through the breach on either side of him. A terrible cry announced that the Turks had a foothold on the wall. But no man dared leave his post to go to the threatened point. To the dazed defenders it seemed that Vienna was ringed by a glittering, tossing sea that roared higher and higher about the doomed walls.

Stepping back to avoid being hemmed in, Gottfried grunted and lashed right and left. His eyes were no longer cloudy; they blazed like blue balefire. Three Janizaries were down at his feet; his broadsword clanged in a forest of slashing scimitars. A blade splintered on his basinet, filling his eyes with fire-shot blackness. Staggering, he struck back and felt his great

blade crunch home. Blood jetted over his hands and he tore his sword clear. Then with a yell and a rush someone was at his side and he heard the quick splintering of mail beneath the madly flailing strokes of a saber that flashed like silver lightning before his clearing sight.

It was Red Sonya who had come to his aid, and her onslaught was no less terrible than that of a she-panther. Her strokes followed each other too quickly for the eye to follow; her blade was a blur of white fire, and men went down like ripe grain before the reaper. With a deep roar Gottfried strode to her side, bloody and terrible, swinging his great blade. Forced irresistibly back, the Moslems wavered on the edge of the wall, then leaped for the ladders or fell screaming through empty space.

Oaths flowed in a steady stream from Sonya's red lips and she laughed wildly as her saber sang home and blood spurted along the edge. The last Turk on the battlement screamed and parried wildly as she pressed him; then dropping his scimitar, his clutching hands closed desperately on her dripping blade. With a groan he swayed on the edge, blood gushing from his horribly cut fingers.

"Hell to you, dog-soul!" she laughed. "The devil can stir your broth for you!"

With a twist and a wrench she tore away her saber, severing the wretch's fingers; with a moaning cry he pitched backward and fell headlong.

On all sides the Janizaries were falling back. The field-pieces, halted while the fighting went on upon the walls, were booming again, and the Spaniards, kneeling at the embrasures, were returning the fire with their long matchlocks.

Gottfried approached Red Sonya, who was cleansing her blade, swearing softly.

"By God, my girl," said he, extending a huge hand, "had you not come to my aid, I think I'd have supped in Hell this night. I thank--"

"Thank the devil!" retorted Sonya rudely, slapping his hand aside. "The Turks were on the wall. Don't think I risked my hide to save yours, dog-brother!"

And with a scornful flirt of her wide coattails, she swaggered off down the battlements, giving back promptly and profanely the rude sallies of the soldiers. Gottfried scowled after her, and a Lanzknecht slapped him jovially on the shoulder.

"Eh, she's a devil, that one! She drinks the strongest head under the table and outswears a Spaniard. She's no man's light o' love. Cut--slash--death to you, dog-soul! There's her way."

"Who is she, in the devil's name?" growled von Kalmbach.

"Red Sonya from Rogatino--that's all we know. Marches and fights like a man--God knows why. Swears she's sister to Roxelana, the Soldan's favorite. If the Tatars who grabbed Roxelana that night had got Sonya, by Saint Piotr! Suleyman would have had a handful! Let her alone, sir brother; she's a wildcat. Come and have a tankard of ale."

The Janizaries, summoned before the Grand Vizier to explain why the attack failed after the wall had been scaled at one place, swore they had been confronted by a devil in the form of a red-headed woman, aided by a giant in rusty mail. Ibrahim discounted the woman, but the description of the man woke a half-forgotten memory in his mind. After dismissing the soldiers, he summoned the Tatar, Yaruk Khan, and dispatched him up-country to demand of Mikhal Oglu why he had not sent a certain head to the royal tent.

Chapter 5

Suleyman did not eat his breakfast in Vienna on the morning of the 29th. He stood on the height of Semmering, before his rich pavilion with its gold-knobbed pinnacles and its guard of five hundred Solaks, and watched his light batteries pecking away vainly at the frail walls; he saw his irregulars wasting their lives like water, striving to fill the fosse, and he saw his sappers burrowing like moles, driving mines and counter-mines nearer and nearer the bastions.

Within the city there was little ease. Night and day the walls were manned. In their cellars the Viennese watched the faint vibrations of peas on drumheads that betrayed the sounds of digging in the earth. They told of Turkish mines burrowing under the walls, and sank their counter-mines, accordingly. Men fought no less fiercely under the earth than above.

Vienna was the one Christian island in a sea of infidels. Night by night men watched the horizons burning where the Akinji yet scoured the agonized land. Occasionally word came from the outer world--slaves escaping from the camp to slipping into the city. Always their news was fresh horror. In Upper Austria less than a third of the inhabitants were left alive; Mikhal Oglu was outdoing himself. And the people said that it was evident the vulture-winged one was looking for one in particular. His slayers brought men's heads and heaped them high before him; he avidly searched among the grisly relics, then, apparently in fiendish disappointment, drove his devils to new atrocities.

These tales, instead of paralyzing the Austrians with dread, fired them with the mad fury of desperation. Mines exploded, breaches were made and the Turks swarmed in, but always the desperate Christians were there before them, and in the choking, blind, wild-beast madness of hand-to-hand fighting they paid in part the red debt they owed.

September dwindled into October; the leaves turned brown and yellow on Wiener Wald, and the winds blew cold. The watchers shivered at night on the walls that whitened to the bite of the frost; but still the tents ringed the city; and still Suleyman sat in his magnificent pavilion and glared at the frail barrier that barred his imperial path. None but Ibrahim dared speak to him; his mood was black as the cold nights that crept down from the northern hills. The wind that moaned outside his tent seemed a dirge for his ambitions of conquest.

Ibrahim watched him narrowly, and after a vain onset that lasted from dawn till midday, he called off the Janizaries and bade them retire into the ruined suburbs and rest. And he sent a bowman to shoot a very certain shaft into a very certain part of the city, where certain persons were waiting for just such an event.

No more attacks were made that day. The field-pieces, which had been pounding at the Karnthner Gate for days, were shifted northward, to hammer at the Burg. As an assault on that part of the wall seemed imminent, the bulk of the soldiery was shifted there. But the onslaught did not come, though the batteries kept up a steady fire, hour after hour. Whatever the reason, the soldiers gave thanks for the respite; they were dizzy with fatigue, mad with raw wounds and lack of sleep.

That night the great square, the Am-Hof market, seethed with soldiers, while civilians looked on enviously. A great store of wine had been discovered hidden in the cellars of a rich Jewish merchant, who hoped to reap triple profit when all other liquor in the city was gone. In spite of their officers, the half-crazed men rolled the great hogsheads into the square and broached them. Salm gave up the attempt to control them. Better drunkenness, growled the old warhorse, than for the men to fall in their tracks from exhaustion. He paid the Jew from his own purse. In relays the soldiers came from the walls and drank deep.

In the glare of cressets and torches, to the accompaniment of drunken shouts and songs, to which the occasional rumble of a cannon played a sinister undertone, von Kalmbach dipped his basinet into a barrel and brought it out brimful and dripping. Sinking his mustache into the liquid, he paused as his clouded eyes, over the rim of the steel cap, rested on a strutting figure on the other side of the hogshead. Resentment touched his expression. Red Sonya had already visited more than one barrel. Her burganet was thrust sidewise on her rebellious locks, her swagger was wilder, her eyes more mocking.

"Ha!" she cried scornfully. "It's the Turk-killer, with his nose deep in the keg, as usual! Devil bite all topers!"

She consistently thrust a jeweled goblet into the crimson flood and emptied it at a gulp. Gottfried stiffened resentfully. He had had a tilt with Sonya already, and he still smarted.

"Why should I even look at you, in your ragged harness and empty purse," she had mocked, "when even Paul Bakics is mad for me? Go along, guzzler, beer-keg!"

"Be damned to you," he had retorted. "You needn't be so high, just because your sister is the Soldan's mistress--"

At that she had flown into an awful passion, and they had parted with mutual curses. Now, from the devil in her eyes, he saw that she intended making things further uncomfortable for him.

"Hussy!" he growled. "I'll drown you in this hogshead."

"Nay, you'll drown yourself first, boar-pig!" she shouted amid a roar of rough laughter. "A pity you aren't as valiant against the Turks as you are against the wine-butts!"

"Dogs bite you, slut!" he roared. "How can I break their heads when they stand off and pound us with cannon balls? Shall I throw my dagger at them from the wall?"

"There are thousands just outside," she retorted in the madness induced by drink and her own wild nature, "if any had the guts to go to them."

"By God!" the maddened giant dragged out his great sword. "No baggage can call me coward, sot or not! I'll go out upon them, if never a man follow me!"

Bedlam followed his bellow; the drunken temper of the crowd was fit for such madness. The nearly empty hogsheads were deserted as men tipsily drew sword and reeled toward the outer gates. Wulf Hagen fought his way into the storm, buffeting men right and left, shouting fiercely, "Wait, you drunken fools! Don't surge out in this shape! Wait--" They brushed him aside, sweeping on in a blind senseless torrent.

Dawn was just beginning to tip the eastern hills. Somewhere in the strangely silent Turkish camp a drum began to throb. Turkish sentries stared wildly and loosed their matchlocks in the air to warn the camp, appalled at the sight of the Christian horde pouring over the narrow drawbridge, eight thousand strong, brandishing swords and ale tankards. As they foamed over the moat a terrific explosion rent the din, and a portion of the wall near the Karnthner Gate seemed to detach itself and rise into the air. A great shout rose from the Turkish camp, but the attackers did not pause.

They rushed headlong into the suburbs, and there they saw the Janizaries, not rousing from slumber, but fully clad and armed, being hurriedly drawn up in charging lines. Without pausing, they burst headlong into the half-formed ranks. Far outnumbered, their drunken fury and velocity was yet irresistible. Before the madly thrashing axes and lashing broadswords, the Janizaries reeled back dazed and disordered. The suburbs became a shambles where battling men, slashing and hewing at one another, stumbled on mangled bodies and severed limbs. Suleyman and Ibrahim, on the height of Semmering, saw the invincible Janizaries in full retreat, streaming out toward the hills.

In the city the rest of the defenders were working madly to repair the great breach the mysterious explosion had torn in the wall. Salm gave thanks for that drunken sortie. But for it, the Janizaries would have been pouring through the breach before the dust settled.

All was confusion in the Turkish camp. Suleyman ran to his horse and took charge in person, shouting at the Spahis. They formed ranks and swung down the slopes in orderly squadrons. The Christian warriors, still following their fleeing enemies, suddenly awakened to their danger. Before them the Janizaries were still falling back, but on either flank the horsemen of Asia were galloping to cut them off. Fear replaced drunken recklessness. They began to fall back, and the retreat quickly became a rout. Screaming in blind panic they threw away their weapons and fled for the drawbridge. The Turks rode them down to the water's edge, and tried to follow them across the bridge, into the gates which were opened for them. And there at the bridge Wulf Hagen and his retainers met the pursuers and held them hard. The flood of the fugitives flowed past him to safety; on him the Turkish tide broke like a red wave. He loomed, a steel-clad giant, in a waste of spears.

Gottfried von Kalmbach did not voluntarily quit the field, but the rush of his companions swept him along the tide of flight, blaspheming bitterly. Presently he lost his footing and his panic-stricken comrades stampeded across his prostrate frame. When the frantic heels ceased to drum on his mail, he raised his head and saw that he was near the fosse, and naught but Turks about him. Rising, he ran lumberingly toward the moat, into which he plunged unexpectedly, looking back over his shoulder at a pursuing Moslem.

He came up floundering and spluttering, and made for the opposite bank, splashing water like a buffalo. The blood-mad Muhammadan was close behind him--an Algerian corsair, as much at home in water as out. The stubborn German would not drop his great sword, and burdened by his mail, just managed to reach the other bank, where he clung, utterly exhausted and unable to lift a hand in defense as the Algerian swirled in, dagger gleaming above his naked shoulder. Then someone swore heartily on the bank hard by. A slim hand thrust a long pistol into the Algerian's face; he screamed as it exploded, making a ghastly ruin of his head. Another slim, strong hand gripped the sinking German by the scruff of his mail.

"Grab the bank, fool!" gritted a voice, indicative of great effort. "I can't heave you up alone; you must weigh a ton. Pull, dolt, pull!"

Blowing, gasping and floundering, Gottfried half-clambered, was half lifted, out of the moat. He showed some disposition to lie on his belly and retch, what of the dirty water he had swallowed, but his rescuer urged him to his feet.

"The Turks are crossing the bridge and the lads are closing the gates against them--haste, before we're cut off."

Inside the gate Gottfried stared about, as if waking from a dream.

"Where's Wulf Hagen? I saw him holding the bridge."

"Lying dead among twenty dead Turks," answered Red Sonya.

Gottfried sat down on a piece of fallen wall, and because he was shaken and exhausted, and still mazed with drink and blood-lust, he sank his face in his huge hands and wept. Sonya kicked him disgustedly.

"Name o' Satan, man, don't sit and blubber like a spanked schoolgirl. You drunkards had to play the fool, but that can't be mended. Come--let's go to the Walloon's tavern and drink ale."

"Why did you pull me out of the moat?" he asked.

"Because a great oaf like you never can help himself. I see you need a wise person like me to keep life in that hulking frame."

"But I thought you despised me!"

"Well, a woman can change her mind, can't she?" she snapped.

Along the walls the pikemen were repelling the frothing Moslems, thrusting them off the partly repaired breach. In the royal pavilion Ibrahim was explaining to his master that the devil had undoubtedly inspired that drunken sortie just at the right moment to spoil the Grand Vizier's carefully laid plans. Suleyman, wild with fury, spoke shortly to his friend for the first time.

"Nay, thou hast failed. Have done with thine intrigues. Where craft has failed, sheer force shall prevail. Send a rider for the Akinji; they are needed here to replace the fallen. Bid the hosts to the attack again."

Chapter 6

The preceding onslaughts were naught to the storm that now burst on Vienna's reeling walls. Night and day the cannons flashed and thundered. Bombs burst on roofs and in the streets. When men died on the walls there was none to take their places. Fear of famine stalked the streets and the darker fear of treachery ran black-mantled through the alleys. Investigation showed that the blast that had rent the Karnthner wall had not been fired from without. In a mine tunneled from an unsuspected cellar inside the city, a heavy charge of powder had been exploded beneath the wall. One or two men, working secretly, might have done it. It was now apparent that the bombardment of the Burg had been merely a gesture to draw attention away from the Karnthner wall, to give the traitors an opportunity to work undiscovered.

Count Salm and his aides did the work of giants. The aged commander, fired with superhuman energy, trod the walls, braced the faltering, aided the wounded, fought in the breaches side by side with the common soldiers, while death dealt his blows unsparingly.

But if death supped within the walls, he feasted full without. Suleyman drove his men as relentlessly as if he were their worst foe. Plague stalked among them, and the ravaged countryside yielded no food. The cold winds howled down from the Carpathians and the warriors shivered in their light Oriental garb. In the frosty nights the hands of the sentries froze to their matchlocks. The ground grew hard as flint and the sappers toiled feebly with blunted tools. Rain fell, mingled with sleet, extinguishing matches, wetting powder, turning the plain outside the city to a muddy wallow, where rotting corpses sickened the living.

Suleyman shuddered as with an ague, as he looked out over the camp. He saw his warriors, worn and haggard, toiling in the muddy plain like ghosts under the gloomy leaden skies. The stench of his slaughtered thousands was in his nostrils. In that instant it seemed to the Sultan that he looked on a gray plain of the dead, where corpses dragged their lifeless bodies to an outworn task, animated only by the ruthless will of their master. For an instant the Tatar in his veins rose above the Turk and he shook with fear. Then his lean jaws set. The walls of Vienna staggered drunkenly, patched and repaired in a score of places. How could they stand?

"Sound for the onslaught. Thirty thousand aspers to the first man on the walls!"

The Grand Vizier spread his hands helplessly. "The spirit is gone out of the warriors. They can not endure the miseries of this icy land."

"Drive them to the walls with whips," answered Suleyman, grimly. "This is the gate to Frankistan. It is through it we must ride the road to empire."

Drums thundered through the camp. The weary defenders of Christendom rose up and gripped their weapons, electrified by the instinctive knowledge that the death-grip had come.

In the teeth of roaring matchlocks and swinging broadswords, the officers of the Sultan drove the Moslem hosts. Whips cracked and men cried out blasphemously up and down the lines. Maddened, they hurled themselves at the reeling walls, riddled with great breaches, yet still barriers behind which desperate men could crouch. Charge after charge rolled on over the choked fosse, broke on the staggering walls, and rolled back, leaving its wash of dead. Night fell unheeded, and through the darkness, lighted by blaze of cannon and flare of torches, the battle raged. Driven by Suleyman's terrible will, the attackers fought throughout the night, heedless of all Moslem tradition.

Dawn rose as on Armageddon. Before the walls of Vienna lay a vast carpet of steel-clad dead. Their plumes waved in the wind. And across the corpses staggered the hollow-eyed attackers to grapple with the dazed defenders.

The steel tides rolled and broke, and rolled on again, till the very gods must have stood aghast at the giant capacity of men for suffering and enduring. It was the Armageddon of races--Asia against Europe. About the walls raved a sea of Eastern faces--Turks, Tatars, Kurds, Arabs, Algerians, snarling, screaming, dying before the roaring matchlocks of the Spaniards, the thrust of Austrian pikes, the strokes of the German Lanzknechts, who swung their two-handed swords like reapers mowing ripe grain. Those within the walls were no more heroic than those without, stumbling among fields of their own dead.

To Gottfried von Kalmbach, life had faded to a single meaning--the swinging of his great sword. In the wide breach by the Karnthner Tower he fought until time lost all meaning. For long ages maddened faces rose snarling before him, the faces of devils, and scimitars flashed before his eyes everlastingly. He did not feel his wounds, nor the drain of weariness. Gasping in the choking dust, blind with sweat and blood, he dealt death like a harvest, dimly aware that at his side a slim, pantherish figure swayed and smote--at first with laughter, curses and snatches of song, later in grim silence.

His identity as an individual was lost in that cataclysm of swords. He hardly knew it when Count Salm was death-stricken at his side by a bursting bomb. He was not aware when night crept over the hills, nor did he realize at last that the tide was slackening and ebbing. He was only dimly aware that Nikolas Zrinyi tore him away from the corpse-choked breach, saying, "God's name, man, go and sleep. We've beaten them off--for the time being, at least."

He found himself in a narrow, winding street, all dark and forsaken. He had no idea of how he had got there, but seemed vaguely to remember a hand on his elbow, tugging, guiding. The weight of his mail pulled at his sagging shoulders. He could not tell if the sound he heard were the cannon fitfully roaring, or a throbbing in his own head. It seemed there was someone he should look for--someone who meant a great deal to him. But all was vague. Somewhere, sometime, it seemed long, long ago, a sword-stroke had cleft his basinet. When he tried to think he seemed to feel again the impact of that terrible blow, and his brain swam. He tore off the dented head-piece and cast it into the street.

Again the hand was tugging at his arm. A voice urged, "Wine, my lord--drink!"

Dimly he saw a lean, black-mailed figure extending a tankard. With a gasp he caught at it and thrust his muzzle into the stinging liquor, gulping like a man dying of thirst. Then something burst in his brain. The night filled with a million flashing sparks, as if a powder magazine had exploded in his head. After that, darkness and oblivion.

He came slowly to himself, aware of a raging thirst, an aching head, and an intense weariness that seemed to paralyze his limbs. He was bound hand and foot, and gagged. Twisting his head, he saw that he was in a small bare dusty room, from which a winding stone stair led up. He deduced that he was in the lower part of the tower.

Over a guttering candle on a crude table stooped two men. They were both lean and hook-nosed, clad in plain black garments--Asiatics, past doubt. Gottfried listened to their low-toned conversation. He had picked up many languages in his wanderings. He recognized them--Tshoruk and his son Rhupen, Armenian merchants. He remembered that he had seen Tshoruk often in the last week or so, ever since the domed helmets of the Akinji had appeared in Suleyman's camp. Evidently the merchant had been shadowing him, for some reason. Tshoruk was reading what he had written on a bit of parchment.

"My lord, though I blew up the Karnthner wall in vain, yet I have news to make my lord's heart glad. My son and I have taken the German, von Kalmbach. As he left the wall, dazed with fighting, we followed, guiding him subtly to the ruined tower whereof you know, and giving him drugged wine, bound him fast. Let my lord send the emir Mikhal Oglu to the wall by the tower, and we will give him into thy hands. We will bind him on the old mangonel and cast him over the wall like a tree trunk."

The Armenian took up an arrow and began to bind the parchment about the shaft with light silver wire.

"Take this to the roof, and shoot it toward the mantlet, as usual," he began, when Rhupen exclaimed, "Hark!" and both froze, their eyes glittering like those of trapped vermin--fearful yet vindictive.

Gottfried gnawed at the gag; it slipped. Outside he heard a familiar voice. "Gottfried! Where the devil are you?"

His breath burst from him in a stentorian roar. "Hey, Sonya! Name of the devil! Be careful, girl--"

Tshoruk snarled like a wolf and struck him savagely on the head with a scimitar hilt. Almost instantly, it seemed, the door crashed inward. As in a dream Gottfried saw Red Sonya framed in the doorway, pistol in hand. Her face was drawn and haggard; her eyes burned like coals. Her basinet was gone, and her scarlet cloak. Her mail was hacked and red-clotted, her boots slashed, her silken breeches splashed and spotted with blood.

With a croaking cry Tshoruk ran at her, scimitar lifted. Before he could strike, she crashed down the barrel of the empty pistol on his head, felling him like an ox. From the other side Rhupen slashed at her with a curved Turkish dagger. Dropping the pistol, she closed with the young Oriental. Moving like someone in a dream, she bore him irresistibly backward, one hand gripping his wrist, the other his throat. Throttling him slowly, she inexorably crashed his head again and again against the stones of the wall, until his eyes rolled up and set. Then she threw him from her like a sack of loose salt.

"God!" she muttered thickly, reeling an instant in the center of the room, her hands to her head. Then she went to the captive and sinking stiffly to her knees, cut his bonds with fumbling strokes that sliced his flesh as well as the cords.

"How did you find me?" he asked stupidly, clambering stiffly up.

She reeled to the table and sank down in a chair. A flagon of wine stood at her elbow and she seized it avidly and drank. Then she wiped her mouth on her sleeve and surveyed him wearily but with renewed life.

"I saw you leave the wall and followed. I was so drunk from the fighting I scarce knew what I did. I saw those dogs take your arm and lead you into the alleys, and then I lost sight of you. But I found your burganet lying outside in the street, and began shouting for you. What the hell's the meaning of this?"

She picked up the arrow, and blinked at the parchment fastened to it. Evidently she could read the Turkish characters, but she scanned it half a dozen times before the meaning became apparent to her exhaustion-numbed brain. Then her eyes flickered dangerously to the men on the floor. Tshoruk sat up, dazedly feeling the gash in his scalp; Rhupen lay retching and gurgling on the floor.

"Tie them up, brother," she ordered, and Gottfried obeyed. The victims eyed the woman much more apprehensively than him.

"This missive is addressed to Ibrahim, the Wezir," she said abruptly. "Why does he want Gottfried's head?"

"Because of a wound he gave the Sultan at Mohacz," muttered Tshoruk uneasily.

"And you, you lower-than-a-dog," she smiled mirthlessly, "you fired the mine by the Karnthner! You and your spawn are the traitors among us." She drew and primed a pistol. "When Zrinyi learns of you," she said, "your end will be neither quick nor sweet. But first, you old swine, I'm going to give myself the pleasure of blowing out your cub's brains before your eyes--"

The older Armenian gave a choking cry. "God of my fathers, have mercy! Kill me--torture me--but spare my son!"

At that instant a new sound split the unnatural quiet--a great peal of bells shattered the air.

"What's this?" roared Gottfried, groping wildly at his empty scabbard.

"The bells of Saint Stephen!" cried Sonya. "They peal for victory!"

She sprang for the sagging stair and he followed her up the perilous way. They came out on a sagging shattered roof, on a firmer part of which stood an ancient stone-casting machine, relic of an earlier age, and evidently recently repaired. The tower overlooked an angle of the wall, at which there were no watchers. A section of the ancient glacis, and a ditch interior the main moat, coupled with a steep natural pitch of the earth beyond, made the point practically invulnerable. The spies had been able to exchange messages here with little fear of discovery, and it was easy to guess the method used. Down the slope, just within long arrow-shot, stood up a huge mantlet of bullhide stretched on a wooden frame, as if abandoned there by chance. Gottfried knew that message-laden arrows were loosed from the tower roof into this mantlet. But just then he gave little thought to that. His attention was riveted on the Turkish camp. There a leaping glare paled the spreading dawn; above the mad clangor of the bells rose the crackle of flames, mingled with awful screams.

"The Janizaries are burning their prisoners," said Red Sonya.

"Judgment Day in the morning," muttered Gottfried, awed at the sight that met his eyes.

From their eyrie the companions could see almost all of the plain. Under a cold gray leaden sky, tinged a somber crimson with dawn, it lay strewn with Turkish corpses as far as the sight would carry. And the hosts of the living were melting away. From Semmering the great pavilion had vanished. The other tents were now coming down fast. Already the head of the long column was out of sight, moving into the hills through the cold dawn. Snow began falling in light swift flakes.

The Janizaries were glutting their mad disappointment on their helpless captives, hurling men, women and children living into the flames they had kindled under the somber eyes of their master, the monarch men called the Magnificent, the Merciful. All the time the bells of Vienna clanged and thundered as if their bronze throats would burst.

"They shot their bolt last night," said Red Sonya. "I saw their officers lashing them, and heard them cry out in fear beneath our swords. Flesh and blood could stand no more. Look!" She clutched her companion's arm. "The Akinji will form the rear-guard."

Even at that distance they made out a pair of vulture wings moving among the dark masses; the sullen light glimmered on a jeweled helmet. Sonya's powder-stained hands clenched so that the pink, broken nails bit into the white palms, and she spat out a Cossack curse that burned like vitriol.

"There he goes, the bastard that made Austria a desert! How easily the souls of the butchered folk ride on his cursed winged shoulders! Anyway, old warhorse, he didn't get your head."

"While he lives it'll ride loose on my shoulders," rumbled the giant.

Red Sonya's keen eyes narrowed suddenly. Seizing Gottfried's arm, she hurried downstairs. They did not see Nikolas Zrinyi and Paul Bakics ride out of the gates with their tattered retainers, risking their lives in sorties to rescue prisoners. Steel clashed along the line of march, and the Akinji retreated slowly, fighting a good rear-guard action, balking the headlong courage of the attackers by their very numbers. Safe in the depths of his horsemen, Mikhal Oglu grinned sardonically. But Suleyman, riding in the main column, did not grin. His face was like a death-mask.

Back in the ruined tower, Red Sonya propped one booted foot on a chair, and cupping her chin in her hand, stared into the fear-dulled eyes of Tshoruk.

"What will you give for your life?"

The Armenian made no reply.

"What will you give for the life of your whelp?"

The Armenian started as if stung. "Spare my son, princess," he groaned. "Anything--I will pay--I will do anything."

She threw a shapely booted leg across the chair and sat down.

"I want you to bear a message to a man."

"What man?"

"Mikhal Oglu."

He shuddered and moistened his lips with his tongue.

"Instruct me; I obey," he whispered.

"Good. We'll free you and give you a horse. Your son shall remain here as hostage. If you fail us, I'll give the cub to the Viennese to play with--"

Again the old Armenian shuddered.

"But if you play squarely, we'll let you both go free, and my pal and I will forget about this treachery. I want you to ride after Mikhal Oglu and tell him--"

Through the slush and driving snow, the Turkish column plodded slowly. Horses bent their heads to the blast; up and down the straggling lines camels groaned and complained, and oxen bellowed pitifully. Men stumbled through the mud, leaning beneath the weight of their arms and equipment. Night was falling, but no command had been given to halt. All day the retreating host had been harried by the daring Austrian cuirassiers who darted down upon them like wasps, tearing captives from their very hands.

Grimly rode Suleyman among his Solaks. He wished to put as much distance as possible between himself and the scene of his first defeat, where the rotting bodies of thirty thousand Muhammadans reminded him of his crushed ambitions. Lord of western Asia he was; master of Europe he could never be. Those despised walls had saved the Western world from Moslem dominion, and Suleyman knew it. The rolling thunder of the Ottoman power re-echoed around the world, paling the glories of Persia and Mogul India. But in the West the yellow-haired Aryan barbarian stood unshaken. It was not written that the Turk should rule beyond the Danube.

Suleyman had seen this written in blood and fire, as he stood on Semmering and saw his warriors fall back from the ramparts, despite the flailing lashes of their officers. It had been to save his authority that he gave the order to break camp--it burned his tongue like gall, but already his soldiers were burning their tents and preparing to desert him. Now in darkly brooding silence he rode, not even speaking to Ibrahim.

In his own way Mikhal Oglu shared their savage despondency. It was with a ferocious reluctance that he turned his back on the land he had ruined, as a half-glutted panther might be driven from its prey. He recalled with satisfaction the blackened, corpse-littered wastes--the screams of tortured men--the cries of girls writhing in his iron arms; recalled with much the same sensations the death-shrieks of those same girls in the blood-fouled hands of his killers.

But he was stung with the disappointment of a task undone--for which the Grand Vizier had lashed him with stinging word. He was out of favor with Ibrahim. For a lesser man that might have meant a bowstring. For him it meant that he would have to perform some prodigious feat to reinstate himself. In this mood he was dangerous and reckless as a wounded panther.

Snow fell heavily, adding to the miseries of the retreat. Wounded men fell in the mire and lay still, covered by a growing white mantle. Mikhal Oglu rode among his rearmost ranks, straining his eyes into the darkness. No foe had been sighted for hours. The victorious Austrians had ridden back to their city.

The columns were moving slowly through a ruined village, whose charred beams and crumbling fire-seared walls stood blackly in the falling snow. Word came back down the lines that the Sultan would pass on through and camp in a valley which lay a few miles beyond.

The quick drum of hoofs back along the way they had come caused the Akinji to grip their lances and glare slit-eyed into the flickering darkness. They heard but a single horse, and a voice calling the name of Mikhal Oglu. With a word the chief stayed a dozen lifted bows, and shouted in return. A tall, gray stallion loomed out of the flying snow, a black-mantled figure crouched grotesquely atop of it.

"Tshoruk! You Armenian dog! What in the name of Allah--"

The Armenian rode close to Mikhal Oglu and whispered urgently in his ear. The cold bit through the thickest garments. The Akinji noted that Tshoruk was trembling violently. His teeth chattered and he stammered in his speech. But the Turk's eyes blazed at the import of his message.

"Dog, do you lie?"

"May I rot in hell if I lie!" A strong shudder shook Tshoruk and he drew his kaftan close about him. "He fell from his horse, riding with the cuirassiers to attack the rear-guard, and lies with a broken leg in a deserted peasant's hut some three miles back--alone except for his mistress Red Sonya, and three or four Lanzknechts, who are drunk on wine they found in the deserted camp."

Mikhal Oglu wheeled his horse with sudden intent.

"Twenty men to me!" he barked. "The rest ride on with the main column. I go after a head worth its weight in gold. I'll overtake you before you go in camp."

Othman caught his jeweled rein. "Are you mad, to ride back now? The whole country will be on our heels--"

He reeled in his saddle as Mikhal Oglu slashed him across the mouth with his riding whip. The chief wheeled away, followed by the men he had designated. Like ghosts they vanished into the spectral darkness.

Othman sat his horse uncertainly, looking after them. The snow shafted down, the wind sobbed drearily among the bare branches. There was no sound except the receding noises of the trudging column. Presently these ceased. Then Othman started. Back along the way they had come, he heard a distant reverberation, a roar as of forty or fifty matchlocks speaking together. In the utter silence which followed, panic came upon Othman and his warriors. Whirling away they fled through the ruined village after the retreating horde.

Chapter 7

None noticed when night fell on Constantinople, for the splendor of Suleyman made night no less glorious than day. Through gardens that were riots of blossoms and perfume, cressets twinkled like myriad fireflies. Fireworks turned the city into a realm of shimmering magic, above which the minarets of five hundred mosques rose like towers of fire in an ocean of golden foam. Tribesmen on Asian hills gaped and marveled at the blaze that pulsed and glowed afar, paling the very stars. The streets of Stamboul were thronged with crowds in the attire of holiday and rejoicing. The million lights shone on jeweled turban and striped khalat--on dark eyes sparkling over filmy veils--on shining palanquins borne on the shoulders of huge ebony-skinned slaves.

All that splendor centered in the Hippodrome, where in lavish pageants the horsemen of Turkistan and Tatary competed in breathtaking races with the riders of Egypt and Arabia, where warriors in glittering mail spilled one another's blood on the sands, where swordsmen were matched against wild beasts, and lions were pitted against tigers of Bengal and boars from northern forests. One might have deemed the imperial pageantry of Rome revived in Eastern garb.

On a golden throne, set upon lapis lazuli pillars, Suleyman reclined, gazing on the splendors, as purple-togaed Caesars had gazed before him. About him bowed his viziers and officers, and the ambassadors from foreign courts--Venice, Persia, India, the khanates of Tatary. They came--including the Venetians--to congratulate him on his victory over the Austrians. For this grand fete was in celebration of that victory, as set forth in a manifesto under the Sultan's hand, which stated, in part, that the Austrians having made submission and sued for pardon on their knees, and the German realms being so distant from the Ottoman empire, "the Faithful would not trouble to clean out the fortress (Vienna), or purify, improve, and put it in repair." Therefore the Sultan had accepted the submission of the contemptible Germans, and left them in possession of their paltry "fortress"!

Suleyman was blinding the eyes of the world with the blaze of his wealth and glory, and striving to make himself believe that he had actually accomplished all he had intended. He had not been beaten on the field of open battle; he had set his puppet on the Hungarian throne; he had devastated Austria; the markets of Stamboul and Asia were full of Christian slaves. With this knowledge he soothed his vanity, ignoring the fact that thirty thousand of his subjects rotted before Vienna, and that his dreams of European conquest had been shattered.

Behind the throne shone the spoils of war--silken and velvet pavilions, wrested from the Persians, the Arabs, the Egyptian memluks; costly tapestries, heavy with gold embroidery. At his feet were heaped the gifts and tributes of subject and allied princes. There were vests of Venetian velvet, golden goblets crusted with jewels from the courts of the Grand Moghul, ermine-lined kaftans from Erzeroum, carven jade from Cathay, silver Persian helmets with horse-hair plumes, turban-cloths, cunningly sewn with gems, from Egypt, curved Damascus blades of watered steel, matchlocks from Kabul worked richly in chased silver, breastplates and shields of Indian steel, rare furs from Mongolia. The throne was flanked on either hand by a long rank of youthful slaves, made fast by golden collars to a single, long silver chain. One file was composed of young Greek and Hungarian boys, the other of girls; all clad only in plumed head-pieces and jeweled ornaments intended to emphasize their nudity.

Eunuchs in flowing robes, their rotund bellies banded by cloth-of-gold sashes, knelt and offered the royal guests sherbets in gemmed goblets, cooled with snow from the mountains of Asia Minor. The torches danced and flickered to the roars of the multitudes. Around the courses swept the horses, foam flying from their bits; wooden castles reeled and went up in flames as the Janizaries clashed in mock warfare. Officers passed among the shouting people, tossing showers of copper and silver coins amongst them. None hungered or thirsted in Stamboul that night except the miserable Caphar captives. The minds of the foreign envoys were numbed by the bursting sea of splendor, the thunder of imperial magnificence. About the vast arena stalked trained elephants, almost covered with housings of gold-worked leather, and from the jeweled towers on their backs, fanfares of trumpets vied with the roar of the throngs and the bellowing of lions. The tiers of the Hippodrome were a sea of faces, all turning toward the jeweled figure on the shining throne, while thousands of tongues wildly thundered his acclaim.

As he impressed the Venetian envoys, Suleyman knew he impressed the world. In the blaze of his magnificence, men would forget that a handful of desperate Caphars behind rotting walls had closed his road to empire. Suleyman accepted a goblet of the forbidden wine, and spoke aside to the Grand Vizier, who stepped forth and lifted his arms.

"Oh, guests of my master, the Padishah forgets not the humblest in the hour of rejoicing. To the officers who led his hosts against the infidels, he has made rare gifts. Now he gives two hundred and forty thousand ducats to be distributed among the common soldiers, and likewise to each Janizary he gives a thousand aspers."

In the midst of the roar that went up, a eunuch knelt before the Grand Vizier, holding up a large round package, carefully bound and sealed. A folded piece of parchment, held shut by a red seal, accompanied it. The attention of the Sultan was attracted.

"Oh, friend, what has thou there?"

Ibrahim salaamed. "The rider of the Adrianople post delivered it, oh Lion of Islam. Apparently it is a gift of some sort from the Austrian dogs. Infidel riders, I understand, gave it into the hands of the border guard, with instructions to send it straightway to Stamboul."

"Open it," directed Suleyman, his interest roused. The eunuch salaamed to the floor, then began breaking the seals of the package. A scholarly slave opened the accompanying note and read the contents, written in a bold yet feminine hand:

To the Soldan Suleyman and his Wezir Ibrahim and to the hussy Roxelana we who sign our names below send a gift in token of our immeasurable fondness and kind affection.

Sonya of Rogatino, and Gottfried von Kalmbach

Suleyman, who had started up at the name of his favorite, his features suddenly darkening with wrath, gave a choking cry, which was echoed by Ibrahim. The eunuch had torn the seals of the bale, disclosing what lay within. A pungent scent of herbs and preservative spices filled the air, and the object, slipping from the horrified eunuch's hands, tumbled among the heaps of presents at Suleyman's feet, offering a ghastly contrast to the gems, gold and velvet bales. The Sultan stared down at it and in that instant his shimmering pretense of triumph slipped from him; his glory turned to tinsel and dust. Ibrahim tore at his beard with a gurgling, strangling sound, purple with rage.

At the Sultan's feet, the features frozen in a death-mask of horror, lay the severed head of Mikhal Oglu, Vulture of the Grand Turk.

Contents

THE SOWERS OF THE THUNDER

By Robert E. Howard

Iron winds and ruin and flame.
And a Horseman shaking with giant mirth;
Over the corpse-strewn, blackened earth
Death, stalking naked, came
Like a storm-cloud shattering the ships;
Yet the Rider seated high.
Paled at the smile on a dead king's lips.
As the tall white horse went by.
--The Ballad of Baibars

CHAPTER 1

The idlers in the tavern glanced up at the figure framed in the doorway. It was a tall broad man who stood there, with the torch-lit shadows and the clamor of the bazaars at his back. His garments were simple tunic, and short breeches of leather; a camel's-hair mantle hung from his broad shoulders and sandals were on his feet. But belying the garb of the peaceful traveler, a short straight stabbing sword hung at his girdle. One massive arm, ridged with muscles, was outstretched, the brawny hand gripping a pilgrim's staff, as the man stood, powerful legs wide braced, in the doorway. His bare legs were hairy, knotted like tree trunks. His coarse red locks were confined by a single band of blue cloth, and from his square dark face, his strange blue eyes blazed with a kind of reckless and wayward mirth, reflected by the half-smile that curved his thin lips.

His glance passed over the hawk-faced seafarers and ragged loungers who brewed tea and squabbled endlessly, to rest on a man who sat apart at a rough-hewn table, with a wine pitcher. Such a man the watcher in the door had never seen--tall, deep-chested, broad-shouldered, built with the dangerous suppleness of a panther. His eyes were as cold as blue ice, set off by a mane of golden hair tinted with red; so to the man in the doorway that hair seemed like burning gold. The man at the table wore a light shirt of silvered mail, a long lean sword hung at his hip, and on the bench beside him lay a kite-shaped shield and a light helmet.

The man in the guise of a traveler strode purposefully forward and halted, hands resting on the table across which he smiled mockingly at the other, and spoke in a tongue strange to the seated man, newly come to the East.

The one turned to an idler and asked in Norman French: "What does the infidel say?"

"I said," replied the traveler in the same tongue, "that a man can not even enter an Egyptian inn these days without finding some dog of a Christian under his feet."

As the traveler had spoken the other had risen, and now the speaker dropped his hand to his sword. Scintillant lights flickered in the other's eyes and he moved like a flash of summer lightning. His left hand darted out to lock in the breast of the traveler's tunic, and in his right hand the long sword flashed out. The traveler was caught flat-footed, his sword half clear of its sheath. But the faint smile did not leave his lips and he stared almost childishly at the blade that flickered before his eyes, as if fascinated by its dazzling.

"Heathen dog," snarled the swordsman, and his voice was like the slash of a blade through fabric, "I'll send you to Hell unshriven!"

"What panther whelped you that you move as a cat strikes?" responded the other curiously, as calmly as if his life were not weighing in the balance. "But you took me by surprize. I did not know that a Frank dare draw sword in Damietta."

The Frank glared at him moodily; the wine he had drunk showed in the dangerous gleams that played in his eyes where lights and shadows continuously danced and shifted.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Haroum the Traveler," the other grinned. "Put up your steel. I crave pardon for my gibing words. It seems there are Franks of the old breed yet."

With a change of mood the Frank thrust his sword back into its sheath with an impatient clash. Turning back to his bench he indicated table and wine pitcher with a sweeping gesture.

"Sit and refresh yourself; if you are a traveler, you have a tale to tell."

Haroun did not at once comply. His gaze swept the inn and he beckoned the innkeeper, who came grudgingly forward. As he approached the Traveler, the innkeeper suddenly shrank back with a low half-stifled cry. Haroun's eyes went suddenly merciless and he said, "What then, host, do you see in me a man you have known aforetime, perchance?"

His voice was like the purr of a hunting tiger and the wretched innkeeper shivered as with an ague, his dilated eyes fixed on the broad, corded hand that stroked the hilt of the stabbing-sword.

"No, no, master," he mouthed. "By Allah, I know you not--I never saw you before--and Allah grant I never see you again," he added mentally.

"Then tell me what does this Frank here, in mail and wearing a sword," ordered Haroun bruskly, in Turki. "The dog-Venetians are allowed to trade in Damietta as in Alexandria, but they pay for the privilege in humility and insult, and none dares gird on a blade here--much less lift it against a Believer."

"He is no Venetian, good Haroun," answered the innkeeper. "Yesterday he came ashore from a Venetian trading-galley, but he consorts not with the traders or the crew of the infidels. He strides boldly through the streets, wearing steel openly and ruffling against all who would cross him. He says he is going to Jerusalem and could not find a ship bound for any port in Palestine, so came here, intending to travel the rest of the way by land. The Believers have said he is mad, and none molests him."

"Truly, the mad are touched by Allah and given His protection," mused Haroun. "Yet this man is not altogether mad, I think. Bring wine, dog!"

The innkeeper ducked in a deep salaam and hastened off to do the Traveler's bidding. The Prophet's command against strong drink was among other orthodox precepts disobeyed in Damietta where many nations foregathered and Turk rubbed shoulders with Copt, Arab with Sudani.

Haroun seated himself opposite the Frank and took the wine goblet proffered by a servant.

"You sit in the midst of your enemies like a shah of the East, my lord," he grinned. "By Allah, you have the bearing of a king."

"I am a king, infidel," growled the other; the wine he had drunk had touched him with a reckless and mocking madness.

"And where lies your kingdom, malik?" The question was not asked in mockery. Haroun had seen many broken kings drifting among the debris that floated Eastward.

"On the dark side of the moon," answered the Frank with a wild and bitter laugh. "Among the ruins of all the unborn or forgotten empires which etch the twilight of the lost ages. Cahal Ruadh O'Donnel, king of Ireland--the name means naught to you, Haroun of the East, and naught to the land which was my birthright. They who were my foes sit in the high seats of power, they who were my vassals lie cold and still, the bats haunt my shattered castles, and already the name of Red Cahal is dim in the memories of men. So--fill up my goblet, slave!"

"You have the soul of a warrior, malik. Was it treachery overcame you?"

"Aye, treachery," swore Cahal, "and the wiles of a woman who coiled about my soul until I was as one blind--to be cast out at the end like a broken pawn. Aye, the Lady Elinor de Courcey, with her black hair like midnight shadows on Lough Derg, and the grey eyes of her, like--" he started suddenly, like a man waking from a trance, and his wayward eyes blazed.

"Saints and devils!" he roared. "Who are you that I should spill out my soul to? The wine has betrayed me and loosened my tongue, but I--" He reached for his sword but Haroun laughed.

"I've done you no harm, malik. Turn this murderous spirit of yours into another channel. By Erlik, I'll give you a test to cool your blood!"

Rising, he caught up a javelin lying beside a drunken soldier, and striding around the table, his eyes recklessly alight, he extended his massive arm, gripping the shaft close to the middle, point upward.

"Grip the shaft, malik," he laughed. "In all my days I have met no one who was man enough to twist a stave out of my hand."

Cahal rose and gripped the shaft so that his clenched fingers almost touched those of Haroun. Then, legs braced wide, arms bent at the elbow, each man exerted his full strength against the other. They were well matched; Cahal was a trifle taller, Haroun thicker of body. It was bear opposed to tiger. Like two statues they stood straining, neither yielding an inch, the javelin almost motionless under the equal forces. Then, with a sudden rending snap, the tough wood gave way and each man staggered, holding half the shaft, which had parted under the terrific strain.

"Hai!" shouted Haroun, his eyes sparkling; then they dulled with sudden doubt.

"By Allah, malik," said he, "this is an ill thing! Of two men, one should be master of the other, lest both come to a bad end. Yet this signifies that neither of us will ever yield to the other, and in the end, each will work the other ill."

"Sit down and drink," answered the Gael, tossing aside the broken shaft and reaching for the wine goblet, his dreams of lost grandeur and his anger both apparently forgotten. "I have not been long in the East, but I knew not there were such as you among the paynim. Surely you are not one with the Egyptians, Arabs and Turks I have seen."

"I was born far to the east, among the tents of the Golden Horde, on the steppes of High Asia," said Haroun, his mood changing back to joviality as he flung himself down on his bench. "Ha! I was almost a man grown before I heard of Muhammad--on whom peace! Hai, bogatyr, I have been many things! Once I was a princeling of the Tatars--son of the lord Subotai who was right hand to Genghis Khan. Once I was a slave--when the Turkomans drove a raid east and carried off youths and girls from the Horde. In the slave markets of El Kahira I was sold for three pieces of silver, by Allah, and my master gave me to the Bahairiz--the slave-soldiers--because he feared I'd strangle him. Ha! Now I am Haroun the traveler, making pilgrimage to the holy place. But once, only a few days agone, I was man to Baibars--whom the devil fly away with!"

"Men say in the streets that this Baibars is the real ruler of Cairo," said Cahal curiously; new to the East though he was, he had heard that name oft-repeated.

"Men lie," responded Haroun. "The sultan rules Egypt and Shadjar ad Darr rules the sultan. Baibars is only the general of the Bahairiz--the great oaf!

"I was his man!" he shouted suddenly, with a great laugh, "to come and go at his bidding--to put him to bed--to rise with him--to sit down at meat with him--aye, and to put food and drink into his fool's-mouth. But I have escaped him! Allah, by Allah and by Allah, I have naught to do with this great fool Baibars tonight! I am a free man and the devil may fly away with him and with the sultan, and Shadjar ad Darr and all Saladin's empire! But I am my own man tonight!"

He pulsed with an energy that would not let him be still or silent; he seemed vibrant and joyously mad with the sheer exuberance of life and the huge mirth of living. With gargantuan laughter he smote the table thunderously with his open hand and roared: "By Allah, malik, you shall help me celebrate my escape from the great oaf Baibars--whom the devil fly away with! Away with this slop, dogs! Bring kumiss! The Nazarene lord and I intend to hold such a drinking bout as Damietta's inns have not seen in a hundred years!"

"But my master has already emptied a full wine pitcher and is more than half drunk!" clamored the nondescript servant Cahal had picked up on the wharves--not that he cared, but whomever he served, he wished to have the best of any contest, and besides it was his Oriental instinct to intrude his say.

"So!" roared Haroun, catching up a full wine pitcher. "I will not take advantage of any man! See--I quaff this thimbleful that we may start on even terms!" And drinking deeply, he flung down the pitcher empty.

The servants of the inn brought kumiss--fermented mare's milk, in leathern skins, bound and sealed--illegal drink, brought down by the caravans from the lands of the Turkomans, to tempt the sated palates of nobles, and to satisfy the craving of the steppesmen among the mercenaries and the Bahairiz.

Then, goblet for goblet with Haroun, Cahal quaffed the unfamiliar, whitish, acid stuff, and never had the exiled Irish prince seen such a cup-companion as this wanderer. For between enormous drafts, Haroun shook the smoke-stained rafters with giant laughter, and shouted over spicy tales that breathed the very scents of Cairo's merry obscenity and high comedy. He sang Arab love songs that sighed with the whisper of palm leaves and the swish of silken veils, and he roared riding songs in a tongue none in the tavern understood, but which vibrated with the drum of Mongol hoofs and the clashing of swords.

The moon had set and even the clamor of Damietta had ebbed in the darkness before dawn, when Haroun staggered up and clutched reeling at the table for support. A single weary slave stood by, to pour wine. Keeper, servants and guests snored on the floor or had slipped away long before. Haroun shouted a thick-tongued war cry and yelled aloud with the sheer riotousness of his mirth. Sweat stood in beads on his face and the veins of his temples swelled and throbbed from his excesses. His wild wayward eyes danced with joyous deviltry.

"Would you were not a king, malik!" he roared, catching up a stout bludgeon. "I would show you cudgel-play! Aye, my blood is racing like a Turkoman stallion and in good sport I would fain deal strong blows on somebody's pate, by Allah!"

"Then grip your stick, man," answered Cahal reeling up. "Men call me fool, but no man has ever said I was backward where blows were going, be they of steel or wood!"

Upsetting the table, he gripped a leg and wrenched powerfully. There was a splintering of wood, and the rough leg came away in his iron hand.

"Here is my cudgel, wanderer!" roared the Gael. "Let the breaking of heads begin and if the Prophet loves you, he'd best fling his mantle over your skull!"

"Salaam to you, malik!" yelled Haroun. "No other king since Malik Ric would take up cudgels with a masterless wanderer!" And with giant laughter, he lunged.

The fight was necessarily short and fierce. The wine they had drunk had made eye and hand uncertain, and their feet unsteady, but it had not robbed them of their tigerish strength. Haroun struck first, as a bear strikes, and it was by luck rather than skill that Cahal partly parried the whistling blow. Even so it fell glancingly above his ear, filling his vision with a myriad sparks of light, and knocking him back against the upset table. Cahal gripped the table edge with his left hand for support and struck back so savagely and swiftly that Haroun could neither duck nor parry. Blood spattered, the cudgel splintered in Cahal's hand and the Traveler dropped like a log, to lie motionless.

Cahal flung aside his cudgel with a motion of disgust and shook his head violently to clear it.

"Neither of us would yield to the other--well, in this I have prevailed--"

He stopped. Haroun lay sprawled serenely and a sound of placid snoring rose on the air. Cahal's blow had laid open his scalp and felled him, but it was the incredible amount of liquor the Tatar had drunk that had caused him to lie where he had fallen. And now Cahal knew that if he did not get out into the cool night air at once, he too would fall senseless beside Haroun.

Cursing himself disgustedly, he kicked his servant awake and gathering up shield, helmet and cloak, staggered out of the inn. Great white clusters of stars hung over the flat roofs of Damietta, reflected in the black lapping waves of the river. Dogs and beggars slept in the dust of the street, and in the black shadows of the crooked alleys not even a thief stole. Cahal swung into the saddle of the horse the sleepy servant brought, and reined his way through the winding silent streets. A cold wind, forerunner of dawn, cleared away the fumes of the wine as he rode out of the tangle of alleys and bazaars. Dawn was not yet whitening the east, but the tang of dawn was in the air.

Past the flat-topped mud huts along the irrigation ditches he rode, past the wells with their long wooden sweeps and deep clumps of palms. Behind him the ancient city slumbered, shadowy, mysterious, alluring. Before him stretched the sands of the Jifar.

CHAPTER 2

The Bedouins did not cut Red Cahal's throat on the road from Damietta to Ascalon. He was preserved for a different destiny and so he rode, careless, and alone except for his ragamuffin servant, across the wastelands, and no barbed arrow or curved blade touched him, though a band of hawk-like riders in floating white khalats harried him the last part of the way and followed him like a wolf pack to the very gates of the Christian outposts.

It was a restless and unquiet land through which Red Cahal rode on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the warm spring days of that year 1243. The red-haired prince learned much that was new to him, of the land which had been but a vague haze of disconnected names and events in his mind when he started on his exiled pilgrimage. He had known that the Emperor Frederick II had regained Jerusalem from the infidels without fighting a battle. Now he learned that the Holy City was shared with the Moslems--to whom it likewise was holy; Al Kuds, the Holy, they called it, for from thence, they said, Muhammad ascended to paradise, and there on the last day would he sit in judgment on the souls of men.

And Cahal learned that the kingdom of Outremer was but a shadow of an heroic past. In the north Bohemund VI held Antioch and Tripoli. In the south Christendom held the coast as far as Ascalon, with some inland towns such as Hebron, Bethlehem, and Ramlah. The grim castles of the Templars and of the Knights of St. John loomed like watchdogs above the land and the fierce soldier-monks wore arms day and night, ready to ride to any part of the kingdom threatened by pagan invasion. But how long could that thin line of ramparts and men along the coast stand against the growing pressure of the heathen hinterlands?

In the talk of castle and tavern, as he rode toward Jerusalem, Cahal heard again the name of Baibars. Men said the sultan of Egypt, kin of the great Saladin, was in his dotage, ruled by the girl-slave, Shadjar ad Darr, and that sharing her rule were the war-chiefs, Ae Beg the Kurd, and Baibars the Panther. This Baibars was a devil in human form, men said--a guzzler of wine and a lover of women; yet his wits were as keen as a monk's and his prowess in battle was the subject of many songs among the Arab minstrels. A strong man, and ambitious.

He was generalissimo of the mercenaries, men said, who were the real strength of the Egyptian army--Bahairiz, some called them, others the White Slaves of the River, the memluks. This host was, in the main, composed of Turkish slaves, raised up in its ranks and trained only in the arts of war. Baibars himself had served as a common soldier in the ranks, rising to power by the sheer might of his arm. He could eat a roasted sheep at one meal, the Arab wanderers said, and though wine was forbidden the Faithful, it was well known that he had drunk all his officers under the table. He had been known to break a man's spine in his bare hands in a moment of rage, and when he rode into battle swinging his heavy scimitar, none could stand before him.

And if this incarnate devil came up out of the South with his cutthroats, how could the lords of Outremer stand against him, without the aid that war-torn and intrigue-racked Europe had ceased to send? Spies slipped among the Franks, learning their weaknesses, and it was said that Baibars himself had gained entrance into Bohemund's palace in the guise of a wandering teller-of-tales. He must be in league with the Evil One himself, this Egyptian chief. He loved to go among his people in disguise, it was said, and he ruthlessly slew any man who recognized him. A strange soul, full of wayward whims, yet ferocious as a tiger.

Yet it was not so much Baibars of whom the people talked, nor yet of Sultan Ismail, the Moslem lord of Damascus. There was a threat in the blue mysterious East which overshadowed both these nearer foes.

Cahal heard of a strange new terrible people, like a scourge out of the East--Mongols, or Tartars as the priests called them, swearing they were the veritable demons of Tatary, spoken of by the prophets of old. More than a score of years before they had burst like a sandstorm out of the East, trampling all in their path; Islam had crumpled before them and kings had been dashed into the dust. And as their chief, men named one Subotai, whom Haroun the traveler, Cahal remembered, had claimed as sire.

Then the horde had turned its course and the Holy Land had been spared. The Mongols had drifted back into the limbo of the unknown East with their ox-tail standards, their lacquered armor, their kettledrums and terrible bows, and men had almost forgotten them. But now of late years the vultures had circled again in the East, and from time to time news had

trickled down through the hills of the Kurds, of the Turkoman clans flying in shattered rout before the yak-tail banners. Suppose the unconquerable Horde should turn southward? Subotai had spared Palestine--but who knew the mind of Mangu Khan, whom the Arab wanderers named the present lord of the nomads?

So the people talked in the dreamy spring weather as Cahal rode to Jerusalem, seeking to forget the past, losing himself in the present; absorbing the spirit and traditions of the country and the people, picking up new languages with the characteristic facility of the Gael.

He journeyed to Hebron, and in the great cathedral of the Virgin at Bethlehem, knelt beside the crypt where candles burned to mark the birthplace of our fair Seigneur Christ. And he rode up to Jerusalem, with its ruined walls and its mullahs calling the muezzin within earshot of the priests chanting beside the Sepulcher. Those walls had been destroyed by the Sultan of Damascus, years before.

Beyond the Via Dolorosa he saw the slender columns of the Al Aksa portals and was told Christian hands first shaped them. He was shown mosques that had once been Christian chapels, and was told that the gilded dome above the mosque of Omar covered a grey rock which was the Muhammadan holy of holies--the rock whence the Prophet ascended to paradise. Aye, and thereon, in the days of Israel, had Abraham stood, and the Ark of the Covenant had rested, and the Temple whence Christ drove the merchants; for the Rock was the pinnacle of Mount Moriah, one of the two mountains on which Jerusalem was built. But now the Moslem Dome of the Rock hid it from Christian view, and dervishes with naked swords stood night and day to bar the way of Unbelievers; though nominally the city was in Christian hands. And Cahal realized how weak the Franks of Outremer had grown.

He rode in the hills about the Holy City and stood on the Mount of Olives where Tancred had stood, nearly a hundred and fifty years before, for his first sight of Jerusalem. And he dreamed deep dim dreams of those old days when men first rode from the West strong with faith and eager with zeal, to found a kingdom of God.

Now men cut their neighbors' throats in the West and cried out beneath the heels of ambitious kings and greedy popes, and in their wars and crying out, forgot that thin frontier where the remnants of a fading glory clung to their slender boundaries.

Through budding spring, hot summer and dreamy autumn, Red Cahal rode--following a blind pilgrimage that led even beyond Jerusalem and whose goal he could not see or guess. Ascalon he tarried in, Tyre, Jaffa and Acre. He was visitor at the castles of the Military Orders. Walter de Brienne offered him a part in the rule of the fading kingdom, but Cahal shook his head and rode on. The throne he had never pressed had been snatched beyond his reach and no other earthly glory would suffice.

And so in the budding dream of a new spring he came to the castle of Renault d'Ibelin beyond the frontier.

CHAPTER 3

The Sieur Renault was a cousin of the powerful crusading family of d'Ibelin which held its grim grey castles on the coast, but little of the fruits of conquest had fallen to him. A wanderer and adventurer, living by his wits and the edge of his sword, he had gotten more hard blows than gold. He was a tall lean man with hawk-eyes and a predatory nose. His mail was worn, his velvet cloak shabby and torn, the gems long gone from hilt of sword and dagger.

And the knight's hold was a haunt of poverty. The dry moat which encircled the castle was filled up in many places; the outer walls were mere heaps of crumbled stone. Weeds grew rank in the courtyard and over the filled-up well.

The chambers of the castle were dusty and bare, and the great desert spiders spun their webs on the cold stones. Lizards scampered across the broken flags and the tramp of mailed feet resounded eerily in the echoing emptiness. No merry villagers bearing grain and wine thronged the barren courts, and no gayly clad pages sang among the dusty corridors. For over half a century the keep had stood deserted, until d'Ibelin had ridden across the Jordan to make it a reaver's hold. For the Sieur Renault, in the stress of poverty, had become no more than a bandit chief, raiding the caravans of the Moslems.

And now in the dim dusty tower of the crumbling hold, the knight in his shabby finery sat at wine with his guest.

"The tale of your betrayal is not entirely unknown to me, good sir," said Renault--unbidden, for since that night of drunkenness in Damietta, Cahal had not spoken of his past. "Some word of affairs in Ireland has drifted into this isolated land. As one ruined adventurer to another, I bid you welcome. But I would like to hear the tale from your own lips."

Cahal laughed mirthlessly and drank deeply.

"A tale soon told and best forgotten. I was a wanderer, living by my sword, robbed of my heritage before my birth. The English lords pretended to sympathize with my claim to the Irish throne. If I would aid them against the O'Neills, they would throw off their allegiance to Henry of England--would serve me as my barons. So swore William Fitzgerald and his peers. I am not an utter fool. They had not persuaded me so easily but for the Lady Elinor de Courcey, with her black hair and proud Norman eyes--who feigned love for me. Hell!

"Why draw out the tale? I fought for them--won wars for them. They tricked me and cast me aside. I went into battle for the throne with less than a thousand men. Their bones rot in the hills of Donegal and better had I died there--but my kerns bore me senseless from the field. And then my own clan cast me forth.

"I took the cross--after I cut the throat of William Fitzgerald among his own henchmen. Speak of it no more; my kingdom was clouds and moonmist. I seek forgetfulness--of lost ambition and the ghost of a dead love."

"Stay here and raid the caravans with me," suggested Renault.

Cahal shrugged his shoulders.

"It would not last, I fear. With but forty-five men-at-arms, you can not hold this pile of ruins long. I have seen that the old well is long choked and broken in, and the reservoirs shattered. In case of a siege you would have only the tanks you have built, filled with water you carry from the muddy spring outside the walls. They would last only a few days at most."

"Poverty drives men to desperate deeds," frankly admitted Renault. "Godfrey, first lord of Jerusalem, built this castle for an outpost in the days when his rule extended beyond Jordan. Saladin stormed and partly dismantled it, and since then it has housed only the bat and the jackal. I made it my lair, from whence I raid the caravans which go down to Mecca, but the plunder has been scanty enough.

"My neighbor the Shaykh Suleyman ibn Omad will inevitably wipe me out if I bide here long, though I have skirmished successfully with his riders and beat off a flying raid. He has sworn to hang my head on his tower, driven to madness by my raids on the Mecca pilgrims whom it is his obligation to protect.

"Well, I have another thing in mind. Look, I scratch a map on the table with my dagger-point. Here is this castle; here to the north is El Omad, the stronghold of the Shaykh Suleyman. Now look--far to the east I trace a wandering line--so. That is the great river Euphrates, which begins in the hills of Asia Minor and traverses the whole plain, joining at last with the Tigris and flowing into Bahr el Fars--the Persian Gulf--below Bassorah. Thus--I trace the Tigris.

"Now where I make this mark beside the river Tigris stands Mosul of the Persians. Beyond Mosul lies an unknown land of deserts and mountains, but among those mountains there is a city called Shahazar, the treasure-trove of the sultans. There the lords of the East send their gold and jewels for safekeeping, and the city is ruled by a cult of warriors sworn to safeguard the treasures. The gates are kept bolted night and day, and no caravans pass out of the city. It is a secret place of wealth and pleasure and the Moslems seek to keep word of it from Christian ears. Now it is my mind to desert this ruin and ride east in quest of that city!"

Cahal smiled in admiration of the splendid madness, but shook his head.

"If it is as well guarded as you, say, how could a handful of men hope to take it, even if they win through the hostile country which lies between?"

"Because a handful of Franks has taken it," retorted d'Ibelin. "Nearly half a century ago the adventurer Cormac FitzGeoffrey raided Shahazar among the mountains and bore away untold plunder. What he did, another can do. Of course, it is madness; the chances are all that the Kurds will cut our throats before we ever see the banks of the Euphrates. But we will ride swiftly--and then, the Moslems may be so engaged with the Mongols, a small, hard-riding band might slip through. We will ride ahead of the news of our coming, and smite Shahazar as a whirlwind smites. Lord Cahal, shall we sit supine until Baibars comes up out of Egypt and cuts all our throats, or shall we cast the dice of chance to loot the eagle's eyrie under the nose of Moslem and Mongol alike?"

Cahal's cold eyes gleamed and he laughed aloud as the lurking madness in his soul responded to the madness of the proposal. His hard hand smote against the brown palm of Renault d'Ibelin.

"Doom hovers over all Outremer, and Death is no grimmer met on a mad quest than in the locked spears of battle! East we ride to the Devil knows what doom!"

The sun had scarce set when Cahal's ragged servant, who had followed him faithfully through all his previous wanderings, stole away from the ruined walls and rode toward Jordan, flogging his shaggy pony hard. The madness of his master was no affair of his and life was sweet, even to a Cairo gutter-waif.

The first stars were blinking when Renault d'Ibelin and Red Cahal rode down the slope at the head of the men-at-arms. A hard-bitten lot these were, lean taciturn fighters, born in Outremer for the most part--a few veterans of Normandy and the Rhineland who had followed wandering lords into the Holy Land and had remained. They were well armed--clad in chain-mail shirts and steel caps, bearing kite-shaped shields. They rode fleet Arab horses and tall Turkoman steeds, and led horses followed. It was the capture of a number of fine steeds which had crystallized the idea of the raid in Renault's mind.

D'Ibelin had long learned the lesson of the East--swift marches that went ahead of the news of the raid, and depended on the quality of the mounts. Yet he knew the whole plan was madness. Cahal and Renault rode into the unknown land and far in the east the vultures circled endlessly.

CHAPTER 4

The bearded watcher on the tower above the gates of El Omad shaded his hawk-eyes. In the east a dust cloud grew and out of the cloud a black dot came flying. And the lean Arab knew it was a lone horseman, riding hard. He shouted a warning, and in an instant other lean, hawk-eyed figures were at his side, brown fingers toying with bowstring and cane-shafted spear. They watched the approaching figure with the intentness of men born to feud and raid.

"A Frank," grunted one, "and on a dying horse."

They watched tensely as the lone rider dipped out of sight in a dry wadi, came into view again on the near side, clattered reelingly across the dusty level and drew rein beneath the gate. A lean hand drew shaft to ear, but a word from the first watcher halted the archer. The Frank below had half-climbed, half-fallen from his reeling horse, and now he staggered to the gate and smote against it resoundingly with his mailed fist.

"By Allah and by Allah!" swore the bearded watcher in wonder. "The Nazarene is mad!" He leaned over the battlement and shouted: "Oh, dead man, what wouldst thou at the gate of El Omad?"

The Frank looked up with eyes glazed from thirst and the burning winds of the desert. His mail was white with the drifting dust, with which likewise his lips were parched and caked. He spoke with difficulty.

"Open the gates, dog, lest ill befall you!"

"It is Kizil Malik--the Red King--whom men call The Mad," whispered an archer. "He rode with the lord Renault, the shepherds say. Hold him in play while I fetch the Shaykh."

"Art thou weary of life, Nazarene," called the first speaker, "that thou comest to the gate of thine enemy?"

"Fetch the lord of the castle, dog," roared the Gael. "I parley not with menials--and my horse is dying."

The tall lean form of Shaykh Suleyman ibn Omad loomed among the guardsmen and the old chief swore in his beard.

"By Allah, this is a trap of some sort. Nazarene, what do ye here?"

Cahal licked his blackened lips with a dry tongue.

"When the wild dogs run, panther and buffalo flee together," he said. "Doom rushes from the east on Moslem and Christian alike. I bring you warning--call in your vassals and make fast your gates, lest another rising sun find you sleeping among the charred embers of your hold. I claim the courtesy due a perishing traveler--and my horse is dying."

"It is no trap," growled the Shaykh in his beard. "The Frank has a tale--there has been a harrying in the east and perchance the Mongols are upon us--open the gates, dogs, and let him in."

Through the opened gates Cahal unsteadily led his drooping steed, and his first words gained him esteem among the Arabs.

"See to my horse," he mumbled, and willing hands complied.

Cahal stumbled to a horse block and sank down, his head in his hands. A slave gave him a flagon of water and he drank avidly. As he set down the flagon he was aware that the Shaykh had come from the tower and stood before him. Suleyman's keen eyes ran over the Gael from head to foot, noting the lines of weariness on his face, the dust that caked his mail, the fresh dints on helmet and shield--black dried blood was caked thick about the mouth of his scabbard, showing he had sheathed his sword without pausing to cleanse it.

"You have fought hard and fled swiftly," concluded Suleyman aloud.

"Aye, by the Saints!" laughed the prince. "I have fled for a night and a day and a night without rest. This horse is the third which has fallen under me--"

"Whom do you flee?"

"A horde that must have ridden up from the dim limbo of Hell! Wild riders with tall fur caps and the heads of wolves on their standards."

"Allah il Allah!" swore Suleyman. "Kharesmians!--flying before the Mongols!"

"They were apparently fleeing some greater horde," answered Cahal. "Let me tell the tale swiftly--the Sieur Renault and I rode east with all his men, seeking the fabled city of Shahazar--"

"So that was the quest!" interrupted Suleyman. "Well, I was preparing to sweep down and stamp out that robbers' nest when divers herdsmen brought me word that the bandits had ridden away swiftly in the night like the thieves they were. I could have ridden after, but knew that Christians riding eastward but rode to their doom--and none can alter the will of Allah."

"Aye," grinned Cahal wolfishly, "east to our doom we rode, like men riding blind into the teeth of a storm. We slashed our way through the lands of the Kurds and crossed the Euphrates. Beyond, far to the east, we saw smoke and flame and the wheeling of many vultures, and Renault said the Turkomans fought the Horde. But we met no fugitives and I wondered then--I wonder not now. The slayers rode over them like a wave out of the night and none was left to flee.

"Like men riding to death in a dream, we rode into the onrushing storm and the suddenness of its coming was like a thunderbolt. A sudden drum of hoofs over a ridge and they were upon us--hundreds of them, a swarm of outriders scouting ahead of the horde. There was no chance to flee--our men died where they stood."

"And the Sieur Renault?" asked the Shaykh.

"Dead!" said Cahal. "I saw a curved blade cleave his helmet and his skull."

"Allah be merciful and save his soul from the hellfire of unbelievers!" piously exclaimed Suleyman, who had sworn to kill the luckless adventurer on sight.

"He took toll before he fell," grimly answered the Gael. "By God, the heathen lay like ripe grain beneath our horses' hoofs before the last man fell. I alone hacked my way through."

The Shaykh, grown old in warfare, visualized the scene that lay behind that simple sentence--the swarming, howling, fur-clad horsemen with their barbaric war cries, and Red Cahal riding like a wind of Death through that maelstrom of flashing blades, his sword singing in his hand as horse and rider went down before him.

"I outstripped the pursuers," said Cahal, "and as I rode over a hill I looked back and saw the great black mass of the horde swarming like locusts over the land, filling the sky with the clamor of their kettledrums. The Turkomans had risen behind us as we had raced through their lands, and now the desert was alive with horsemen--but the whole east was aflame and the tribesmen had no time to hunt down a single rider. They were faced with a stronger foe. So I won through.

"My horse fell under me, but I stole a steed from a herd watched by a Turkoman boy. When it could do no more, I took a mount from a wandering Kurd who rode up, thinking to loot a dying traveler. And now I say to you, whom men dub the Watcher of the Trail--beware, lest these demons from the east ride over your ruins as they have ridden over the corpses of the Turkomans. I do not think they'll lay siege--they are like wolves ranging the steppes; they strike and pass on. But they ride like the wind. They have crossed the Euphrates. Behind me last night the sky was red as blood. Hard as I have ridden, they must be close on my heels."

"Let them come," grimly answered the Arab. "El Omad has held out against Nazarene, Kurd and Turk--for a hundred years no foe has set foot within these walls. Malik, this is a time when Christian and Moslem should join hands. I thank you for your warning, and beg you to aid me in holding the walls."

But Cahal shook his head.

"You will not need my help, and I have other work to do. It was not to save my worthless life that I have ridden three noble steeds to death--otherwise I had left my body beside Renault d'Ibelin. I must ride on; Jerusalem is in the path of these devils, with its ruined walls and scanty guard."

Suleyman paled and plucked his beard.

"Al Kuds! These pagan dogs will slay Christian and Muhammadan alike, and desecrate the holy places!"

"And so," Cahal rose stiffly, "I must on to warn them. So swiftly have these Kharesmians come that no word of their coming can have gone into Palestine. On me alone the burden of warning lies. Give me a fleet horse and let me go."

"You can do no more," objected Suleyman. "You are foredone--an hour more and you would drop senseless from the saddle. I will send one of my men instead--"

Cahal shook his head. "The duty is mine. Yet I will sleep an hour--one small hour can make no great difference. Then I will fare on."

"Come to my couch," urged Suleyman, but the hardy Gael shook his head.

"This has been my couch before," said he, and flinging himself down on the scanty grass of the courtyard, he drew his cloak about him and fell into the deep sleep of utter exhaustion. Yet he slept but an hour when he awoke of his own accord. Food and wine were placed before him and he drank and ate ravenously. His features were still drawn and haggard, but in his short rest he had drawn upon hidden springs of endurance. An iron man in an age of iron, he added to his physical ruggedness a dynamic nerve-energy that carried him beyond himself and upheld him after more stolid men had dropped by the wayside.

As he reined out of the gates on a swift Arab steed, the watchmen shouted and pointed to the east where a pillar of smoke billowed up against the hot blue sky. The Shaykh flung up his arm in salute as Cahal rode toward Jerusalem at a swinging gallop that ate up the miles.

Bedouins in their black felt tents gaped at him; herdsmen leaning on their staves stiffened at his shout. A rising drum of hoofs, the wave of a mailed arm, a shouted warning, then the dwindling hoofbeats--behind him the frenzied people snatched up their belongings and fled shrieking to places of shelter or hiding.

CHAPTER 5

The moon was setting as Cahal splashed through the calm waters of the Jordan, flecked with the mirrored stars. The sun was rising when his horse fell at the gate of Jerusalem that opens on the Damascus road. Cahal staggered up, half-dead himself, and gazing at the crumbling ruins of the shattered walls, he groaned aloud. On foot he hurried forward and a group of placid Syrians watched him curiously. A bearded Flemish man-at-arms came forward, trailing his pike. Cahal snatched a wine-flask that hung at the soldier's girdle and emptied it at one draft.

"Lead me to the patriarch," he gasped throatily. "Doom rides on swift hoofs to Jerusalem--ha!"

From the people a thin cry of wonder and fear had gone up--Cahal wheeled and felt fear constrict his throat. Again in the east he saw flying flame and drifting smoke--the gigantic tracks of the destroying horde.

"They have crossed the Jordan!" he cried. "Saints of God, when did men born of women ride so madly? They spurn the very wind--curst be the weakness that made me waste a single hour--"

The words died in his throat as he looked at the ruined walls. Truly, an hour more or less could have no significance in that doomed city.

Cahal hurried through the streets with the soldier, and he saw that already the word had spread like wildfire. Jews in their blue shubas ran about howling; in the streets and on the housetops women wrung their white hands and wailed. Tall Syrians bound their belongings on donkeys and formed the nucleus of a disorderly horde that streamed out of the western gates staggering under bundles of household goods. The city crouched trembling and dazed with terror under the threat rising in the east. What horde was sweeping upon them they did not know, nor care; death is death, whoever the dealer.

Some cried out that the Tartars were upon them and both Moslem and Nazarene shook. Cahal found the patriarch bewildered and helpless. With a handful of soldiers, how could he defend the wall-less city? He was ready to give up his life in the vain attempt; he could do no more. The mullahs rallied their people, and for the first time in all history Moslem and Christian joined forces to defend the city that was holy to both. The great mass of the people fled into the mosques or the cathedrals, or crouched resignedly in the streets, dumbly awaiting the stroke. Men cried on Jehovah and on Allah, and some prophesied a miracle that should deliver the Holy City. But in the merciless blue sky no flaming sword appeared, only the smoke of the pillaging, the flame of the slaughter, and at last the dust clouds of the riders.

The patriarch had bunched his pitiful force of men-at-arms, knights, armed pilgrims and Moslems, at the Damascus Gate. Useless to man the ruined walls. There they would face the horde and give up their lives, without hope and without fear.

Cahal, his weariness half-forgotten in the drunkenness of anticipated battle, reined beside the patriarch on the great red stallion that had been given him, and cried out suddenly at the sight of a tall, broad man on a rangy Turkish bay.

"Haroun, by all the Saints!"

The other turned toward him and Cahal wavered. Was this Haroun? The fellow was clad in the mail shirt and peaked helmet of a Turkish soldier. On his brawny right arm he bore a round spiked buckler and at his belt hung a long broad scimitar, heavier by pounds than the average Moslem blade. Moreover, Haroun had been clean-shaven and this man wore the fierce curving mustachios of the Turk. Yet the build of him--that square dark face--those blazing blue eyes--

"By the Saints, Haroun," said Cahal heartily, "what do you here?"

"Allah blast me if I be any Haroun," answered the soldier in a deep growling voice. "I am Akbar the Soldier, come to Al Kuds on pilgrimage. You have mistaken me for another."

Cahal frowned. The voice was not even that of Haroun, yet surely in all the world there was not such another pair of eyes. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it is of no moment--where are you going?"

For the man had reined about.

"To the hills!" answered the soldier. "We can do no good by dying here--best come with me. From the dust, it is a whole horde that is riding upon us."

"Flee without striking a blow? Not I!" snapped Cahal. "Go, if you fear."

Akbar swore loudly. "By Allah and by Allah! A man had better place his head beneath an elephant's tread than call me coward! I'll stand my ground as long as any Nazarene!"

Cahal turned away shortly, irritated by the fellow's manner and by his boasting. Yet for all the soldier's wrath, it seemed to the Gael that a vagrant twinkle lighted his fierce eyes as though he shook with inward mirth. Then Cahal forgot him. A wail went up from the housetops where the helpless people watched their oncoming doom. The horde had swept into sight, up from the hazes of the Jordan's gorge.

The skies shook with the clamor of the kettledrums; the earth trembled with the thunder of the hoofs. The headlong speed of the yelling fiends numbed the minds of their victims. From the steppes of high Asia these barbarians had fled before the Mongols like thistledown flying before the wind. Drunken with the blood of slaughtered tribes, ten thousand strong they surged on Jerusalem, where thousands of helpless folk knelt shuddering.

Cahal saw anew the hideous figures which had haunted his half-delirious dreams as he swayed in the saddle on that long flight: tall rangy steeds on which crouched the broad forms of the riders in wolfskins and mail--square dark faces, eyes glaring like mad dogs' from beneath high fur caps or peaked helmets; standards with the heads of wolves, panthers and bears.

Headlong they swept down the Damascus road--leaping their horses over the broken walls, crowding through the ruined gates at breakneck speed--and headlong they smote the clump of defenders which spurred to meet them--smote them, broke them, shattered them, trampled them down and under, and over their mangled bodies, struck the heart of the doomed city.

Red hell reigned rampant in the streets of Jerusalem, where helpless men, women and children ran screaming before the slayers who rode them down, howling like wolves, spitting babes on their lances and holding them on high like gory standards. Under the frenzied hoofs pitiful forms fell writhing and blood flooded the gutters. Dark blood-stained hands tore the garments from shrieking girls and lance-butts shattered doors and windows behind which cowered terrified prey. All objects of worth were ripped from their places and screams of agony rose to the smoke-fouled heavens as the victims were tortured with steel and fire to make them give up their pitiful treasures. Death stalked howling through the streets of Jerusalem and men blasphemed their gods as they died.

In the first irresistible flood of that charge, such defenders as were not instantly ridden down had been torn apart and swept back in utter confusion. The weight of the impact had swept Red Cahal's steed away as on the crest of a flood, and he found himself reining about in a narrow alley, where he had been tossed as a bit of driftwood is flung into a back-eddy by a rushing tide. He had lost sight of the patriarch and had no doubt that he lay among the trampled dead before the Damascus Gate.

His sword was red to the hilt, his soul ablaze with the battle-lust, his brain sick with fury and horror as the cries of the butchered city smote on his ears.

"I'll leave my corpse before the Sepulcher," he growled, and wheeling, spurred up the alley. He raced down a narrow winding street and emerged upon the Via Dolorosa just as the first Kharesmian came flying along it, scimitar dripping crimson. The red stallion's shoulder brushed the barbarian's stirrup and Cahal's sword flashed like a sunburst. The Kharesmian's head leaped from his shoulders on an arch of crimson and the Gael yelped with murderous exultation.

And now came another riding like the wind, and Cahal saw it was Akbar. The soldier reined in and shouted, "Well, good sir, are you still determined to sacrifice both our lives?"

"Your life is your own--my life is mine!" roared Cahal, eyes blazing.

He saw that a group of horsemen had ridden up to the Sepulcher from another street and were dismounting, shouting in their barbaric tongue, spattering the holy stones with blood-drops from their blades. In a red mist of fury Cahal smote them as an avalanche smites the pines. His whistling sword cleft buckler and helmet, severing necks and splitting skulls; under the hammering hoofs of his screaming charger, men rolled with smashed heads. And even in his madness Cahal was aware that he was not alone. Akbar had charged after him; his great voice roared above the clamor and the heavy scimitar in his left hand crashed through mail and flesh and bone.

The men before the Sepulcher lay in a silent gory heap when Cahal reined back and shook the bloody mist from his eyes. Akbar roared in a strange tongue and smote him thunderously on the shoulders.

"Bodga, bogatyr!" he roared, his eyes dancing, and no longer Cahal doubted that he was Haroun. "You fight like a hero, by Erlik! But come, malik--you have offered a noble sacrifice to your God and He'll hardly blame you for saving yourself now. Thunder of Allah, man, we can not fight ten thousand!"

"Ride on," answered Cahal, shaking the red drops from his blade. "Here I die."

"Well," laughed Akbar, "if you wish to throw away your life here where it will do no good--that's your affair! The heathen may thank you, but your brothers scarcely will, when the raiders smite them suddenly! The horsemen are all dead or hemmed in the alleys. Only you and I escaped that charge. Who will carry the news of the raid to the Frankish barons?"

"You speak truth," said Cahal shortly. "Let us go."

The pair wheeled away and galloped down the street just as a howling horde came flying up the other end. Beyond the shattered walls Cahal looked back to see a mounting flame. He hid his face in his hands.

"Wounds of God!" he groaned. "They are burning the Sepulcher!"

"And defiling the Al Aksa mosque too, I doubt not," said Akbar tranquilly. "Well, that which is written will come to pass, and no man may escape his fate. All things pass away, yes, even the Holy of Holies."

Cahal shook his head, soul-sick. They rode through toiling bands of fugitives who screamed and caught at their stirrups, but Cahal steeled his heart. If he was to bear warning to the barons, he could not be burdened by helpless ones.

The roar of pillage and slaughter faded into the distance; only the smoke stood up among the hills, mute witness of the horror. Akbar laughed gustily.

"By Allah!" he swore, smiting his saddlebow, "these Kharesmians are woundy fighters! They ride like Tatars and slay like Turks! Right well would I lead them into battle! I had rather fight beside them than against them."

Cahal made no reply. His strange companion seemed to him like a faun, a soulless fantastic being full of titanic laughter at all human things--a creature outside the boundaries of men's dreams and reverences.

Akbar spoke abruptly. "Here our roads part for a space, malik; your road lies to Ascalon--mine to El Kahira."

"Why to Cairo, Akbar, or Haroun, or whatever your name is?" asked Cahal.

"Because I have business with that great oaf, Baibars, whom the devil fly away with!" yelled Akbar, and his shout of laughter floated back above the hoof-beats.

It was hours later when Cahal, pushing his horse as hard as he dared, met the travelers--a slender knight in full mail and vizored helmet, with a single attendant, a big carle with a rough red beard, who wore a horned helmet and a shirt of scale-mail and bore a heavy ax. Something slumbering stirred in Cahal as he looked on that fierce bluff face, and he reined in.

"Man, where have I seen you before?"

The fierce frosty eyes met him levelly.

"By Odin, that I can't say. I'm Wulfgar the Dane and this is my master."

Cahal glanced at the silent knight with his plain shield. Through the bars of the vizor, shadowed eyes looked at him--great God! A shock went through Cahal, leaving him bewildered and shaken with a thousand racing chaotic thoughts. He leaned forward, striving to peer through the lowered vizor, and the knight drew back with an almost womanish gesture of rebuke. Cahal reddened.

"I crave your pardon, sir," he said. "I did not intend this seeming rudeness."

"My master has taken a vow not to speak or reveal his features until he has accomplished his penance," broke in the rough Dane. "He is known as the Masked Knight. We journey to Jerusalem."

Sorrowfully Cahal shook his head.

"No Christian may ride thither. The paynim from the outer steppes have swept over the walls and the Holy of Holies lies in smoking ruins."

The Dane's bearded mouth gaped.

"Jerusalem--taken?" he mouthed stupidly. "Why, good sir, that can not be! How would God allow his Holy City to fall into the hands of the infidels?"

"I know not," said Cahal bitterly. "The ways of God and His infinite mercy are past my knowledge--but the streets of Jerusalem run with the blood of His people and the Sepulcher is black with the flames of the heathen."

Perplexed, the Dane tugged at his red beard and glanced at his master, sitting image-like in the saddle.

"By Odin," he growled, "what are we to do now?"

"There is but one thing to be done," answered Cahal. "Ride back to Ascalon and give warning. I was going thither, but if you will do this thing, I will seek Walter de Brienne. Tell the Seneschal of Ascalon that Jerusalem has fallen to heathen Turks of the outer steppes, known as Kharesmians, who number some ten thousand men. Bid him arm for war--and let no grass grow under your horses' hoofs in going."

And Cahal reined aside and took the road for Jaffa.

CHAPTER 6

Cahal found Walter de Brienne in Ramlah, brooding in the White Mosque over the sepulcher of Saint George. Fainting with weariness the Gael told his tale in a few stark bare words, and even they seemed to drag leaden and lifeless from his blackened lips. He was but dimly aware that men led him into a house and laid him on a couch. And there he slept the sun around.

He woke to a deserted city. Horror-stricken, the people of Ramlah had gathered up their belongings and fled along the road to Jaffa, crying that the end of the world was come. But Walter de Brienne had ridden north, leaving a single man-at-arms to bid Cahal follow him to Acre. The Gael rode through the hollow-echoing streets, feeling like a ghost in a dead city. The western gates swung idly open and a spear lay on the worn flags, as if the watch had dropped their weapons and fled in a sudden panic.

Cahal rode through the fields of date-palms and groves of figtrees hugging the shadow of the wall, and out on the plain he overtook staggering crowds of frantic folk burdened with their goods and crying with weariness and thirst. When the fugitives saw Cahal they screamed with fear to know if the slayers were upon them. He shook his head, pushing through. It seemed logical to him that the Kharesmians would sweep on to the sea, and their path might well take them by Ramlah. But as he rode he scanned the horizon behind him and saw neither smoke-wrack nor dust cloud.

He left the Jaffa road with its hurrying throngs, and swung north. Already the tale had passed like wildfire from mouth to mouth. The villages were deserted as the folk thronged to the coast towns or retired into towers on the heights. Christian Outremer stood with its back to the sea, facing the onrushing menace out of the East.

Cahal rode into Acre, where the waning powers of Outremer were already gathering--hawk-eyed knights in worn mail--the barons with their wolfish men-at-arms. Sultan Ismail of Damascus had sent swift emissaries urging an alliance--which had been quickly accepted. Knights of St. John from their great grim Krak des Chevaliers, Templars with their red skull-caps and untrimmed beards rode in from all parts of the kingdom--the grim silent watchdogs of Outremer.

Survivors had drifted into Ascalon and Jaffa--lame, weary folk, a bare handful who had escaped the torch and sword and survived the hardships of the flight. They told tales of horror. Seven thousand Christians, mostly women and children, had perished in the sack of Jerusalem. The Holy Sepulcher had been blackened by flame, the altars of the city shattered, the shrines burned with fire. Moslem had suffered with Christian. The patriarch was among the fugitives--saved from death by the valor and faithfulness of a nameless Rhinelander man-at-arms, who hid a cruel wound until he said, "Yonder be the towers of Ascalon, master, and since you have no more need o' me, I'll lie me down and sleep, for I be sore weary." And he died in the dust of the road.

And word came of the Kharesmian horde; they had not tarried long in the broken city, but swept on, down through the deserts of the south, to Gaza, where they lay encamped at last after their long drift. And pregnant, mysterious hints floated up from the blue web of the South, and de Brienne sent for Cahal O'Donnel.

"Good sir," said the baron, "my spies tell me that a host of memluks is advancing from Egypt. Their object is obvious--to take possession of the city the Kharesmians left desolate. But what else? There are hints of an alliance between the memluks and the nomads. If this be the case, we may as well be shriven before we go into battle, for we can not stand against both hosts.

"The men of Damascus cry out against the Kharesmians for befouling holy places--Moslem as well as Christian--but these memluks are of Turkish blood, and who knows the mind of Baibars, their master?

"Sir Cahal, will you ride to Baibars and parley with him? You saw with your own eyes the sack of Jerusalem and can tell him the truth of how the pagans befouled Al Aksa as well as the Sepulcher. After all, he is a Moslem. At least learn if he means to join hands with these devils.

"Tomorrow, when the cohorts of Damascus come up, we advance southward to go against the foe ere he can come against us. Ride you ahead of the host as emissary under a flag of truce, with as many men as you wish."

"Give me the flag," said Cahal. "I'll ride alone."

He rode out of the camp before sunset on a palfrey, bearing the flag of peace and without his sword. Only a battle-ax hung at his saddlebow as a precaution against bandits who respected no flag, as he rode south through a half-deserted land. He guided his course by the words of the wandering Arab herdsmen who knew all things that went on in the land. And beyond Ascalon he learned that the host had crossed the Jifar and was encamped to the southeast of Gaza. The close proximity to the Kharesmians made him wary and he swung far to the east to avoid any scouts of the pagans who might be combing the countryside. He had no trust in the peace-token as a safeguard against the barbarians.

He rode, in a dreamy twilight, into the Egyptian camp which lay about a cluster of wells a bare league from Gaza. Misgivings smote him as he noted their arms, their numbers, their evident discipline. He dismounted, displaying the peace-gonfalon and his empty sword-belt. The wild memluks in their silvered mail and heron feathers swarmed about him in sinister silence, as if minded to try their curved blades on his flesh, but they escorted him to a spacious silk pavilion in the midst of the camp.

Black slaves with wide-tipped scimitars stood ranged about the entrance and from within a great voice--strangely familiar--boomed a song.

"This is the pavilion of the amir, even Baibars the Panther, Caphar," growled a bearded Turk, and Cahal said as haughtily as if he sat on his lost throne amid his gallaglachs, "Lead me to your lord, dog, and announce me with due respect."

The eyes of the gaudily clad ruffian fell sullenly, and with a reluctant salaam he obeyed. Cahal strode into the silken tent and heard the memluk boom: "The lord Kizil Malik, emissary from the barons of Palestine!"

In the great pavilion a single huge candle on a lacquered table shed a golden light; the chiefs of Egypt sprawled about on silken cushions, quaffing the forbidden wine. And dominating the scene, a tall broad figure in voluminous silken trousers, satin vest, a broad cloth-of-gold girdle--without a doubt Baibars, the ogre of the South. And Cahal caught his breath--that coarse red hair--that square dark face--those blazing blue eyes--

"I bid you welcome, lord Caphar," boomed Baibars. "What news do you bring?"

"You were Haroun the Traveler," said Cahal slowly, "and at Jerusalem you were Akbar the Soldier."

Baibars rocked with laughter.

"By Allah!" he roared, "I bear a scar on my head to this day as a relic of that night's bout in Damietta! By Allah, you gave me a woundy clout!"

"You play your parts like a mummer," said Cahal. "But what reason for these deceptions?"

"Well," said Baibars, "I trust no spy but myself, for one thing. For another it makes life worth living. I did not lie when I told you that night in Damietta that I was celebrating my escape from Baibars. By Allah, the affairs of the world weigh heavily on Baibars' shoulders, but Haroun the Traveler, he is a mad and merry rogue with a free mind and a roving foot. I play the mummer and escape from myself, and try to be true to each part--so long as I play it. Sit ye and drink!"

Cahal shook his head. All his carefully thought out plans of diplomacy fell away, futile as dust. He struck straight and spoke bluntly and to the point.

"A word and my task is done, Baibars," he said. "I come to find whether you mean to join hands with the pagans who desecrated the Sepulcher--and Al Aksa."

Baibars drank and considered, though Cahal knew well that the Tatar had already made up his mind, long before.

"Al Kuds is mine for the taking," he said lazily. "I will cleanse the mosques--aye, by Allah, the Kharesmians shall do the work, most piously. They'll make good Moslems. And winged war-men. With them I sow the thunder--who reaps the tempest?"

"Yet you fought against them at Jerusalem," Cahal reminded bitterly.

"Aye," frankly admitted the amir, "but there they would have cut my throat as quick as any Frank's. I could not say to them: 'Hold, dogs, I am Baibars!'"

Cahal bowed his lion-like head, knowing the futility of arguing.

"Then my work is done; I demand safe-conduct from your camp."

Baibars shook his head, grinning. "Nay, malik, you are thirsty and weary. Bide here as my guest."

Cahal's hand moved involuntarily toward his empty girdle. Baibars was smiling but his eyes glittered between narrowed lids and the slaves about him half-drew their scimitars.

"You'd keep me prisoner despite the fact that I am an ambassador?"

"You came without invitation," grinned Baibars. "I ask no parley. Di Zaro!"

A tall lank Venetian in black velvet stepped forward.

"Di Zaro," said Baibars in a jesting voice, "the malik Cahal is our guest. Mount ye and ride like the devil to the host of the Franks. There say that Cahal sent you secretly. Say that the lord Cahal is twisting that great fool Baibars about his finger, and pledges to keep him aloof from the battle."

The Venetian grinned bleakly and left the tent, avoiding Cahal's smoldering eyes. The Gael knew that the trade-lusting Italians were often in secret league with the Moslems, but few stooped so low as this renegade.

"Well, Baibars," said Cahal with a shrug of his shoulders, "since you must play the dog, there is naught I can do. I have no sword."

"I'm glad of that," responded Baibars candidly. "Come, fret not. It is but your misfortune to oppose Baibars and his destiny. Men are my tools--at the Damascus Gate I knew that those red-handed riders were steel to forge into a Moslem sword. By Allah, malik, if you could have seen me riding like the wind into Egypt--marching back across the Jifar without pausing to rest! Riding into the camp of the pagans with mullahs shouting the advantages of Islam! Convincing their wild Kuran Shah that his only safety lay in conversion and alliance!

"I do not fully trust the wolves, and have pitched my camp apart from them--but when the Franks come up, they will find our hordes joined for battle--and should be horribly surprized, if that dog di Zaro does his work well!"

"Your treachery makes me a dog in the eyes of my people," said Cahal bitterly.

"None will call you traitor," said Baibars serenely, "because soon all will cease to be. Relics of an outworn age, I will rid the land of them. Be at ease!"

He extended a brimming goblet and Cahal took it, sipped at it absently, and began to pace up and down the pavilion, as a man paces in worry and despair. The memluks watched him, grinning surreptitiously.

"Well," said Baibars, "I was a Tatar prince, I was a slave, and I will be a prince again. Kuran Shah's shaman read the stars for me--and he says that if I win the battle against the Franks, I will be sultan of Egypt!"

The amir was sure of his chiefs, thought Cahal, to thus flaunt his ambition openly. The Gael said, "The Franks care not who is sultan of Egypt."

"Aye, but battles and the corpses of men are stairs whereby I climb to fame. Each war I win clinches my hold on power. Now the Franks stand in my path; I will brush them aside. But the shaman prophesied a strange thing--that a dead man's sword will deal me a grievous hurt when the Franks come up against us--"

From the corner of his eye Cahal saw that his apparently aimless strides had taken him close to the table on which stood the great candle. He lifted the goblet toward his lips, then with a lightning flick of his wrist, dashed the wine onto the flame. It sputtered and went out, plunging the tent into total darkness. And simultaneously Cahal ripped a hidden dirk from under his arm and like a steel spring released, bounded toward the place where he knew Baibars sat. He catapulted into somebody in the dark and his dirk hummed and sank home. A death scream ripped the clamor and the Gael wrenched the blade free and sprang away. No time for another stroke. Men yelled and fell over each other and steel clanged wildly. Cahal's crimsoned blade ripped a long slit in the silk of the tent-wall and he sprang into the outer starlight where men were shouting and running toward the pavilion.

Behind him a bull-like bellowing told the Gael that his blindly stabbing dirk had found some other flesh than Baibars'. He ran swiftly toward the horse-lines, leaping over taut tent-ropes, a shadow among a thousand racing figures. A mounted sentry came galloping through the confusion, firelight gleaming on his drawn scimitar. As a panther leaps Cahal sprang, landing behind the saddle. The memluk's startled yell broke in a gurgle as the keen dirk crossed his throat.

Flinging the corpse to the earth, the Gael quieted the snorting, plunging steed and reined it away. Like the wind he rode through the swarming camp and the free air of the desert struck his face. He gave the Arab horse the rein and heard the clamor of pursuit die away behind him. Somewhere to the north lay the slowly advancing host of the Christians, and Cahal rode north. He hoped to overtake the Venetian on the road, but the other had too long a start. Men who rode for Baibars rode with a flowing rein.

The Franks were breaking camp at dawn when a Venetian rode headlong into their lines, gasping a tale of escape and flight, and demanding to see de Brienne.

Within the baron's half-dismantled tent, di Zaro gasped: "The lord Cahal sent me, seigneur--he holds Baibars in parley. He gives his word that the memluks will not join the Kharesmians, and urges you to press forward--"

Outside a clatter of hoofs split the din--a lone rider whose flying hair was like a veil of blood against the crimson of dawn. At de Brienne's tent the hard-checked steed slid to its haunches. Cahal leaped to the earth and rushed in like an avenging blast. Di Zaro cried out and paled, frozen by his doom--till Cahal's dirk split his heart and the Venetian rolled, an earthen-faced corpse, to Walter de Brienne's feet. The baron sprang up, bewildered.

"Cahal! What news, in God's name?"

"Baibars joins arms with the pagans," answered Cahal.

De Brienne bowed his head.

"Well--no man can ask to live forever."

CHAPTER 7

Through the drear grey dusty desert the host of Outremer crawled southward. The black and white standard of the Templars floated beside the cross of the patriarch, and the black banners of Damascus billowed in the faintly stirring air. No king led them. The Emperor Frederick claimed the kingship of Jerusalem and he skulked in Sicily, plotting against the pope. De Brienne had been chosen to lead the barons and he shared his command with Al Mansur el Haman, warlord of Damascus.

They went into camp within sight of the Moslem outposts, and all night the wind that blew up from the south throbbed with the beat of drums and the clash of cymbals. Scouts reported the movements of the Kharesmian horde, and that the memluks had joined them.

In the grey light of dawn, Red Cahal came from his tent fully armed. On all sides the host was moving, striking tents and buckling armor. In the illusive light Cahal saw them moving like phantoms--the tall patriarch, shriving and blessing; the giant form of the Master of the Temple among his grim war-dogs; the heron-feathered gold helmet of Al Mansur. And he stiffened as he saw a slim mailed shape moving through the swarm, followed close by a rough figure with ax on shoulder. Bewildered, he shook his head--why did his heart pound so strangely at sight of that mysterious Masked Knight? Of whom did the slim youth remind him, and of what dim bitter memories? He felt as one plunged into a web of illusion.

And now a familiar figure fell upon Cahal and embraced him.

"By Allah!" swore Shaykh Suleyman ibn Omad, "but for thee I had slept in the ruins of my keep! They came like the wind, those dogs, but they found the gates closed, the archers on the walls--and after one assault, they passed on to easier prey! Ride with me this day, my son!"

Cahal assented, liking the lean hearty old desert hawk. And so it was in the glittering, plume-helmeted ranks of Damascus the Gael rode to battle.

In the dawn they moved forward, no more than twelve thousand men to meet the memluks and nomads--fifteen thousand warriors, not counting light-armed irregulars. In the center of the right wing the Templars held their accustomed place, in advance of the rest; five hundred grim iron men, flanked on one side by the Knights of St. John and the Teutonic Knights, some three hundred in all; and on the other by the handful of barons with the patriarch and his iron mace. The combined forces of their men-at-arms did not exceed seven thousand. The rest of the host consisted of the cavalry of Damascus, in the center of the army, and the warriors of the amir of Kerak who held the left wing--lean hawk-faced Arabs better at raiding than at fighting pitched battles.

Now the desert blackened ahead of them with the swarms of their foes, and the drums throbbed and bellowed. The warriors of Damascus sang and chanted, but the men of the Cross were silent, like men riding to a known doom. Cahal, riding beside Al Mansur and Shaykh Suleyman, let his gaze sweep down those grim grey-mailed ranks, and found that which he sought. Again his heart leaped curiously at the sight of the slim Masked Knight, riding close to the patriarch. Close at the knight's side bobbed the horned helmet of the Dane. Cahal cursed, bewilderedly.

And now both hosts advanced, the dark swarms of the desert riders moving ahead of the ordered ranks of the memluks. The Kharesmians trotted forward in some formation, and Cahal saw the Crusaders close their ranks to meet the charge, without slackening their even pace. The wild riders struck in the rowels and the dark swarm rolled swiftly across the sands; then suddenly they shifted as a crafty swordsman shifts. Wheeling in perfect order they swept past the front of the knights and bursting into a headlong run, thundered down on the banners of Damascus.

The trick, born in the brain of Baibars, took the whole allied host by surprize. The Arabs yelled and prepared to meet the onset, but they were bewildered by the mad fury and numbing speed of that charge.

Riding like madmen the Kharesmians bent their heavy bows and shot from the saddle, and clouds of feathered shafts hummed before them. The leather bucklers and light mail of the Arabs were useless against those whistling missiles, and along the Damascus front warriors fell like ripe grain. Al Mansur was screaming commands for a countercharge, but in the teeth of that deadly blast the dazed Arabs milled helplessly, and in the midst of the confusion, the charge crashed into their lines. Cahal saw again the broad squat figures, the wild dark faces, the madly hacking scimitars--broader and heavier than the light Damascus blades. He felt again the irresistible concussion of the Kharesmian charge.

His great red stallion staggered to the impact and a whistling blade shivered on his shield. He stood up in his stirrups, slashing right and left, and felt mail-mesh part under his edge, saw headless corpses drop from their saddles. Up and down the line the blades were flashing like spray in the sun and the Damascus ranks were breaking and melting away. Man to man, the Arabs might have held fast; but dazed and outnumbered, that demoralizing rain of arrows had begun the rout that the curved swords completed.

Cahal, hurled back with the rest, vainly striving to hold his ground as he slashed and thrust, heard old Suleyman ibn Omad cursing like a fiend beside him as his scimitar wove a shining wheel of death about his head.

"Dogs and sons of dogs!" yelled the old hawk. "Had ye stood but a moment, the day had been yours! By Allah, pagan, will ye press me close?--So! Ha! Now carry your head to Hell in your hand! Ho, children, rally to me and the lord Cahal! My son, keep at my side. The fight is already lost and we must hack clear."

Suleyman's hawks reined in about him and Cahal, and the compact little knot of desperate men slashed through, riding down the snarling wolfish shapes that barred their path, and so rode out of the red frenzy of the melee into the open desert. The Damascus clans were in full flight, their black banners streaming ingloriously behind them. Yet there was no shame to be attached to them. That unexpected charge had simply swept them away, like a shattered dam before a torrent.

On the left wing the amir of Kerak was giving back, his ranks crumbling before the singing arrows and flying blades of tribesmen. So far the memluks had taken no part in the battle, but now they rode forward and Cahal saw the huge form of Baibars galloping into the fray, beating the howling nomads from their flying prey and reforming their straggling lines. The wolfskin-clad riders swung about and trotted across the sands, reinforced by the memluks in their silvered mail and heron-feathered helmets. So suddenly had the storm burst that before the Franks could wheel their ponderous lines to support the center, their Arab allies were broken and flying. But the men of the Cross came doggedly onward.

"Now the real death-grip," grunted Suleyman, "with but one possible end. By Allah, my head was not made to dangle at a pagan's saddlebow. The road to the desert is open to us--ha, my son, are you mad?"

For Cahal wheeled away, jerking his rein from the clutching hand of the protesting Shaykh. Across the corpse-littered plain he galloped toward the grey-steel ranks that swept inexorably onward. Riding hard, he swept into line just as the oliphants trumpeted for the onset. With a deep-throated roar the knights of the Cross charged to meet the onrushing hordes through a barbed and feathered cloud. Heads down, grimly facing the singing shafts that could not check them, the knights swept on in their last charge. With an earthquake shock the two hosts crashed together, and this time it was the Kharesmian horde which staggered.

The long lances of the Templars ripped their foremost line to shreds and the great chargers of the Crusaders overthrew horse and rider. Close on the heels of the warrior-monks thundered the rest of the Christian host, swords flashing. Dazed in their turn, the wild riders in their wolfskins reeled backward, howling and plying their deadly blades. But the long swords of the Europeans hacked through iron mesh and steel plate, to split skulls and bosoms. Squat corpses choked the ground under their horses' hoofs, as deep into the heart of the disorganized horde the knights slashed, and the yells of the tribesmen changed to howls of dismay as the whole battle-mass surged backward.

And now Baibars, seeing the battle tremble in the balance, deployed swiftly, skirted the ragged edge of the melee and hurled his memluks like a thunderbolt at the back of the Crusaders. The fresh, unwearied Bahairiz struck home, and the Franks found themselves hemmed in on all sides, as the wavering Kharesmians stiffened and with a fresh resurge of confidence renewed the fight.

Leaguered all about, the Christians fell fast, but even in dying they took bitter toll. Back to back, in a slowly shrinking ring facing outward, about a rocky knoll on which was planted the patriarch's cross, the last host of Outremer made its last stand.

Until the red stallion fell dying, Red Cahal fought in the saddle, and then he joined the ring of men on foot. In the berserk fury that gripped him, he felt not the sting of wounds. Time faded in an eternity of plunging bodies and frantic steel; of chaotic, wild figures that smote and died. In a red maze he saw a gold-mailed figure roll under his sword, and knew, in a brief passing flash of triumph, that he had slain Kuran Shah, khan of the horde. And remembering Jerusalem, he ground the dying face under his mailed heel. And the grim fight raged on. Beside Cahal fell the grim Master of the Temple, the Seneschal of Ascalon, the lord of Acre. The thin ring of defenders staggered beneath the repeated charges; blood blinded them, the heat of the sun smote fierce upon them, they were choked with dust and maddened with wounds. Yet with broken swords and notched axes they smote, and against that iron ring Baibars hurled his slayers again and again, and again and again he saw his hordes stagger back, broken.

The sun was sinking toward the horizon when, foaming with rage that for once drowned his gargantuan laughter, he launched an irresistible charge upon the dying handful that tore them apart and scattered their corpses over the plain.

Here and there single knights or weary groups, like the drift of a storm, were ridden down by the chanting riders who swarmed the plain.

Cahal O'Donnel walked dazedly among the dead, the notched and crimsoned sword trailing in his weary hand. His helmet was gone, his arms and legs gashed, and from a deep wound beneath his hauberk, blood trickled sluggishly.

And suddenly his head jerked up.

"Cahal! Cahal!"

He drew an uncertain hand across his eyes. Surely the delirium of battle was upon him. But again the voice rose, in agony.

"Cahal!"

He was close to a boulder-strewn knoll where the dead lay thick. Among them lay Wulfgar the Dane, his unshaven lip a-snarl, his red beard tilted truculently, even in death. His mighty hand still gripped his ax, notched and clotted red, and a gory heap of corpses beneath him gave mute evidence of his berserk fury.

"Cahal!"

The Gael dropped to his knees beside the slender figure of the Masked Knight. He lifted off the helmet--to reveal a wealth of unruly black tresses--grey eyes luminous and deep. A choked cry escaped him.

"Saints of God! Elinor! I dream--this is madness--"

The slender mailed arms groped about his neck. The eyes misted with growing blindness. Through the pliant links of the hauberk blood seeped steadily.

"You are not mad, Red Cahal," she whispered. "You do not dream. I am come to you at last--though I find you but in death. I did you a deathly wrong--and only when you were gone from me forever did I know I loved you. Oh, Cahal, we were born under a blind unquiet star--both seeking goals of fire and mist. I loved you--and knew it not until I lost you. You were gone--and I knew not where.

"The Lady Elinor de Courcey died then, and in her place was born the Masked Knight. I took the Cross in penance. Only one faithful servitor knew my secret--and rode with me--to the ends of the earth--"

"Aye," muttered Cahal, "I remember him now--even in death he was faithful."

"When I met you among the hills below Jerusalem," she whispered faintly, "my heart tore at its strings to burst from my bosom and fall in the dust at your feet. But I dared not reveal myself to you. Ah, Cahal, I have done bitter penance! I have died for the Cross this day, like a knight. But I ask not forgiveness of God. Let Him do with me as He will--but oh, it is forgiveness of you I crave, and dare not ask!"

"I freely forgive you," said Cahal heavily. "Fret no more about it, girl; it was but a little wrong, after all. Faith, all things and the deeds and dreams of men are fleeting and unstable as moon-mist, even the world which has here ended."

"Then kiss me," she gasped, fighting hard against the onrushing darkness.

Cahal passed his arm under her shoulders, lifting her to his blackened lips. With a convulsive effort she stiffened half-erect in his arms, her eyes blazing with a strange light.

"The sun sets and the world ends!" she cried. "But I see a crown of red gold on your head, Red Cahal, and I shall sit beside you on at throne of glory! Hail, Cahal, chief of Uland; hail, Cahal Ruadh, ard-ri na Eireann,--"

She sank back, blood starting from her lips. Cahal eased her to the earth and rose like a man in a dream. He turned toward the low slope and staggered with a passing wave of dizziness. The sun was sinking toward the desert's rim. To his eyes the whole plain seemed veiled in a mist of blood through which vague phantasmal figures moved in ghostly pageantry. A chaotic clamor rose like the acclaim to a king, and it seemed to him that all the shouts merged into one thunderous roar: "Hail, Cahal Ruadh, ard-ri na Eireann!"

He shook the mists from his brain and laughed. He strode down the slope, and a group of hawk-like riders swept down upon him with a swift rattle of hoofs. A bow twanged and an iron arrowhead smashed through his mail. With a laugh he tore it out and blood flooded his hauberk. A lance thrust at his throat and he caught the shaft in his left hand, lunging upward. The grey sword's point rent through the rider's mail, and his death-scream was still echoing when Cahal stepped aside from the slash of a scimitar and hacked off the hand that wielded it. A spear-point bent on the links of his mail and the lean grey sword leaped like a serpent-stroke, splitting helmet and head, spilling the rider from the saddle.

Cahal dropped his point to the earth and stood with bare head thrown back, as a gleaming clump of horsemen swept by. The foremost reined his white horse back on its haunches with a shout of laughter. And so the victor faced the vanquished. Behind Cahal the sun was setting in a sea of blood, and his hair, floating in the rising breeze, caught the last glints of the sun, so that it seemed to Baibars the Gael wore a misty crown of red gold.

"Well, malik," laughed the Tatar, "they who oppose the destiny of Baibars lie under my horses' hoofs, and over them I ride up the gleaming stair of empire!"

Cahal laughed and blood started from his lips. With a lion-like gesture he threw up his head, flinging high his sword in kingly salute.

"Lord of the East!" his voice rang like a trumpet-call, "welcome to the fellowship of kings! To the glory and the witch-fire, the gold and the moon-mist, the splendor and the death! Baibars, a king hails thee!"

And he leaped and struck as a tiger leaps. Not Baibars' stallion that screamed and reared, not his trained swordsmen, not his own quickness could have saved the memluk then. Death alone saved him--death that took the Gael in the midst of his leap. Red Cahal died in midair and it was a corpse that crashed against Baibars' saddle--a falling sword in a dead hand, that, the momentum of the blow completing its arc, scarred Baibar's forehead and split his eyeball.

His warriors shouted and reined forward. Baibars slumped in the saddle, sick with agony, blood gushing from between the fingers that gripped his wound. As his chiefs cried out and sought to aid him, he lifted his head and saw, with his single, pain-dimmed eye, Red Cahal lying dead at his horse's feet. A smile was on the Gael's lips, and the grey sword lay in shards beside him, shattered, by some freak of chance, on the stones as it fell beside the wielder.

"A hakim, in the name of Allah," groaned Baibars. "I am a dead man."

"Nay, you are not dead, my lord," said one of his memluk chiefs. "It is the wound from the dead man's sword and it is grievous enough, but bethink you: here has the host of the Franks ceased to be. The barons are all taken or slain and the Cross of the patriarch has fallen. Such of the Kharesmians as live are ready to serve you as their new lord--since Kizil Malik slew their khan. The Arabs have fled and Damascus lies helpless before you--and Jerusalem is ours! You will yet be sultan of Egypt."

"I have conquered," answered Baibars, shaken for the first time in his wild life, "but I am half-blind--and of what avail to slay men of that breed? They will come again and again and again, riding to death like a feast because of the restlessness of their souls, through all the centuries. What though we prevail this little Now? They are a race unconquerable, and at last, in a year or a thousand years, they will trample Islam under their feet and ride again through the streets of Jerusalem."

And over the red field of battle night fell shuddering.

Contents

RED BLADES OF BLACK CATHAY

By Robert E. Howard

Trumpets die in the loud parade,
The gray mist drinks the spears;
Banners of glory sink and fade
In the dust of a thousand years.
Singers of pride the silence stills,
The ghost of empire goes,
But a song still lives in the ancient hills,
And the scent of a vanished rose.
Ride with us on a dim, lost road
To the dawn of a distant day,
When swords were bare for a guerdon rare --
"The Flower of Black Cathay."

Chapter I

The singing of the swords was a deathly clamor in the brain of Godric de Villehard. Blood and sweat veiled his eyes and in the instant of blindness he felt a keen point pierce a joint of his hauberk and sting deep into his ribs. Smiting blindly, he felt the jarring impact that meant his sword had gone home, and snatching an instant's grace, he flung back his vizor and wiped the redness from his eyes. A single glance only was allowed him: in that glance he had a fleeting glimpse of huge, wild black mountains; of a clump of mail-clad warriors, ringed by a howling horde of human wolves; and in the center of that clump, a slim, silk-clad shape standing between a dying horse and a dying swordsman. Then the wolfish figures surged in on all sides, hacking like madmen.

"Christ and the Cross!" the old Crusading shout rose in a ghastly croak from Godric's parched lips. As if far away he heard voices gaspingly repeat the words. Curved sabers rained on shield and helmet. Godric's eyes blurred to the sweep of frenzied dark faces with bristling, foam-flecked beards. He fought like a man in a dream. A great weariness fettered his limbs. Somewhere -- long ago it seemed -- a heavy axe, shattering on his helm, had bitten through an old dent to rend the scalp beneath. He heaved his curiously weighted arm above his head and split a bearded face to the chin.

"En avant, Montferrat!" We must hack through and shatter the gates, thought the dazed brain of Godric; we can not long stand this press, but once within the city -- no -- these walls were not the walls of Constantinople: he was mad; he dreamed -- these towering heights were the crags of a lost and nameless land and Montferrat and the Crusade lay lost in leagues and years.

Godric's steed reared and pitched headlong, throwing his rider with a clash of armor. Under the lashing hoofs and the shower of blades, the knight struggled clear and rose, without his shield, blood starting from every joint in his armor. He reeled, bracing himself; he fought not these foes alone, but the long grinding days behind -- the days and days of hard riding and ceaseless fighting.

Godric thrust upward and a man died. A scimitar shivered on his crest, and the wielder, torn from his saddle by a hand that was still iron, spilled his entrails at Godric's feet. The rest reined in around howling, seeking to overthrow the giant Frank by sheer weight of numbers. Somewhere in the hellish din a woman's scream knifed the air. A clatter of hoofs burst like a sudden whirlwind and the press was cleared. Through a red mist the dulling eyes of the knight saw the wolfish, skin-clad assailants swept away by a sudden flood of mailed riders who hacked them down and trampled them under.

Then men were dismounting around him, men whose gaudy silvered armor, high fur kaftans and two-handed scimitars he saw as in a dream. One with thin drooping mustaches adorning his dark face spoke to him in a Turkish tongue the knight could faintly understand, but the burden of the words was unintelligible. He shook his head.

"I can not linger," Godric said, speaking slowly and with growing difficulty, "De Montferrat awaits my report and I must -- ride -- East -- to -- find -- the -- kingdom -- of -- Prester -- John -- bid -- my -- men -- mount -- "

His voice trailed off. He saw his men; they lay about in a silent, sword-gashed cluster, dead as they had lived -- facing the foe. Suddenly the strength flowed from Godric de Villehard in a great surge and he fell as a blasted tree falls. The red mist closed about him, but ere it engulfed him utterly, he saw bending near him two great dark eyes, strangely soft and luminous, that filled him with formless yearning; in a world grown dim and unreal they were the one tangible reality and this vision he took with him into a nightmare realm of shadows.

Godric's return to waking life was as abrupt as his departure. He opened his eyes to a scene of exotic splendor. He was lying on a silken couch near a wide window whose sill and bars were of chased gold. Silken cushions littered the marble floor and the walls were of mosaics where they were not worked in designs of gems and silver, and were hung with heavy tapestries of silk, satin and cloth-of-gold. The ceiling was a single lofty dome of lapis lazuli from which was suspended on golden chains a censer that shed a faint alluring scent over all. Through the window a faint breeze wafted scents of spices, roses and jasmine, and beyond Godric could see the clear blue of the Asian skies.

He tried to rise and fell back with a startled exclamation. Whence this strange weakness? The hand he lifted to his gaze was thinner than should be, and its bronze was faded. He gazed in perplexity at the silken, almost feminine garments which clothed him, and then he remembered -- the long wandering, the battle, the slaughter of his men-at-arms. His heart turned sick within him as he remembered the staunch faithfulness of the men he had led to the shambles.

A tall, thin yellow man with a kindly face entered and smiled to see that he was awake and in his right mind. He spoke to the knight in several languages unknown to Godric, then used one easy to understand -- a rough Turkish dialect much akin to the bastard tongue used by the Franks in their contacts with the Turanian peoples.

"What place is this?" asked Godric. "How long have I lain here?"

"You have lain here many days," answered the other. "I am You-tai, the emperor's man-of-healing. This is the heaven-born empire of Black Cathay. The princess Yulita has attended you with her own hands while you lay raving in delirium. Only through her care and your own marvelous natural strength have you survived. When she told the emperor how you with your small band recklessly charged and delivered her from the hands of the Hian bandits who had slain her guard and taken her prisoner, the heavenly one gave command that naught be spared to preserve you. Who are you, most noble lord? While you raved you spoke of many unknown peoples, places and battles and your appearance is such as to show that you come from afar."

Godric laughed, and bitterness was in his laughter.

"Aye," quoth he, "I have ridden far; the deserts have parched my lips and the mountains have wearied my feet. I have seen Trebizond in my wanderings, and Teheran and Bokhara and Samarcand. I have looked on the waters of the Black Sea and the Sea of Ravens. From Constantinople far to the west I set forth more than a year agone, riding eastward. I am a knight of Normandy, Sir Godric de Villehard."

"I have heard of some of the places you name," answered You-tai, "but many of them are unknown to me. Eat now, and rest. In time the princess Yulita will come to you."

So Godric ate the curiously spiced rice, the dates and candied meats, and drank the colorless rice wine brought him by a flat-faced girl slave who wore golden bangles on her ankles, and soon slept, and sleeping, his unquenchable vitality began to assert itself.

When he awoke from that long sleep he felt refreshed and stronger, and soon the pearl-inlaid doors opened and a slight, silk-clad figure entered. Godric's heart suddenly pounded as he again felt the soft, tender gaze of those great dark eyes upon him. He drew himself together with an effort; was he a boy to tremble before a pair of eyes, even though they adorned the face of a princess?

Long used was he to the veiled women of the Moslems, and Yulita's creamy cheeks with her full ruby lips were like an oasis in the waste.

"I am Yulita," the voice was soft, vibrant and musical as the silvery tinkle of the fountain in the court outside. "I wish to thank you. You are brave as Rustum. When the Hians rushed from the defiles and cut down my guard, I was afraid. You answered my screams as unexpectedly and boldly as a hero sent down from paradise. I am sorry your brave men died."

"And I likewise," the Norman answered with the bluntness of his race, "but it was their trade: they would not have had it otherwise and they could not have died in a better cause."

"But why did you risk your life to aid me, who am not of your race and whom you never saw before?" she pursued.

Godric might have answered as would nine out of any ten knights in his position -- with the repeating of the vow of chivalry, to protect all weaker things. But being Godric de Villehard, he shrugged his shoulders. "God knows. I should have known it was death to us all to charge that horde. I have seen too much rapine and outrage since I turned my face east to have thus thrown away my men and expedition in the ordinary course of events. Perhaps I saw at a glance you were of regal blood and followed the knight's natural instinct to rush to the aid of royalty."

She bowed her head. "I am sorry."

"I am not," he growled. "My men would have died anyhow today or tomorrow -- now they are at rest. We have ridden through hell for more than a year. Now they are beyond the sun's heat and the Turk's saber." She rested her chin on her hands and her elbows on her knees, leaning forward to gaze deep into his eyes. His senses swam momentarily. Her eyes traversed his mighty frame to return to his face. Thin-lipped, with cold gray eyes, Godric de Villehard's sun-darkened, clean-shaven face inspired trust and respect in men but there was little in his appearance to stir the heart of a woman. The Norman was not past thirty, but his hard life had carved his face into inflexible lines. Rather than the beauty that appeals to women, there was in his features the lean strength of the hunting wolf. The forehead was high and broad, the brow of a thinker, and once the mouth had been kindly, the eyes those of a dreamer. But now his eyes were bitter and his whole appearance that of a man with whom life has dealt hardly -- who has ceased to look for mercy or to give it.

"Tell me, Sir Godric," said Yulita, "whence come you and why have you ridden so far with so few men?"

"It's a long tale," he answered. "It had its birth in a land halfway across the world. I was a boy and full of high ideals of chivalry and knighthood -- and I hated that Saxon-French pig, King John. A wine-bibber named Fulk of Neuilly began ranting and screaming death and damnation because the Holy Land was still in the possession of the Paynim. He howled until he stirred the blood of such young fools as myself, and the barons began recruiting men -- forgetting how the other Crusades had ended.

"Walter de Brienne and that black-faced cut-throat Simon de Montfort fired us young Normans with promises of salvation and Turkish loot, and we set forth. Boniface and Baldwin were our leaders and they plotted against each other all the way to Venice.

"There the mercenary Venetians refused us ships and it sickened my very entrails to see our chiefs go down on their knees to those merchant swine. They promised us ships at last but they set such a high price we could not pay. None of us had any money, else we had never started on that mad venture. We wrenched the jewels from our hilts and the gold from our buckles and raised part of the money, bargaining to take various cities from the Greeks and give them over to Venice for the rest of the price. The Pope -- Innocent III -- raged, but we went our ways and quenched our swords in Christian blood instead of Paynim.

"Spalato we took, and Ragusa, Sebenico and Zara. The Venetians got the cities and we got the glory." Here Godric laughed harshly. A quick glance told him the girl was sitting spellbound, eyes aglow. Somehow he felt ashamed.

"Well," he continued, "young Alexius who had been driven from Constantinople persuaded us that it would be doing God's work to put old Angelus back on the throne, so we fared forth.

"We took Constantinople with no great difficulty, but only a scant time had elapsed before the maddened people strangled old Angelus and we were forced to take the city again. This time we sacked it and split the empire up. De Montfort had long returned to England and I fought under Boniface of Montferrat, who was made King of Macedonia. One day he called me to him, and said he: 'Godric, the Turkomans harry the caravans and the trade of the East dries up because of constant war. Take a hundred men-at-arms and find me this kingdom of Prester John. He too is a Christian and we may establish a route of trade between us, guarded by both of us, and thus safeguard the caravans.'

"Thus he spoke, being a natural-born liar and unable to tell the truth on a wager. I saw through his design and understood his wish for me to conquer this fabulous kingdom for him.

"'Only a hundred men?' quoth I.

"'I can not spare you more,' said he, 'lest Baldwin and Dandolo and the Count of Blois come in and cut my throat. These are enow. Gain ye to Prester John and abide with him awhile -- aid him in his wars for a space, then send riders to report your progress to me. Mayhap then I can send you more men.' And his eyelids drooped in a way I knew. '"But where lies this kingdom?' said I.

"'Easy enough,' said he; 'to the east -- any fool can find it if he fares far enough.'

"So," Godric's face darkened, "I rode east with a hundred heavily armed horsemen -- the pick of the Norman warriors. By Satan, we hacked our way through! Once past Trebizond we had to fight almost every mile. We were assailed by Turks, Persians and Kirghiz, as well as by our natural foes of heat, thirst and hunger. A hundred men -- there were less than a score with me when I heard your screams and rode out of the defiles. Their bodies lie scattered from the hills of Black Cathay to the shores of the Black Sea. Arrows, spears, swords, all took their toll, but still I forged eastward."

"And all for your liege lord!" cried Yulita, her eyes sparkling, as she clasped her hands. "Oh, it is like the tales of honor and chivalry; of Iran and those You-tai has told me of the heroes of ancient Cathay. It makes my blood burn! You too are a hero such as all men were once in the days of our ancestors, with your courage and loyalty!"

The sting of his healing wounds bit into Godric.

"Loyalty?" he snarled. "To that devious-minded assassin, Montferrat? Bah! Do you think I intended giving up my life to carve out a kingdom for him? He had naught to lose and all to gain. He gave me a handful of men, expecting to receive the rewards of what I did. If I failed, he was still winner, for he would be rid of a turbulent vassal. The kingdom of Prester John is a dream and a fantasy. I have followed a will-o'-the-wisp for a thousand miles. A dream that receded farther and farther into the mazes of the East, leading me to my doom."

"And had you found it, what then?" asked the girl, grown suddenly quiet.

Godric shrugged his shoulders. It was not the Norman way to flaunt secret ambitions to any chance-met man or woman, but after all, he owed his life to this girl. She had paid her debt to him and there was something in her eyes....

"Had I found Prester John's kingdom," said Godric, "I had made shift to conquer it for myself."

"Look," Yulita took Godric's arm and pointed out a gold-barred window, whose sheer silken curtains, blowing inward, disclosed the rugged peaks of distant mountains, shouldering against the blazing blue of the skies.

"Beyond those mountains lies the kingdom of him you call Prester John."

Godric's eyes gleamed suddenly with the conquering spirit of the true Norman -- the born empire-maker, whose race had carved out kingdoms with their swords in every land of the West and Near East.

"And does he dwell in purple-domed palaces of gold and glittering gems?" he asked eagerly. "Do, as I have heard, learned philosophers and magi sit at either hand, doing wonders with stars and suns and ghosts of the mighty dead? Does his city loom among the clouds with golden spires thrusting among the stars? And does the deathless monarch, who learned at the feet of our fair Lord Christ, sit on an ivory throne in a room whose walls are carved of one great sapphire dispensing justice?"

She shook her head.

"Prester John -- Wang Khan we name him -- is very old, but he is not deathless nor has he ever been beyond the confines of his own kingdom. His people are the Keraits -- Krits -- Christians; they dwell in cities, true, but the houses are mud huts and goatskin tents, and the palace of Wang Khan is as a hut itself compared to this palace." Godric fell back and his eyes went dull.

"My dream is vanished," he muttered. "You should have let me die."

"Dream again, man," she answered; "only dream something more attainable."

Shaking his head, he looked into her eyes.

"Dreams of empire have haunted my life," said he, "yet even now the shadow of a dream lingers in my soul, ten times less attainable than the kingdom of Prester John."

Chapter II

"Scrawled screens and secret gardens
And insect-laden skies --
Where fiery plains stretch on and on
To the purple country of Prester John
And the walls of Paradise."
-- Chesterton

The days passed and slowly the giant frame of the Norman knight regained its accustomed vigor. In those days he sat in the chamber with the lapis lazuli dome, or walked in the outer courts where fountains tinkled musically beneath the shade of cherry trees, and soft petals fell in a colorful rain about him. The battle-scarred warrior felt strangely out of place in this setting of exotic luxury but was inclined to rest there and lull the restlessness of his nature for a time. He saw nothing of the city, Jahadur, for the walls about the courts were high, and he presently understood that he was practically a prisoner. He saw only Yulita, the slaves and You-tai. With the thin yellow man he talked much. You-tai was a Cathayan -- a member of the race who lived in Greater Cathay, some distance to the south. This empire, Godric soon realized, had given rise to many of the tales of Prester John; it was an ancient, mighty but now loosely knit empire, divided into three kingdoms -- the Khitai, the Chin and the Sung. You-tai was learned beyond any man Godric had ever known and he spoke freely.

"The emperor inquires often after your health," said he, "but I tell you frankly, it were best that you not be presented to him for a time at least. Since your great battle with the Hian bandits, you have captured the fancy of the soldiers, especially old Roogla, the general who loves the princess like his own since he bore her as a babe on his saddle-bow from the ruins of Than when the Naimans raided over the border. Chamu Khan fears anyone the army loves. He fears you might be a spy. He fears most things, does the emperor, even his niece, the princess Yulita."

"She does not took like the Black Cathayan girls I have seen" commented Godric; "her face is not flat, nor do her eyes slant as much."

"She has Iranian blood," answered You-tai. "She is the daughter of a royal Black Cathayan and a Persian woman."

"I see sadness in her eyes, at times," said Godric.

"She remembers that she is soon to leave her mountain home," answered You-tai, eyeing Godric closely. "She is to marry prince Wang Yin of the Chin emperors. Chamu Khan has promised her to him, for he is anxious to gain favor with Cathay. The emperor fears Genghis Khan."

"Who is Genghis Khan?" Godric asked idly.

"A chief of the Yakka Mongols. He has grown greatly in power for the last decade. His people are nomads -- fierce fighters who have so little to live for in their barren deserts that they do not mind dying. Long ago their ancestors, the Hiong-nu, were driven into the Gobi by my ancestors, the Cathayans. They are divided into many tribes and fight against one

another, but Genghis Khan seems to be uniting them by conquest. I even hear wild tales that he plans to shake off the liege-ship of Cathay and even make war on his masters. But that is foolish. This small kingdom is different. Though Hia and the Keraits lie between Chamu Khan and the Yakkas, Genghis Khan is a real threat to this mountain empire.

"Black Cathay has grown to be a kingdom apart, pent in the fastness where no strong foe has come against them for ages. They are neither Turks nor Chinese any longer, but constitute a separate nation of their own, with separate traditions. They have never needed any alliances for protection, but now since they have grown soft and degenerate from long years of peace, even Chamu realizes their weaknesses and seeks to ally his house with that of the Chins of Cathay."

Godric mused a space. "It would seem Jahadur is the key to Black Cathay. These Mongols must first take this city to make sure of their conquests. No doubt the walls throng with archers and spearmen?"

You-tai spread his hands helplessly. "No man knows the mind of Chamu Khan. There are scarce fifteen hundred warriors in the city. Chamu has even sent our strongest detachment -- a troop of hard-riding western Turks -- to another part of the empire. Why, no one knows. I beg you, stir not from the court until I tell you. Chamu Khan deems you a spy of Genghis Khan, I fear, and it were best if he did not send for you."

But Chamu Khan did call for Godric before many days had drifted by. The emperor gave him audience, not in the great throne room, but in a small chamber where Chamu Khan squatted like a great fat toad on a silken divan attended by a huge black mute with a two-handed scimitar. Godric veiled the contempt in his eyes and answered Chamu Khan's questions regarding his people and his country with patience. He wondered at the absurdity of most of these questions, and at the emperor's evident ignorance and stupidity. Old Roogla, the general, a fiercely mustached, barrel-chested savage, was present and he said nothing. But his eyes strayed in comparison from the fat, helpless mass of flesh and arrogance on the cushions to the erect, broad-shouldered figure and hard, scarred face of the Frank. From the corner of his eye Chamu Khan observed this but he was not altogether a fool. He spoke pleasantly to Godric, but the wary Norman, used to dealing with rulers, sensed that dislike was mixed with the khan's feeling of obligation, and that this dislike was mingled with fear. Chamu asked him suddenly of Genghis Khan and watched him narrowly. The sincerity of the knight's reply evidently convinced Chamu, for a shadow of relief passed over his fat face. After all, decided Godric, it was but natural that an emperor should be suspicious of a stranger in his realm, especially one of such war-like aspects as the Norman knew himself to be.

At the end of the interview, Chamu fastened a heavy golden chain about Godric's neck with his own pudgy hands. Then Godric went back to his chamber with the lapis lazuli dome, to the cherry blossoms drifting in gay-colored clouds from the breeze-shaken trees, and to lazy strolls and talks with Yulita.

"It seems strange," said he abruptly one day, "that you are to leave this land and go to another. Somehow I can not think of you save as a slim girl forever under these blossom-heavy trees, with the dreamy fountains singing and the mountains of Black Cathay rising against the skies."

She caught her breath and turned away her face as if from an inner hurt.

"There are cherry trees in Cathay," said she, without looking at him, "and fountains too -- and finer palaces than I have ever seen."

"But there are no such mountains," returned the knight.

"No," her voice was low, "there are no such mountains -- nor -- "

"Nor what?"

"No Frankish knight to save me from bandits," she laughed suddenly and gayly.

"Nor will there be here, long," he said somberly. "The time approaches when I must take the trail again. I come of a restless breed and I have dallied here overlong."

"Whither will you go, oh Godric?" Did she catch her breath suddenly as she spoke?

"Who knows?" In his voice was the ancient bitterness that his heathen Viking ancestors knew. "The world is before me -- but not all the world with its shining leagues of sea or sand can quench the hunger that is in me. I must ride -- that is all I know. I must ride till the ravens pluck my bones. Perchance I will ride back to tell Montferrat that his dream of an Eastern empire is a bubble that has burst. Perhaps I will ride east again."

"Not east," she shook her head. "The ravens are gathering in the east and there is a red flame there that pales the night. Wang Khan and his Keraits have fallen before the riders of Genghis Khan and Hia reels before his onslaught. Black Cathay too, I fear, is doomed, unless the Chins send them aid."

"Would you care if I fell?" he asked curiously.

Her clear eyes surveyed him.

"Would I care? I would care if a dog died. Surely then I would care if a man who saved my life, fell."

He shrugged his mighty shoulders. "You are kind. Today I ride. My wounds are long healed. I can lift my sword again. Thanks to your care I am strong as I ever was. This has been paradise -- but I come of a restless breed. My dream of a kingdom is shattered and I must ride -- somewhere. I have heard much from the slaves and You-tai of this Genghis Khan and his chiefs. Aye, of Subotai and Chepe Noyon. I will lend my sword to him -- "

"And fight against my people?" she asked.

His gaze fell before her clear eyes. "'Twere the deed of a dog," he muttered. "But what would you have? I am a soldier -- I have fought for and against the same men since I rode east. A warrior must pick the winning side. And Genghis Khan, from all accounts, is a born conqueror."

Her eyes flashed. "The Cathayans will send out an army and crush him. He can not take Jahadur -- what do his skin-clad herders know of walled cities?"

"We were but a naked horde before Constantinople," muttered Godric, "but we had hunger to drive us on and the city fell. Genghis and his men are hungry. I have seen men of the same breed. Your people are fat and indolent. Genghis Khan will ride them down like sheep."

"And you will aid him," she blazed.

"War is a man's game," he said roughly; shame hardened his tone; this slim, clear-eyed girl, so ignorant and innocent of the world's ways, stirred old dreams of idealistic chivalry in his soul -- dreams he thought long lost in the fierce necessity of life. "What do you know of war and men's perfidy? A warrior must better himself as he may. I am weary of fighting for lost causes and getting only hard blows in return."

"What if I asked you -- begged you?" she breathed, leaning forward.

A sudden surge of madness swept him off his feet.

"For you," he roared suddenly, like a wounded lion, "I would ride down on the Mongol yurts alone and crush them into the red earth and bring back the heads of Genghis and his khans in a cluster at my saddle-bow!"

She recoiled, gasping before the sudden loosing of his passion, but he caught her in an unconsciously rough embrace. His race loved as they hated, fiercely and violently. He would not have bruised her tender skin for all the gold in Cathay, but his own savagery swept him out of himself.

Then a sudden voice brought him to himself and he released the girl and whirled, ready to battle the whole Black Cathayan army. Old Roogla stood before them, panting.

"My princess," he gasped; "the courtiers from Greater Cathay -- they have just arrived -- "

She went white and cold as a statue.

"I am ready, oh Roogla," she whispered.

"Ready the devil!" roared the old soldier. "Only three of them got through to the gates of Jahadur and they're bleeding to death! You are not going to Cathay to marry Wang Yin. Not now, at least. And you'll be lucky if you're not dragged by the hair to Subotai's yurt. The hills are swarming with Mongols. They cut the throats of the watchers in the passes, and ambushed the courtiers from Cathay. An hour will bring them -- the whole horde of howling devils -- to the very gates of Jahadur. Chamu Khan is capering about like a devil with a hornet in his khalat. We can't send you out now -- Genghis holds all the outer passes. The western Turks might give you sanctuary -- but we can not reach them. There's only one thing to do -- and that's hold the city! But with these fat, perfume-scented, wine-bibbing dogs that call themselves soldiery we'll be lucky if we get to strike a single blow in our defense -- "

Yulita turned to Godric with level eyes.

"Genghis Khan is at our gates," said she. "Go to him." And turning she walked swiftly into a nearby doorway.

"What did she mean?" asked old Roogla wonderingly.

Godric growled deep in his throat. "Bring my armor and my sword. I go to seek Genghis Khan -- but not as she thought."

Roogla grinned and his beard bristled. He smote Godric a blow that had rendered a lesser man senseless.

"Hai, wolf-brother!" he roared; "we'll give Genghis a fight yet! We'll send him back to the desert to lick his wounds if we can only keep three men in the army from fleeing! They can stand behind us and hand us weapons when we break our swords and axes, while we pile up Mongol dead so high that the women on the battlements will look up at them!" Godric smiled thinly.

Chapter III

"To grow old cowed in a conquered land,
With the sun itself discrowned,
To see trees crouch and cattle slink --
Death is a better ale to drink,
And by high Death on the fell brink,
That flagon shall go round."
-- Chesterton

Godric's armor had been mended cleverly, he found, the rents in hauberk and helmet fused with such skill that no sign of a gash showed. The knight's armor was unusually strong, anyway, and of a weight few men could have borne. The blades that had wounded him in the battle of the defiles had hacked through old dents. Now that these were mended, the armor was like new. The heavy mail was reinforced with solid plates of steel on breast, back and shoulders and the sword belt was of joined steel plates a hand's breadth wide. The helmet, instead of being merely a steel cap with a long nasal, worn over a mail hood, as was the case of most Crusaders, was made with a vizor and fitted firmly into the steel shoulder-pieces. The whole armor showed the trend of the times -- chain and scale mail giving way gradually to plate armor.

Godric experienced a fierce resurge of power as he felt the familiar weight of his mail and fingered the worn hilt of his long, two-handed sword. The languorous illusive dreaminess of the past weeks vanished; again he was a conqueror of a race of conquerors. With old Roogla he rode to the main gates, seeing on all hands the terror that had seized the people. Men and women ran distractedly through the streets, crying that the Mongols were upon them; they tied their belongings into bundles, loaded them on donkeys and jerked them off again, shouting reproaches at the soldiers on the walls, who seemed as frightened as the people.

"Cowards!" old Roogla's beard bristled. "What they need is war to stiffen their thews. Well, they've got war now and they'll have to fight."

"A man can always run," answered Godric sardonically.

They came to the outer gates and found a band of soldiery there, handling their pikes and bows nervously. They brightened slightly as Roogla and Godric rode up. The tale of the Norman's battle with the Hian bandits had lost nothing in the telling. But Godric was surprized to note their fewness.

"Are these all your soldiers?"

Roogla shook his head.

"Most of them are at the Pass of Skulls," he growled. "It's the only way a large force of men can approach Jahadur. In the past we've held it easily against all comers -- but these Mongols are devils. I left enough men here to hold the city against any stray troops that might climb down the cliffs."

They rode out of the gates and down the winding mountain trail. On one side rose a sheer wall, a thousand feet high. On the other side the cliff fell away three times that distance into a fathomless chasm. A mile's ride brought them to the Pass of Skulls. Here the trail debouched into a sort of upland plateau, passing between two walls of sheer rock.

A thousand warriors were encamped there, gaudy in their silvered mail, long-toed leather boots and gold-chased weapons. With their peaked helmets with mail drops, their long spears and wide-bladed scimitars, they seemed war-like enough. They were big men, but they were evidently nervous and uncertain.

"By the blood of the devil, Roogla," snapped Godric, "have you no more soldiers than these?"

"Most of the troops are scattered throughout the empire," Roogla answered. "I warned Chamu Khan to collect all the warriors in the empire here, but he refused to do so. Why, Erlik alone knows. Well, a man can always die."

He rose in his saddle and his great voice roared through the hills: "Men of Black Cathay, you know me of old! But here beside me is one you know only by word of mouth; a chief out of the West who will fight beside you today. Now take heart, and when Genghis comes up the defile, show him Black Cathayans can still die like men!"

"Not so fast," growled Godric. "This pass looks impregnable to me. May I have a word as to the arranging of the troops?"

Roogla spread his hands. "Assuredly."

"Then set men to work rebuilding that barricade," snapped Godric, pointing to the wavering lines of stone, half tumbled down, which spanned the pass.

"Build it high and block that gate. There'll be no caravans passing through today. I thought you were a soldier; it should have been done long ago. Put your best bowmen behind the first line of stone. Then the spearmen, and the swordsmen and ax-fighters behind the spearmen -- "

The long hot day wore on. At last far away sounded the deep rattle of many kettledrums, then a thunder of myriad hoofs. Then up the deep defile and out onto the plateau swept a bizarre and terrible horde. Godric had expected a wild, motley mass of barbarians, like a swarm of locusts without order or system. These men rode in compact formation, of such as he had never before seen; in well ordered ranks, divided into troops of a thousand each.

The tugh, the yak-tail standards, were lifted above them. At the sight of their orderly array and hard-bitten appearance, Godric's heart sank. These men were used to fierce warfare; they outnumbered his own soldiers by seven times. How could he hope to hold the pass against them even for a little while? Godric swore deeply and fervently and put the hope of survival from him; thereafter during the whole savage fight, his one idea was to do as much damage to the enemy as he possibly could before he died.

Now he stood on the first line of fortifications and gazed curiously at the advancing hosts, seeing stocky, broad-built men mounted on wiry horses, men with square flat faces, devoid of humor or mercy, whose armor was plain stuff of hardened leather, lacquer, or iron plates laced together. With a wry face he noted the short, heavy bows and long arrows. From the look of those bows he knew they would drive shafts through ordinary mail as if it were paper. Their other weapons consisted of spears, short-handled axes, maces and curved sabers, lighter and more easily handled than the huge two-handed scimitars of the Black Cathayans.

Roogla, standing at his shoulder, pointed to a giant riding ahead of the army.

"Subotai," he growled, "a Uriankhi -- from the frozen tundras, with a heart as cold as his native land. He can twist a spear shaft in two between his hands. The tall fop riding beside him is Chepe Noyon; note his silvered mail and heron plumes. And by Erlik, there is Kassar the Strong, sword-bearer to the khan. Well -- if Genghis himself is not here now, he soon will be, for he never allows Kassar long out of his sight -- the Strong One is a fool, useful only in actual combat."

Godric's cold gray eyes were fixed on the giant form of Subotai; a growing fury stirred in him, not a tangible hatred of the Uriankhi but the fighting rage one strong man feels when confronted by a foe his equal in prowess. The knight expected a parley but evidently the Mongols were of a different mind. They came sweeping across the boulder-strewn plateau like a wind from Hell, a swarm of mounted bowmen preceding them.

"Down!" roared Godric, as shafts began to rain around him. "Down behind the rocks! Spearmen and swordsmen lie flat! Archers return their fire."

Roogla repeated the shout and arrows began to fly from the barricades. But the effort was half-hearted. The sight of that onrushing horde had numbed the men of Jahadur. Godric had never seen men ride and shoot from the saddle as these Mongols did. They were barely within arrow flight, yet men were falling along the lines of stone. He felt the Jahadurans wavering -- realized with a flood of blind rage that they would break before the Mongol heavy cavalry reached the barricade. A bowman near him roared and fell backward with an arrow through his throat and a shout went up from the faltering Black Cathayans.

"Fools!" raged Godric, smiting right and left with clenched fists. "Horsemen can never take this pass if you stand to it! Bend your bows and throw your shoulders into it! Fight, damn you!"

The bowmen had split to either side, and through the gap the flying swordsmen swept. Now if ever was the time to break the charge, but the Jahaduran bowmen loosed wildly or not at all and behind them the spearmen were scrambling up to flee. Old Roogla was screaming and tearing his hair, cursing the day he was born, and not a man had fallen on the Mongols' side. Even at that distance Godric, standing upright on the barricade, saw the broad grin on Subotai's face. With a bitter curse he tore a spear from the hand of a warrior near by and threw every ounce of his mighty-thewed frame into the cast.

It was too far for an ordinary spearcast even to carry -- but with a hum the spear hissed through the air and the Mongol next to Subotai fell headlong, transfixed. From the Black Cathayan ranks rose a sudden roar. These riders could be slain after all! And surely no mortal man could have made that cast! Godric, towering above them on the barricade, like a man of iron, suddenly assumed supernatural proportions in the eyes of the warriors behind him. How could they be defeated when such a man led them? The quick fire of Oriental battle-lust blazed up and sudden courage surged through the veins of the wavering warriors.

With a shout they pulled shaft to ear and loosed, and a sudden hail of death smote the charging Mongols. At that range there was no missing. Those long shafts tore through buckler and hauberk, transfixing the wearers. Flesh and blood could not stand it. The charge did not exactly break, but in the teeth of that iron gale the squadrons wheeled and circled away out of range. A wild yell of triumph rose from the Jahadurans and they waved their spears and shouted taunts.

Old Roogla was in ecstasies, but Godric snarled a mirthless laugh. At least he had whipped courage into the Black Cathayans. But here, he knew, he and Roogla and all the others would leave their corpses before the day was over. And Yulita -- he would not allow himself to think of her. At least, he swore, a red mist waving in front of his eyes, Subotai would not take her.

The yak tails were waving, the kettledrums beating for another charge. This time the bowmen rode out more warily, loosing a perfect rain of shafts. At Godric's order his men did not return the fire, but sheltered themselves behind their barricade; he himself stood contemptuously upright, trusting to the strength of his half-plate armor. He became the center of the fire, but the long shafts glanced harmlessly from his shield or splintered on his hauberk.

The horsemen wheeled closer, drawing harder on their heavy bows, and at Godric's word the Jahadurans answered them. In a short fierce exchange the men in the open had the worst of it. They galloped out of range with several empty saddles, but Godric had not let his attention stray from the real menace -- the heavily armed cavalry. These had approached at a rapid trot while the arrow fire was being exchanged, and now they struck in the spurs and came like a bolt from a crossbow.

Again the sweeping rain of arrows met and broke them, though this time their momentum carried them to within a hundred feet of the barricades. One rider broke through to the lines and Godric saw a wild figure, spurting blood and hewing madly at him. Then as the Mongol rose in his stirrups to reach the knight's head, a dozen spears, thrusting over the backs of the bowmen, pierced him and hurled him headlong.

Again the Mongols retreated out of range, but this time their losses had been severe. Riderless horses ranged the plateau, which was dotted with still or writhing forms.

Already the Jahadurans had inflicted more damage on the men of Genghis Khan than the Mongols were accustomed to. But from the way the nomads ranged themselves for the third charge, Godric knew that this time no flight of arrows would stop them. He spared a moment's admiration for their courage.

The supply of arrows was running low. Black Cathay, as in all things pertaining to war, had neglected the manufacture of war-arrows. A large number of shafts remaining in the quivers of the archers were hunting-arrows, good only at short range.

This time there was no great exchange between the bowmen. The archers of Subotai mingled themselves among the front ranks of the swordsmen, and when the charge came, a sheet of arrows preceded it.

"Save your shafts!" roared Godric, gripping the ax he had chosen from the arms of Jahadur. "Back, archers -- spearmen, on the wall!"

The next moment the headlong horde broke like a red wave on the barricade. Evidently they had misjudged the strength of those stone lines, not knowing them newly reinforced -- had expected to shatter them by sheer weight and velocity and to ride through the ruins. But the strengthened walls held.

Horses hit the barricade with a splintering of bones, and men's brains were dashed out by the shock. Doubtless they had expected to sacrifice the first line, but the slaughter was greater than they could have reckoned. The second line, hot on the heels of the first, plunged against the wall over its writhing remnants, and the third line piled up on both. The whole line of the barricade was a red welter of dying, screaming horses, lashing hoofs and writhing men, while the blood-maddened Jahadurans yelled like wolves, hacking and stabbing down at the crimson shambles.

The rear lines ruthlessly trampled down their dying comrades to strike at the defenders, but the ground was thick with dead and wounded and the plunging, writhing horses fouled the hoofs that swept over them. Still, some of the Mongols did gain through to the lines and made a desperate effort to clamber over the wall. They died like rats in a trap beneath the lunging spears of the inspired Black Cathayans.

One, a huge brutal-faced giant, rode over a writhing welter of red torn flesh, reined in close to the barricade and an iron mace in his hands dashed out the brains of a spearman. From both hosts rose a shout of: "Kassar!"

"Kassar, eh?" growled Godric, stepping forward on the precarious top of the barricade. The giant rose in his stirrups, the clotted mace swung back and at that instant the twenty-pound battle-ax in Godric's right hand crashed down on the peaked helmet. Ax and helmet shattered together and the steed went to his knees under the shock. Then it reared and plunged wildly away, Kassar's crumpled body lolling and swaying in the saddle, held by the deep stirrups.

Godric tossed away the splintered ax-haft and picked up the mace that had fallen on the stones. He heard old Roogla shouting: "Bogda! Bogda! Bogda! Gurgaslan!"

The whole host of Jahadur took up the shout; thus Godric gained his new name, which means the Lion, and crimson was the christening.

The Mongols were again in slow, stubborn retreat and Godric brandished the mace and shouted: "Ye be men! Stand to it boldly! Already have you slain more than half your own number!"

But he knew that now the real death grip was about to be. The Mongols were dismounting. Horsemen by nature and choice, they had realized however that cavalry charges could never take those solid walls, manned by inspired madmen. They held their round, lacquered bucklers before them and swung solidly onward in much the same formation as they had maintained mounted.

They rolled like a black tide over the corpse-strewn plain and like a black flood they burst on the spear-bristling wall. Few arrows were loosed on either side. The Black Cathayans had emptied their quivers and the Mongols wished only to come to hand-grips.

The line of barricades became a red line of Hell. Spears jabbed downward, curved blades broke on lances. In the very teeth of the girding steel, the Mongols strove to climb the wall, piling heaps of their own dead for grim ladders. Most of them were pierced by the spears of the defenders, and the few who did win over the barriers were cut down by the swordsmen behind the spearmen.

The nomads perforce fell back a few yards, then surged on again. The terrific shocks of their impact shook the whole barricade. These men needed no shouts or commands to spur them on. They were fired with an indomitable will which emanated from within as well as from without. Godric saw Chepe Noyon fighting silently on foot with the rest of the warriors. Subotai sat his horse a few yards back of the mass, directing the movements.

Charge after charge crashed against the barriers. The Mongols were wasting lives like water and Godric wondered at their unquenchable resolve to conquer this relatively unimportant mountain kingdom. But he realized that Genghis Khan's whole future as a conqueror depended on his stamping out all opposition, no matter what the cost.

The wall was crumbling. The Mongols were tearing it to pieces. They could not climb it, so they thrust their spears between the stones and loosened them, tearing them away with bare hands. They died as they toiled, but their comrades trampled their corpses and took up their work.

Subotai leaped from his horse, snatched a heavy curved sword from his saddle and joined the warriors on foot. He gained to the center of the wall and tore at it with his naked hands, disdaining the down-lunging spears which broke on his helmet and armor. A breach was made and the Mongols began to surge through.

Godric yelled fiercely and leaped to stem the sudden tide, but a wash of the black wave over the wall hemmed him in with howling fiends. A crashing sweep of his mace cleared a red way and he plunged through. The Mongols were coming over the ruins of the barriers and through the great breach Subotai had made. Godric shouted for the Jahadurans to fall back, and even as he did, he saw Roogla parrying the whistling strokes of Chepe Noyon's curved scimitar.

The old general was bleeding already from a deep gash in the thigh, and even as the Norman sprang to aid him, the Mongol's blade cut through Roogla's mail and blood spurted. Roogla slumped slowly to the earth and Chepe Noyon wheeled to meet the knight's furious charge. He flung up his sword to parry the whistling mace, but the giant Norman in his berserk rage dealt a blow that made nothing of skill or tempered steel. The scimitar flew to singing sparks, the helmet cracked and Chepe Noyon was dashed to earth like a pole-axed steer.

"Bear Roogla back!" roared Godric, leaping forward and swinging his mace up again to dash out the prostrate Mongol's brains as a man kills a wounded snake. But even as the mace crashed downward, a squat warrior leaped like a panther, arms wide, shielding the fallen chieftain's body with his own and taking the stroke on his own head. His shattered corpse fell across Chepe Noyon and a sudden determined rush of Mongols bore Godric back. Even as the Jahadurans bore the desperately wounded Roogla back across the next line of stone, the Mongols lifted the stunned Chepe Noyon and carried him out of the battle.

Fighting stubbornly, Godric retreated, half-ringed by the squat shapes that fought so silently and thrust so fiercely for his life. He reached the next wall, over which the Jahadurans had already gone, and for a moment stood at bay, back against the stones, while spears flashed at him and curved sabers hacked at him. His armor had saved him thus far, though a shrewd thrust had girded deep into the calf of his leg and a heavy blow on his hauberk had partly numbed the shoulder beneath.

Now the Black Cathayans leaned over the wall, cleared a space with their spears and seizing their champion under the armpits, lifted him bodily over. The fight rolled on. Life became to the men on the walls one red continuance of hurtling bodies and lunging blades. The spears of the defenders were bent or splintered. The arrows were gone. Half the Black Cathayans were dead. Most of the rest were wounded. But possessed of a fanatical fervor they fought on, swinging their notched axes and blunted scimitars as fiercely as if the fight had but started. The full fighting fury of their Turkish ancestors was roused and only death could quench it. After all, they were of the same blood as these unconquerable demons from the Gobi.

The second barricade crumbled and the Jahadurans began to fall back to the last line of barricades. But this time the Mongols were over the falling stones and upon them before they could make good their escape. Godric and fifty men, covering the withdrawal of the rest, were cut off. Then the others would have come back over the wall to aid them, but a solid mass of Mongols were between that balked their fiercest efforts.

Godric's men died about him like hunted wolves, slaying and dying without a groan or whimper. Their last gasps were snarls of deathless fury. Their heavy two-handed scimitars wrought fearful destruction among their stocky foes but the Mongols ran in under the sweep of the blades and ripped upward with their shorter sabers.

Godric's plated mail saved him from chance blows and his enormous strength and amazing quickness made him all but invincible. His shield he had long discarded. He gripped the heavy mace in both hands and it smashed like a black god of death through the battle rout. Blood and brains splashed like water as shields, helmets and corselets gave way. Across the heads of the hacking warriors Godric saw the giant frame of Subotai, looming head and shoulders above his men. With a curse the Norman hurled the mace, which spattered blood as it hummed through the air. Men cried out at the long cast, but Subotai ducked swiftly. Godric whipped out his two-handed sword for the first time during the fight, and the long straight blade which the Pope had blessed years ago shimmered like a living thing -- like the blue waves of the western sea.

It was a heavy blade, forged to cut through thick mail and strong plates, armor many times heavier than that worn by most Orientals, who usually preferred shirts of light chain mail. Godric wielded it in one hand as lightly as most men could swing it with both. His left hand held a dirk, point upward, and they who ducked beneath the sword to grapple, died from the thrust of the shorter blade. The Norman set his back against a heap of dead, and in a red haze of battle madness, split skulls to the teeth, cleft bosoms to the spine, severed shoulder bones, hewed through neck cords, hacked off legs at the hip and arms at the shoulder until they gave back in sudden, unaccustomed fear and stood panting and eyeing him as hunters eye a wounded tiger.

And Godric laughed at them, taunted them, spat in their faces. Centuries of civilizing French influence were wiped away; it was a berserk Viking who faced his paling foes.

He was wounded, he faintly sensed, but unweakened. The fire of fury left no room in his brain for any other sensation. A giant form surged through the ranks, flinging men right and left as spray is flung by a charging galley. Subotai of the frozen tundras stood before his foe at last.

Godric took in the height of the man, the mighty sweep of chest and shoulder, and the massive arms which wielded the sword that had more than once, during the fight, sheared clear through the torso of a mailed Jahaduran.

"Back!" roared Subotai, his fierce eyes alight -- those eyes were blue, Godric noted, and the Mongol's hair red; surely somewhere in that frozen land of tundras a wandering Aryan strain had mingled with the Turanian blood of Subotai's tribe -- "Back, and give us room! None shall slay this chief but Subotai!"

Somewhere down the deep defile there sounded a rally of kettledrums and the tramp of many hoofs, but Godric was hardly aware he heard. He saw the Mongols fall back, leaving a space clear. He heard Chepe Noyon, still slightly groggy, and with a new helmet, shouting orders at the men who surged about the wall. Fighting ceased altogether and all eyes turned on the chiefs, who swung up their blades and rushed together like two maddened bulls.

Godric knew that his armor would never stand against the full sweep of the great sword Subotai was swinging in his right hand. The Norman leaped and struck as a tiger strikes, throwing every ounce of his body behind the blow and nerving himself to superhuman quickness. His heavy, straight blade sheared through the lacquered buckler Subotai flung above his head, and crashing full on the peaked helmet, bit through to the scalp beneath. Subotai staggered, a jet of blood trickling down his dark face, but almost instantly swung a decapitating stroke that whistled harmlessly through the air as Godric bent his knees quickly. The Frank thrust viciously but Subotai evaded the lunging point with a twist of his huge frame and hacked in savagely. Godric sprang away but could not entirely avoid the blow. The great blade struck under his armpit, crunched through the mail and bit deep into his ribs. The impact numbed his whole left side, and in an instant his hauberk was full of blood.

Stung to renewed madness, Godric sprang in, parrying the scimitar, then dropped his sword and grappled Subotai. The Mongol returned the fierce embrace, drawing a dagger. Close-locked they wrestled and strained, staggering on hard-braced legs, each seeking to break the other's spine or to drive home his own blade. Both weapons were reddened in an instant as they girded through the crevices in the armor or were driven straight through solid mail, but neither could free his hand enough to drive in a death thrust.

Godric was gasping for breath; he felt that the pressure of the Mongol's huge arms was crushing him. But Subotai was in no better way. The Norman saw sweat thickly beading the Mongol's brow, heard his breath coming in heavy pants, and a savage joy shook him.

Subotai lifted his foe bodily to dash him headlong, but Godric's grip held them together so firmly this was impossible. With both feet braced on the blood-soaked earth again, Godric suddenly ceased trying to free his dirk wrist from Subotai's iron grip, and releasing the Mongol's dagger arm, drove his left fist into Subotai's face.

With the full power of mighty arm and broad shoulders behind it, the blow was like that of a club. Blood spattered and Subotai's head snapped back as if on hinges -- but at that instant he drove his dagger deep in Godric's breast muscles.

The Norman gasped, staggered, and then in a last burst of strength he flung the Mongol from him. Subotai fell his full length and rose slowly, dazedly, like a man who has fought out the last red ounce of his endurance. His mighty frame sagged back on the arms of the ringing warriors and he shook his head like a bull, striving to nerve himself again for the combat.

Godric recovered the sword he had dropped and now he faced his foes, feet braced wide against his sick dizziness. He groped a moment for support and felt firm stones at his back. The fight had carried them almost to the last barricades. There he faced the Mongols like a wounded lion at bay, head lowered on his mighty, mailed breast, terrible eyes glittering through the bars of his vizor, both hands gripping his red sword.

"Come on," he challenged as he felt his life waning in thick red surges. "Mayhap I die -- but I will slay seven of you before I die. Come in and make an ending, you pagan swine!"

Men thronged the plateau behind the tattered horde -- thousands of them. A powerful, bearded chieftain on a white horse rode forward and surveyed the silent, battle-weary Mongols and the stone bulwark with its thin ranks of bloody defenders. This, Godric knew in a weary way, was the great Genghis Khan and he wished he had enough life left in him to charge through the ranks and hew the khan from his saddle; but weakness began to steal over him.

"A good thing I came with the Horde," said Genghis Khan sardonically. "It seems these Cathayans have been drinking some wine that makes men of them. They have slain more Mongols already than the Keraits and the Hians did. Who spurred these scented women to battle?"

"He." Chepe Noyon pointed to the bloodstained knight. "By Erlik, they have drunk blood this day. The Frank is a devil; my head still sings from the blow he dealt me; Kassar is but now recovering his senses from an ax the Frank shattered on his helmet, and he has but now fought Subotai himself to a standstill."

Genghis reigned his horse forward and Godric tensed himself. If the khan would only come within reach -- a sudden spring, a last, desperate blow -- if he could but take this paynim lord with him to the realm of death, he would die content.

The great, deep gray eyes of Genghis were upon the knight and he felt their full power.

"You are of such steel as my chiefs are forged from," said Genghis. "I would have you for friend, not foe. You are not of the race of those men; come and serve under me."

"My ears are dull with blows on my helmet," answered Godric, tightening his grip on his hilt and tensing his weary muscles; "I can not understand you. Come closer that I may hear you."

Instead Genghis reigned his steed back a few paces and grinned with tolerant understanding.

"Will you serve me?" he persisted. "I will make you a chief."

"And what of these?" Godric indicated the Black Cathayans.

Genghis shrugged his shoulders. "What am I to do with them? They must die."

"Go to your brother the Devil," Godric growled. "I come of a race that sell their swords for gold -- but we are no jackals to turn on men that have bled beside us. These warriors and I have already killed more than our own number and wounded many more of your warriors. There are still three hundred of us left and the strongest of the barricades. We have slain over a thousand of your wolves -- if you enter Jahadur you ride over our corpses. Charge in now and see how desperate men can die."

"But you owe no allegiance to Jahadur," argued Genghis.

"I owe my life to Chamu Khan," snapped Godric. "I have thrown in my lot with him and I serve him with as much fealty as if he were the Pope himself."

"You are a fool," Genghis said frankly. "I have long had my spies among the Jahadurans. Chamu planned to sacrifice Jahadur and all therein to save his own hide. That is why he refused to bring more soldiers to the city. His main force he gathered on the western border. He planned to flee by a secret way through the cliffs as soon as I attacked the pass.

"Well, he did, but some of my warriors came upon him. They only asked a gift of him," Genghis chuckled. "Then they made no effort to hinder him. He might then go where he would. Would you see the gift they took from Chamu Khan?"

And a Mongol behind the khan held up a ghastly, grinning head. Godric cursed: "Liar, traitor and coward though he was, he was yet a king. Come in and make an ending. I swear to you that before you ride over this wall, your horses will tread fetlock-deep in a carpet of your dead."

Still Genghis sat his horse and pondered. Subotai came up to him, and grinning broadly, spoke in his ear. The Khan nodded.

"Swear to serve me and I will spare the lives of your men; I will take Black Cathay unharmed into my empire."

Godric turned to his men. "You heard -- I would rather die here on a heap of Mongol dead -- but it is for you to say."

They answered with a shout: "The emperor is dead! Why should we die, if Genghis Khan will grant us peace? Give us Gurgaslan for ruler and we will serve you."

Genghis raised his hand. "So be it!"

Godric shook the blood and sweat out of his eyes and snarled a bitter laugh.

"A puppet king on a tinsel throne, to dance on your string, Mongol? No! Get another for the task."

Genghis scowled and suddenly swore. "By the yellow face of Erlik! I have already made more concessions today than I ever made in my life before! What want ye, Gurgaslan -- shall I give you my scepter for a war-club?"

"If he wishes it you may as well give it to him," grinned Subotai, who was no more awed by his khan than if Genghis had been a horse-boy. "These Franks are built of iron without and within. Reason with him, Genghis!"

The khan glared at his general for a moment as if he were of a mind to brain him, then grinned suddenly. These men of the steppes were a frank, open race greatly different from the devious-minded peoples of Asia Minor.

"To have you and your warriors fighting beside me," said Genghis calmly, "I will do that which I never expected to do. You are fit to tread the crimson road of empire. Take Black Cathay and rule it as you will; I ask only that you aid me in my wars, as an equal ally. We will be two kings, reigning side by side and aiding each other against all enemies."

Godric's thin lips smiled. "It is fair enough."

The Mongols sent up a thunderous roar and the bloody Jahadurans swarmed over the barricades to kiss the hands of their new ruler. He did not hear Genghis say to the warrior who bore the grisly severed head of Chamu Khan: "See that the skull is prepared and sheathed in silver, and set among the rest that were khans of tribes; when I fall I would wish my own skull treated with the same respect."

Godric felt a firm grasp on his hand and looked into the steady eyes of Subotai, feeling a rush of friendship for the man that equaled his former rage.

"Erlik, what a man!" growled the chief. "We should be good comrades, Gurgaslan! Here -- by the gods, man, you are sorely wounded! He swoons -- get off his armor and see to his hurts, you thick-headed fools, do you want him to die?"

"Scant chance," grinned Chepe Noyon, feeling his head tenderly. "Such men as he are not made to die from steel. Wait, you big buffalo, you'll kill him with your clumsiness. I'll bring one more fitted to attend him -- one that was found being forcibly escorted out of Jahadur by the palace eunuchs. I saw her only five minutes agone and I am almost ready to cut your throat for her, Gurgaslan. Genghis, will you bid them bring the girl?"

Again Godric saw, as in a closing mist, two great dark eyes bend over him -- he felt soft arms go about his neck and heard a sobbing in his ear.

"Well, Yulita," he said as in a dream, "I went to Genghis Khan after all!"

"You saved Black Cathay, my king," she sobbed, pressing her lips against his. Then while his dull head swam those soft lips were withdrawn and a goblet took their place, filled with a stinging wine that jerked him back into consciousness.

Genghis was standing over him.

"You have already found your queen, eh?" he smiled. "Well -- rest of your wounds; I will not need your aid for some months yet. Marry your queen, organize your kingdom -- there is a great army drawn up on the western border ready to your hand now that there is to be no invasion of your kingdom. It may be the western Turks will dispute your liegeship -- you have but to send the word and I will send you as many riders as you need. When the desert grass deepens for spring, we ride in to Greater Cathay."

The khan turned on his heel and strode away and Godric gathered the slim form of Yulita into his weary arms.

"Wang Yin will wait long for his bride," said he, and the laughter of Yulita was like the tinkle of the silvery fountains in the cherry blossom courts of Jahadur. And so the dream that had haunted Godric de Villehard of an Eastern empire woke to life.

Contents

PEOPLE OF THE DARK

By Robert E. Howard

I came to Dagon's Cave to kill Richard Brent. I went down the dusky avenues made by the towering trees, and my mood well-matched the primitive grimness of the scene.

The approach to Dagon's Cave is always dark, for the mighty branches and thick leaves shut out the sun, and now the somberness of my own soul made the shadows seem more ominous and gloomy than was natural.

Not far away I heard the slow wash of the waves against the tall cliffs, but the sea itself was out of sight, masked by the dense oak forest. The darkness and the stark gloom of my surroundings gripped my shadowed soul as I passed beneath the ancient branches--as I came out into a narrow glade and saw the mouth of the ancient cavern before me. I paused, scanning the cavern's exterior and the dim reaches of the silent oaks.

The man I hated had not come before me! I was in time to carry out my grim intent. For a moment my resolution faltered, then like a wave there surged over me the fragrance of Eleanor Bland, a vision of wavy golden hair and deep gray eyes, changing and mystic as the sea. I clenched my hands until the knuckles showed white, and instinctively touched the wicked snub-nosed revolver whose weight sagged my coat pocket.

But for Richard Brent, I felt certain I had already won this woman, desire for whom made my waking hours a torment and my sleep a torture. Whom did she love? She would not say; I did not believe she knew. Let one of us go away, I thought, and she would turn to the other. And I was going to simplify matters for her--and for myself. By chance I had overheard my blond English rival remark that he intended coming to lonely Dagon's Cave on an idle exploring outing--alone.

I am not by nature criminal. I was born and raised in a hard country, and have lived most of my life on the raw edges of the world, where a man took what he wanted, if he could, and mercy was a virtue little known. But it was a torment that racked me day and night that sent me out to take the life of Richard Brent. I have lived hard, and violently, perhaps. When love overtook me, it also was fierce and violent. Perhaps I was not wholly sane, what with my love for Eleanor Bland and my hatred for Richard Brent. Under any other circumstances, I would have been glad to call him friend--a fine, rangy, upstanding young fellow, clear-eyed and strong. But he stood in the way of my desire and he must die.

I stepped into the dimness of the cavern and halted. I had never before visited Dagon's Cave, yet a vague sense of misplaced familiarity troubled me as I gazed on the high arching roof, the even stone walls and the dusty floor. I shrugged my shoulders, unable to place the elusive feeling; doubtless it was evoked by a similarity to caverns in the mountain country of the American Southwest where I was born and spent my childhood.

And yet I knew that I had never seen a cave like this one, whose regular aspect gave rise to myths that it was not a natural cavern, but had been hewn from the solid rock ages ago by the tiny hands of the mysterious Little People, the prehistoric beings of British legend. The whole countryside thereabouts was a haunt for ancient folk lore.

The country folk were predominantly Celtic; here the Saxon invaders had never prevailed, and the legends reached back, in that long-settled countryside, further than anywhere else in England--back beyond the coming of the Saxons, aye, and incredibly beyond that distant age, beyond the coming of the Romans, to those unbelievably ancient days when the native Britons warred with black-haired Irish pirates.

The Little People, of course, had their part in the lore. Legend said that this cavern was one of their last strongholds against the conquering Celts, and hinted at lost tunnels, long fallen in or blocked up, connecting the cave with a network of subterranean corridors which honeycombed the hills. With these chance meditations vying idly in my mind with grimmer speculations, I passed through the outer chamber of the cavern and entered a narrow tunnel, which, I knew by former descriptions, connected with a larger room.

It was dark in the tunnel, but not too dark for me to make out the vague, half-defaced outlines of mysterious etchings on the stone walls. I ventured to switch on my electric torch and examine them more closely. Even in their dimness I was repelled by their abnormal and revolting character. Surely no men cast in human mold as we know it, scratched those grotesque obscenities.

The Little People--I wondered if those anthropologists were correct in their theory of a squat Mongoloid aboriginal race, so low in the scale of evolution as to be scarcely human, yet possessing a distinct, though repulsive, culture of their own. They had vanished before the invading races, theory said, forming the base of all Aryan legends of trolls, elves, dwarfs and witches. Living in caves from the start, these aborigines had retreated farther and farther into the caverns of the hills, before the conquerors, vanishing at last entirely, though folklore fancy pictures their descendants still dwelling in the lost chasms far beneath the hills, loathsome survivors of an outworn age.

I snapped off the torch and passed through the tunnel, to come out into a sort of doorway which seemed entirely too symmetrical to have been the work of nature. I was looking into a vast dim cavern, at a somewhat lower level than the outer chamber, and again I shuddered with a strange alien sense of familiarity. A short flight of steps led down from the tunnel to the floor of the cavern--tiny steps, too small for normal human feet, carved into the solid stone. Their edges were greatly worn away, as if by ages of use. I started the descent--my foot slipped suddenly. I instinctively knew what was coming--it was all in part with that strange feeling of familiarity--but I could not catch myself. I fell headlong down the steps and struck the stone floor with a crash that blotted out my senses...

* * * *

Slowly consciousness returned to me, with a throbbing of my head and a sensation of bewilderment. I lifted a hand to my head and found it caked with blood. I had received a blow, or had taken a fall, but so completely had my wits been knocked out of me that my mind was an absolute blank. Where I was, who I was, I did not know. I looked about, blinking in the dim light, and saw that I was in a wide, dusty cavern. I stood at the foot of a short flight of steps which led upward into some kind of tunnel. I ran my hand dazedly through my square-cut

black mane, and my eyes wandered over my massive naked limbs and powerful torso. I was clad, I noticed absently, in a sort of loincloth, from the girdle of which swung an empty scabbard, and leathern sandals were on my feet.

Then I saw an object lying at my feet, and stooped and took it up. It was a heavy iron sword, whose broad blade was darkly stained. My fingers fitted instinctively about its hilt with the familiarity of long usage. Then suddenly I remembered and laughed to think that a fall on his head should render me, Conan of the reavers, so completely daft. Aye, it all came back to me now. It had been a raid on the Britons, on whose coasts we continually swooped with torch and sword, from the island called Eireann. That day we of the black-haired Gael had swept suddenly down on a coastal village in our long, low ships and in the hurricane of battle which followed, the Britons had at last given up the stubborn contest and retreated, warriors, women and bairns, into the deep shadows of the oak forests, whither we seldom dared follow.

But I had followed, for there was a girl of my foes whom I desired with a burning passion, a lithe, slim young creature with wavy golden hair and deep gray eyes, changing and mystic as the sea. Her name was Tamera--well I knew it, for there was trade between the races as well as war, and I had been in the villages of the Britons as a peaceful visitor, in times of rare truce.

I saw her white half-clad body flickering among the trees as she ran with the swiftness of a doe, and I followed, panting with fierce eagerness. Under the dark shadows of the gnarled oaks she fled, with me in close pursuit, while far away behind us died out the shouts of slaughter and the clashing of swords. Then we ran in silence, save for her quick labored panting, and I was so close behind her as we emerged into a narrow glade before a somber-mouthed cavern, that I caught her flying golden tresses with one mighty hand. She sank down with a despairing wail, and even so, a shout echoed her cry and I wheeled quickly to face a rangy young Briton who sprang from among the trees, the light of desperation in his eyes.

"Vertorix!" the girl wailed, her voice breaking in a sob, and fiercer rage welled up in me, for I knew the lad was her lover.

"Run for the forest, Tamera!" he shouted, and leaped at me as a panther leaps, his bronze ax whirling like a flashing wheel about his head. And then sounded the clangor of strife and the hard-drawn panting of combat.

The Briton was as tall as I, but he was lithe where I was massive. The advantage of sheer muscular power was mine, and soon he was on the defensive, striving desperately to parry my heavy strokes with his ax. Hammering on his guard like a smith on an anvil, I pressed him relentlessly, driving him irresistibly before me. His chest heaved, his breath came in labored gasps, his blood dripped from scalp, chest and thigh where my whistling blade had cut the skin, and all but gone home. As I redoubled my strokes and he bent and swayed beneath them like a sapling in a storm, I heard the girl cry: "Vertorix! Vertorix! The cave! Into the cave!"

I saw his face pale with a fear greater than that induced by my hacking sword.

"Not there!" he gasped. "Better a clean death! In Il-marenin's name, girl, run into the forest and save yourself!"

"I will not leave you!" she cried. "The cave! It is our one chance!"

I saw her flash past us like a flying wisp of white and vanish in the cavern, and with a despairing cry, the youth launched a wild desperate stroke that nigh cleft my skull. As I staggered beneath the blow I had barely parried, he sprang away, leaped into the cavern after the girl and vanished in the gloom.

With a maddened yell that invoked all my grim Gaelic gods, I sprang recklessly after them, not reckoning if the Briton lurked beside the entrance to brain me as I rushed in. But a quick glance showed the chamber empty and a wisp of white disappearing through a dark doorway in the back wall.

I raced across the cavern and came to a sudden halt as an ax licked out of the gloom of the entrance and whistled perilously close to my black-maned head. I gave back suddenly. Now the advantage was with Vertorix, who stood in the narrow mouth of the corridor where I could hardly come at him without exposing myself to the devastating stroke of his ax.

I was near frothing with fury and the sight of a slim white form among the deep shadows behind the warrior drove me into a frenzy. I attacked savagely but warily, thrusting venomously at my foe, and drawing back from his strokes. I wished to draw him out into a wide lunge, avoid it and run him through before he could recover his balance. In the open I could have beat him down by sheer power and heavy blows, but here I could only use the point and that at a disadvantage; I always preferred the edge. But I was stubborn; if I could not come at him with a finishing stroke, neither could he or the girl escape me while I kept him hemmed in the tunnel.

It must have been the realization of this fact that prompted the girl's action, for she said something to Vertorix about looking for a way leading out, and though he cried out fiercely forbidding her to venture away into the darkness, she turned and ran swiftly down the tunnel to vanish in the dimness. My wrath rose appallingly and I nearly got my head split in my eagerness to bring down my foe before she found a means for their escape.

Then the cavern echoed with a terrible scream and Vertorix cried out like a man death-stricken, his face ashy in the gloom. He whirled, as if he had forgotten me and my sword, and raced down the tunnel like a madman, shrieking Tamera's name. From far away, as if from the bowels of the earth, I seemed to hear her answering cry, mingled with a strange sibilant clamor that electrified me with nameless but instinctive horror. Then silence fell, broken only by Vertorix's frenzied cries, receding farther and farther into the earth.

Recovering myself I sprang into the tunnel and raced after the Briton as recklessly as he had run after the girl. And to give me my due, red-handed reaver though I was, cutting down my rival from behind was less in my mind than discovering what dread thing had Tamera in its clutches.

As I ran along I noted absently that the sides of the tunnel were scrawled with monstrous pictures, and realized suddenly and creepily that this must be the dread Cavern of the Children of the Night, tales of which had crossed the narrow sea to resound horrifically in the ears of the Gaels. Terror of me must have ridden Tamera hard to have driven her into the cavern shunned by her people, where it was said, lurked the survivors of that grisly race which inhabited the land before the coming of the Picts and Britons, and which had fled before them into the unknown caverns of the hills.

Ahead of me the tunnel opened into a wide chamber, and I saw the white form of Vertorix glimmer momentarily in the semidarkness and vanish in what appeared to be the entrance of a corridor opposite the mouth of the tunnel I had just traversed. Instantly there sounded a short, fierce shout and the crash of a hard-driven blow, mixed with the hysterical screams of a girl and a medley of serpentlike hissing that made my hair bristle. And at that instant I shot out of the tunnel, running at full speed, and realized too late the floor of the cavern lay several feet below the level of the tunnel. My flying feet missed the tiny steps and I crashed terrifically on the solid stone floor.

Now as I stood in the semidarkness, rubbing my aching head, all this came back to me, and I stared fearsomely across the vast chamber at that black cryptic corridor into which Tamera and her lover had disappeared, and over which silence lay like a pall. Gripping my sword, I warily crossed the great still cavern and peered into the corridor. Only a denser darkness met my eyes. I entered, striving to pierce the gloom, and as my foot slipped on a wide wet smear on the stone floor, the raw acrid scent of fresh-spilled blood met my nostrils. Someone or something had died there, either the young Briton or his unknown attacker.

I stood there uncertainly, all the supernatural fears that are the heritage of the Gael rising in my primitive soul. I could turn and stride out of these accursed mazes, into the clear sunlight and down to the clean blue sea where my comrades, no doubt, impatiently awaited me after the routing of the Britons. Why should I risk my life among these grisly rat dens? I was eaten with curiosity to know what manner of beings haunted the cavern, and who were called the Children of the Night by the Britons, but in it was my love for the yellow-haired girl which drove me down that dark tunnel--and love her I did, in my way, and would have been kind to her, had I carried her away to my island haunt.

I walked softly along the corridor, blade ready. What sort of creatures the Children of the Night were, I had no idea, but the tales of the Britons had lent them a distinctly inhuman nature.

The darkness closed around me as I advanced, until I was moving in utter blackness. My groping left hand encountered a strangely carven doorway, and at that instant something hissed like a viper beside me and slashed fiercely at my thigh. I struck back savagely and felt my blind stroke crunch home, and something fell at my feet and died. What thing I had slain in the dark I could not know, but it must have been at least partly human because the shallow gash in my thigh had been made with a blade of some sort, and not by fangs or talons. And I sweated with horror, for the gods know, the hissing voice of the Thing had resembled no human tongue I had ever heard.

And now in the darkness ahead of me I heard the sound repeated, mingled with horrible slitherings, as if numbers of reptilian creatures were approaching. I stepped quickly into the entrance my groping hand had discovered and came near repeating my headlong fall, for instead of letting into another level corridor, the entrance gave onto a flight of dwarfish steps on which I floundered wildly.

Recovering my balance I went on cautiously, groping along the sides of the shaft for support. I seemed to be descending into the very bowels of the earth, but I dared not turn back. Suddenly, far below me, I glimpsed a faint eerie light. I went on, perforce, and came to a spot where the shaft opened into another great vaulted chamber; and I shrank back, aghast.

In the center of the chamber stood a grim, black altar; it had been rubbed all over with a sort of phosphorous, so that it glowed dully, lending a semi-illumination to the shadowy cavern. Towering behind it on a pedestal of human skulls, lay a cryptic black object, carven with mysterious hieroglyphics. The Black Stone! The ancient, ancient Stone before which, the Britons said, the Children of the Night bowed in gruesome worship, and whose origin was lost in the black mists of a hideously distant past. Once, legend said, it had stood in that grim circle of monoliths called Stonehenge, before its votaries had been driven like chaff before the bows of the Picts.

But I gave it but a passing, shuddering glance. Two figures lay, bound with rawhide thongs, on the glowing black altar. One was Tamera; the other was Vertorix, bloodstained and disheveled. His bronze ax, crusted with clotted blood, lay near the altar. And before the glowing stone squatted Horror.

Though I had never seen one of those ghoulish aborigines, I knew this thing for what it was, and shuddered. It was a man of a sort, but so low in the stage of life that its distorted humanness was more horrible than its bestiality.

Erect, it could not have been five feet in height. Its body was scrawny and deformed, its head disproportionately large. Lank snaky hair fell over a square inhuman face with flabby writhing lips that bared yellow fangs, flat spreading nostrils and great yellow slant eyes. I knew the creature must be able to see in the dark as well as a cat. Centuries of skulking in dim caverns had lent the race terrible and inhuman attributes. But the most repellent feature was its skin: scaly, yellow and mottled, like the hide of a serpent. A loincloth made of a real snake's skin girt its lean loins, and its taloned hands gripped a short stone-tipped spear and a sinister-looking mallet of polished flint.

So intently was it gloating over its captives, it evidently had not heard my stealthy descent. As I hesitated in the shadows of the shaft, far above me I heard a soft sinister rustling that chilled the blood in my veins. The Children were creeping down the shaft behind me, and I was trapped. I saw other entrances opening on the chamber, and I acted, realizing that an alliance with Vertorix was our only hope. Enemies though we were, we were men, cast in the same mold, trapped in the lair of these indescribable monstrosities.

As I stepped from the shaft, the horror beside the altar jerked up his head and glared full at me. And as he sprang up, I leaped and he crumpled, blood spurting, as my heavy sword split his reptilian heart. But even as he died, he gave tongue in an abhorrent shriek which was echoed far up the shaft. In desperate haste I cut Vertorix's bonds and dragged him to his feet. And I turned to Tamera, who in that dire extremity did not shrink from me, but looked up at me with pleading, terror-dilated eyes. Vertorix wasted no time in words, realizing chance had made allies of us. He snatched up his ax as I freed the girl.

"We can't go up the shaft," he explained swiftly; "we'll have the whole pack upon us quickly. They caught Tamera as she sought for an exit, and overpowered me by sheer numbers when I followed. They dragged us hither and all but that carrion scattered--bearing word of the sacrifice through all their burrows, I doubt not. Il-marenin alone knows how many of my people, stolen in the night, have died on that altar. We must take our chance in one of these tunnels--all lead to Hell! Follow me!"

Seizing Tamera's hand he ran fleetly into the nearest tunnel and I followed. A glance back into the chamber before a turn in the corridor blotted it from view showed a revolting horde streaming out of the shaft. The tunnel slanted steeply upward, and suddenly ahead of us we saw a bar of gray light. But the next instant our cries of hope changed to curses of bitter disappointment. There was daylight, aye, drifting in through a cleft in the vaulted roof, but far, far above our reach. Behind us the pack gave tongue exultingly. And I halted.

"Save yourselves if you can," I growled. "Here I make my stand. They can see in the dark and I cannot. Here at least I can see them. Go!"

But Vertorix halted also. "Little use to be hunted like rats to our doom. There is no escape. Let us meet our fate like men."

Tamera cried out, wringing her hands, but she clung to her lover.

"Stand behind me with the girl," I grunted. "When I fall, dash out her brains with your ax lest they take her alive again. Then sell your own life as high as you may, for there is none to avenge us."

His keen eyes met mine squarely.

"We worship different gods, reaver," he said, "but all gods love brave men. Mayhap we shall meet again, beyond the Dark."

"Hail and farewell, Briton!" I growled, and our right hands gripped like steel.

"Hail and farewell, Gael!"

And I wheeled as a hideous horde swept up the tunnel and burst into the dim light, a flying nightmare of streaming snaky hair, foam-flecked lips and glaring eyes. Thundering my war-cry I sprang to meet them and my heavy sword sang and a head spun grinning from its shoulder on an arching fountain of blood. They came upon me like a wave and the fighting madness of my race was upon me. I fought as a maddened beast fights and at every stroke I clove through flesh and bone, and blood spattered in a crimson rain.

Then as they surged in and I went down beneath the sheer weight of their numbers, a fierce yell cut the din and Vertorix's ax sang above me, splattering blood and brains like water. The press slackened and I staggered up, trampling the writhing bodies beneath my feet.

"A stair behind us!" the Briton was screaming. "Half-hidden in an angle of the wall! It must lead to daylight! Up it, in the name of Il-marenin!"

So we fell back, fighting our way inch by inch. The vermin fought like blood-hungry devils, clambering over the bodies of the slain to screech and hack. Both of us were streaming blood at every step when we reached the mouth of the shaft, into which Tamera had preceded us.

Screaming like very fiends the Children surged in to drag us down. The shaft was not as light as had been the corridor, and it grew darker as we climbed, but our foes could only come at us from in front. By the gods, we slaughtered them till the stair was littered with mangled corpses and the Children frothed like mad wolves! Then suddenly they abandoned the fray and raced back down the steps.

"What portends this?" gasped Vertorix, shaking the bloody sweat from his eyes.

"Up the shaft, quick!" I panted. "They mean to mount some other stair and come at us from above!"

So we raced up those accursed steps, slipping and stumbling, and as we fled past a black tunnel that opened into the shaft, far down it we heard a frightful howling. An instant later we emerged from the shaft into a winding corridor, dimly illumined by a vague gray light filtering in from above, and somewhere in the bowels of the earth I seemed to hear the thunder of rushing water. We started down the corridor and as we did so, a heavy weight smashed on my shoulders, knocking me headlong, and a mallet crashed again and again on my head, sending dull red flashes of agony across my brain. With a volcanic wrench I dragged my attacker off and under me, and tore out his throat with my naked fingers. And his fangs met in my arm in his death-bite.

Reeling up, I saw that Tamera and Vertorix had passed out of sight. I had been somewhat behind them, and they had run on, knowing nothing of the fiend which had leaped on my shoulders. Doubtless they thought I was still close on their heels. A dozen steps I took, then halted. The corridor branched and I knew not which way my companions had taken. At blind venture I turned into the left-hand branch, and staggered on in the semidarkness. I was weak from fatigue and loss of blood, dizzy and sick from the blows I had received. Only the thought of Tamera kept me doggedly on my feet. Now distinctly I heard the sound of an unseen torrent.

That I was not far underground was evident by the dim light which filtered in from somewhere above, and I momentarily expected to come upon another stair. But when I did, I halted in black despair; instead of up, it led down. Somewhere far behind me I heard faintly the howls of the pack, and I went down, plunging into utter darkness. At last I struck a level and went along blindly. I had given up all hope of escape, and only hoped to find Tamera--if she and her lover had not found a way of escape--and die with her. The thunder of rushing water was above my head now, and the tunnel was slimy and dank. Drops of moisture fell on my head and I knew I was passing under the river.

Then I blundered again upon steps cut in the stone, and these led upward. I scrambled up as fast as my stiffening wounds would allow--and I had taken punishment enough to have killed an ordinary man. Up I went and up, and suddenly daylight burst on me through a cleft in the solid rock. I stepped into the blaze of the sun. I was standing on a ledge high above the rushing waters of a river which raced at awesome speed between towering cliffs. The ledge on which I stood was close to the top of the cliff; safety was within arm's length. But I hesitated and such was my love for the golden-haired girl that I was ready to retrace my steps through those black tunnels on the mad hope of finding her. Then I started.

Across the river I saw another cleft in the cliff-wall which fronted me, with a ledge similar to that on which I stood, but longer. In olden times, I doubt not, some sort of primitive bridge connected the two ledges--possibly before the tunnel was dug beneath the riverbed. Now as I watched, two figures emerged upon that other ledge--one gashed, dust-stained, limping, gripping a bloodstained ax; the other slim, white and girlish.

Vertorix and Tamera! They had taken the other branch of the corridor at the fork and had evidently followed the windows of the tunnel to emerge as I had done, except that I had taken the left turn and passed clear under the river. And now I saw that they were in a trap. On that side the cliffs rose half a hundred feet higher than on my side of the river, and so sheer a spider could scarce have scaled them. There were only two ways of escape from the ledge: back through the fiend-haunted tunnels, or straight down to the river which raved far beneath.

I saw Vertorix look up the sheer cliffs and then down, and shake his head in despair. Tamara put her arms about his neck, and though I could not hear their voices for the rush of the river, I saw them smile, and then they went together to the edge of the ledge. And out of the cleft swarmed a loathsome mob, as foul reptiles writhe up out of the darkness, and they stood blinking in the sunlight like the night-things they were. I gripped my sword-hilt in the agony of my helplessness until the blood trickled from under my fingernails. Why had not the pack followed me instead of my companions?

The Children hesitated an instant as the two Britons faced them, then with a laugh Vertorix hurled his ax far out into the rushing river, and turning, caught Tamera in a last embrace. Together they sprang far out, and still locked in each other's arms, hurtled downward, struck the madly foaming water that seemed to leap up to meet them, and vanished. And the wild river swept on like a blind, insensate monster, thundering along the echoing cliffs.

A moment I stood frozen, then like a man in a dream I turned, caught the edge of the cliff above me and wearily drew myself up and over, and stood on my feet above the cliffs, hearing like a dim dream the roar of the river far beneath.

I reeled up, dazedly clutching my throbbing head, on which dried blood was clotted. I glared wildly about me. I had clambered the cliffs--no, by the thunder of Crom, I was still in the cavern! I reached for my sword--

The mists faded and I stared about dizzily, orienting myself with space and time. I stood at the foot of the steps down which I had fallen. I who had been Conan the reaver, was John O'Brien. Was all that grotesque interlude a dream? Could a mere dream appear so vivid? Even in dreams, we often know we are dreaming, but Conan the reaver had no cognizance of any other existence. More, he remembered his own past life as a living man remembers, though in the waking mind of John O'Brien, that memory faded into dust and mist. But the adventures of Conan in the Cavern of the Children stood clear-etched in the mind of John O'Brien.

I glanced across the dim chamber toward the entrance of the tunnel into which Vertorix had followed the girl. But I looked in vain, seeing only the bare blank wall of the cavern. I crossed the chamber, switched on my electric torch--miraculously unbroken in my fall--and felt along the wall.

Ha! I started, as from an electric shock! Exactly where the entrance should have been, my fingers detected a difference in material, a section which was rougher than the rest of the wall. I was convinced that it was of comparatively modern workmanship; the tunnel had been walled up.

I thrust against it, exerting all my strength, and it seemed to me that the section was about to give. I drew back, and taking a deep breath, launched my full weight against it, backed by all the power of my giant muscles. The brittle, decaying wall gave way with a shattering crash and I catapulted through in a shower of stones and falling masonry.

I scrambled up, a sharp cry escaping me. I stood in a tunnel, and I could not mistake the feeling of similarity this time. Here Vertorix had first fallen foul of the Children, as they dragged Tamera away, and here where I now stood the floor had been awash with blood.

I walked down the corridor like a man in a trance. Soon I should come to the doorway on the left--aye, there it was, the strangely carven portal, at the mouth of which I had slain the unseen being which reared up in the dark beside me. I shivered momentarily. Could it be possible that remnants of that foul race still lurked hideously in these remote caverns?

I turned into the doorway and my light shone down a long, slanting shaft, with tiny steps cut into the solid stone. Down these had Conan the reaver gone groping and down them went I, John O'Brien, with memories of that other life filling my brain with vague phantasms. No light glimmered ahead of me but I came into the great dim chamber I had known of yore, and I shuddered as I saw the grim black altar etched in the gleam of my torch. Now no bound figures writhed there, no crouching horror gloated before it. Nor did the pyramid of skulls support the Black Stone before which unknown races had bowed before Egypt was born out of time's dawn. Only a littered heap of dust lay strewn where the skulls had upheld the hellish thing. No, that had been no dream: I was John O'Brien, but I had been Conan of the reavers in that other life, and that grim interlude a brief episode of reality which I had relived.

I entered the tunnel down which we had fled, shining a beam of light ahead, and saw the bar of gray light drifting down from above--just as in that other, lost age. Here the Briton and I, Conan, had turned at bay. I turned my eyes from the ancient cleft high up in the vaulted roof, and looked for the stair. There it was, half-concealed by an angle in the wall.

I mounted, remembering how hurriedly Vertorix and I had gone up so many ages before, with the horde hissing and frothing at our heels. I found myself tense with dread as I approached the dark, gaping entrance through which the pack had sought to cut us off. I had snapped off the light when I came into the dim-lit corridor below, and now I glanced into the well of blackness which opened on the stair. And with a cry I started back, nearly losing my footing on the worn steps. Sweating in the semidarkness I switched on the light and directed its beam into the cryptic opening, revolver in hand.

I saw only the bare rounded sides of a small shaftlike tunnel and I laughed nervously. My imagination was running riot; I could have sworn that hideous yellow eyes glared terribly at me from the darkness, and that a crawling something had scuttered away down the tunnel. I was foolish to let these imaginings upset me. The Children had long vanished from these caverns; a nameless and abhorrent race closer to the serpent than the man, they had centuries ago faded back into the oblivion from which they had crawled in the black dawn ages of the Earth.

I came out of the shaft into the winding corridor, which, as I remembered of old, was lighter. Here from the shadows a lurking thing had leaped on my back while my companions ran on, unknowing. What a brute of a man Conan had been, to keep going after receiving such savage wounds! Aye, in that age all men were iron.

I came to the place where the tunnel forked and as before I took the left-hand branch and came to the shaft that led down. Down this I went, listening for the roar of the river, but not hearing it. Again the darkness shut in about the shaft, so I was forced to have recourse to my electric torch again, lest I lose my footing and plunge to my death. Oh, I, John O'Brien, am not nearly so sure-footed as was I, Conan the reaver; no, nor as tigerishly powerful and quick, either.

I soon struck the dank lower level and felt again the dampness that denoted my position under the riverbed, but still I could not hear the rush of the water. And indeed I knew that whatever mighty river had rushed roaring to the sea in those ancient times, there was no such body of water among the hills today. I halted, flashing my light about. I was in a vast tunnel, not very high of roof, but broad. Other smaller tunnels branched off from it and I wondered at the network which apparently honeycombed the hills.

I cannot describe the grim, gloomy effect of those dark, low-roofed corridors far below the earth. Over all hung an overpowering sense of unspeakable antiquity. Why had the little people carved out these mysterious crypts, and in which black age? Were these caverns their last refuge from the onrushing tides of humanity, or their castles since time immemorial? I shook my head in bewilderment; the bestiality of the Children I had seen, yet somehow they had been able to carve these tunnels and chambers that might balk modern engineers. Even supposing they had but completed a task begun by nature, still it was a stupendous work for a race of dwarfish aborigines.

Then I realized with a start that I was spending more time in these gloomy tunnels than I cared for, and began to hunt for the steps by which Conan had ascended. I found them and, following them up, breathed again deeply in relief as the sudden glow of daylight filled the shaft. I came out upon the ledge, now worn away until it was little more than a bump on the face of the cliff. And I saw the great river, which had roared like a prisoned monster between the sheer walls of its narrow canyon, had dwindled away with the passing eons until it was no more than a tiny stream, far beneath me, trickling soundlessly among the stones on its way to the sea.

Aye, the surface of the earth changes; the rivers swell or shrink, the mountains heave and topple, the lakes dry up, the continents alter; but under the earth the work of lost, mysterious hands slumbers untouched by the sweep of Time. Their work, aye, but what of the hands that reared that work? Did they, too, lurk beneath the bosoms of the hills?

How long I stood there, lost in dim speculations, I do not know, but suddenly, glancing across at the other ledge, crumbling and weathered, I shrank back into the entrance behind me. Two figures came out upon the ledge and I gasped to see that they were Richard Brent and Eleanor Bland. Now I remembered why I had come to the cavern and my hand instinctively sought the revolver in my pocket. They did not see me. But I could see them, and hear them plainly, too, since no roaring river now thundered between the ledges.

"By gad, Eleanor," Brent was saying, "I'm glad you decided to come with me. Who would have guessed there was anything to those old tales about hidden tunnels leading from the cavern? I wonder how that section of wall came to collapse? I thought I heard a crash just as we entered the outer cave. Do you suppose some beggar was in the cavern ahead of us, and broke it in?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I remember--oh, I don't know. It almost seems as if I'd been here before, or dreamed I had. I seem to faintly remember, like a far-off nightmare, running, running, running endlessly through these dark corridors with hideous creatures on my heels..."

"Was I there?" jokingly asked Brent.

"Yes, and John, too," she answered. "But you were not Richard Brent, and John was not John O'Brien. No, and I was not Eleanor Bland, either. Oh, it's so dim and far-off I can't describe it at all. It's hazy and misty and terrible."

"I understand, a little," he said unexpectedly. "Ever since we came to the place where the wall had fallen and revealed the old tunnel, I've had a sense of familiarity with the place. There was horror and danger and battle--and love, too."

He stepped nearer the edge to look down in the gorge, and Eleanor cried out sharply and suddenly, seizing him in a convulsive grasp.

"Don't, Richard, don't! Hold me, oh, hold me tight!"

He caught her in his arms. "Why, Eleanor, dear, what's the matter?"

"Nothing," she faltered, but she clung closer to him and I saw she was trembling. "Just a strange feeling--rushing dizziness and fright, just as if I were falling from a great height. Don't go near the edge, Dick; it scares me."

"I won't, dear," he answered, drawing her closer to him, and continuing hesitantly: "Eleanor, there's something I've wanted to ask you for a long time--well, I haven't the knack of putting things in an elegant way. I love you, Eleanor; always have. You know that. But if you don't love me, I'll take myself off and won't annoy you any more. Only please tell me one way or another, for I can't stand it any longer. Is it I or the American?"

"You, Dick," she answered, hiding her face on his shoulder. "It's always been you, though I didn't know it. I think a great deal of John O'Brien. I didn't know which of you I really loved. But today as we came through those terrible tunnels and climbed those fearful stairs, and just now, when I thought for some strange reason we were falling from the ledge, I realized it was you I loved--that I always loved you, through more lives than this one. Always!"

Their lips met and I saw her golden head cradled on his shoulder. My lips were dry, my heart cold, yet my soul was at peace. They belonged to each other. Eons ago they lived and loved, and because of that love they suffered and died. And I, Conan, had driven them to that doom.

I saw them turn toward the cleft, their arms about each other, then I heard Tamera--I mean Eleanor--shriek. I saw them both recoil. And out of the cleft a horror came writhing, a loathsome, brain-shattering thing that blinked in the clean sunlight. Aye, I knew it of old--vestige of a forgotten age, it came writhing its horrid shape up out of the darkness of the Earth and the lost past to claim its own.

What three thousand years of retrogression can do to a race hideous in the beginning, I saw, and shuddered. And instinctively I knew that in all the world it was the only one of its kind, a monster that had lived on. God alone knows how many centuries, wallowing in the slime of its dank subterranean lairs. Before the Children had vanished, the race must have lost all human semblance, living as they did, the life of the reptile.

This thing was more like a giant serpent than anything else, but it had aborted legs and snaky arms with hooked talons. It crawled on its belly, writhing back mottled lips to bare needlelike fangs, which I felt must drip with venom. It hissed as it reared up its ghastly head on a horribly long neck, while its yellow slanted eyes glittered with all the horror that is spawned in the black lairs under the earth.

I knew those eyes had blazed at me from the dark tunnel opening on the stair. For some reason the creature had fled from me, possibly because it feared my light, and it stood to reason that it was the only one remaining in the caverns, else I had been set upon in the darkness. But for it, the tunnels could be traversed in safety.

Now the reptilian thing writhed toward the humans trapped on the ledge. Brent had thrust Eleanor behind him and stood, face ashy, to guard her as best he could. And I gave thanks silently that I, John O'Brien, could pay the debt I, Conan the reaver, owed these lovers since long ago.

The monster reared up and Brent, with cold courage, sprang to meet it with his naked hands. Taking quick aim, I fired once. The shot echoed like the crack of doom between the towering cliffs, and the Horror, with a hideously human scream, staggered wildly, swayed and pitched headlong, knotting and writhing like a wounded python, to tumble from the sloping ledge and fall plummetlike to the rocks far below.

THE END

Contents

BLACK CANAAN

By Robert E. Howard

1. Call from Canaan

"Trouble on Tularoosa Creek!" A warning to send cold fear along the spine of any man who was raised in that isolated back-country, called Canaan, that lies between Tularoosa and Black River-to send him racing back to that swamp-bordered region, wherever the word might reach him.

It was only a whisper from the withered lips of a shuffling black crone, who vanished among the throng before I could seize her; but it was enough. No need to seek confirmation; no need to inquire by what mysterious, black-folk way the word had come to her. No need to inquire what obscure forces worked to unseal those wrinkled lips to a Black River man. It was enough that the warning had been given-and understood.

Understood? How could any Black River man fail to understand that warning? It could have but one meaning-old hates seething again in the jungle-deeps of the swamplands, dark shadows slipping through the cypress, and massacre stalking out of the black, mysterious village that broods on the moss-festooned shore of sullen Tularoosa.

Within an hour New Orleans was falling further behind me with every turn of the churning wheel. To every man born in Canaan, there is always an invisible tie that draws him back whenever his homeland is imperiled by the murky shadow that has lurked in its jungled recesses for more than half a century.

The fastest boats I could get seemed maddeningly slow for that race up the big river, and up the smaller, more turbulent stream. I was burning with impatience when I stepped off on the Sharpsvil le landing, with the last fifteen miles of my journey yet to make. It was past midnight, but I hurried to the livery stable where, by tradition half a century old, there is always a Buckner horse, day or night.

As a sleepy black boy fastened the cinches, I turned to the owner of the stable, Joe Lafely, yawning and gaping in the light of the lantern he upheld. "There are rumors of trouble on Tularoosa?"

He paled in the lantern-light.

"I don't know. I've heard talk. But you people in Canaan are a shut-mouthed clan. No one outside knows what goes on in there."

The night swallowed his lantern and his stammering voice as I headed west along the pike.

The moon set red through the black pines. Owls hooted away off in the woods, and somewhere a hound howled his ancient wistfulness to the night. In the darkness that foreruns dawn I crossed Nigger Head Creek, a streak of shining black fringed by walls of solid shadows. My horse's hooves splashed through the shallow water and clinked on the wet stones, startlingly loud in the stillness. Behind Nigger Head Creek began the countrymen called Canaan

Heading in the same swamp, miles to the north, that gives birth to Tularoosa, Nigger Head flows due south to ioin Black River a few miles west of Sharpsville, while the Tularoosa runs westward to meet the same river at a higher point. The trend of Black River is from northwest to southeast; so these three streams form the great irregular triangle known as Canaan.

In Canaan lived the sons and daughters of the white frontiersmen who first settled the country, and the sons and daughters of their slaves. Joe Lafely was right; we were an isolated, shut-mouthed breed. Self-sufficient, jealous of our seclusion and independence.

Beyond Nigger Head the woods thickened, the road narrowed, winding through unfenced pinelands, broken by live-oaks and cypresses. There was no sound except the soft clop-clop of hoofs in the thin dust, the creak of the saddle. Then someone laughed throatily in the shadows.

I drew up and peered into the trees. The moon had set and dawn was not yet come, but a faint glow quivered among the trees, and by it I made out a dim figure under the moss-hung branches. My hand instinctively sought the butt of one of the dueling-pistols I wore, and the action brought another low, musical laugh, mocking yet seductive. I glimpsed a brown face, a pair of scintillant eyes, white teeth displayed in an insolent smile.

"Who the devil are you?" I demanded.

"Why do you ride so late, Kirby Buckner?" Taunting laughter bubbled in the voice. The accent was foreign and unfamiliar; a faintly negroid twang was there, but it was rich and sensuous as the rounded body of its owner. In the lustrous pile of dusky hair a great white blossom glimmered palely in the darkness.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded. "You're a long way from any darky cabin. And you're a stranger to me.

"I came to Canaan since you went away," she answered. "My cabin is on the Tularoosa. But now I've lost my way. And my poor brother has hurt his leg and cannot walk."

"Where is your brother?" I asked, uneasily. Her perfect English was disquieting to me, accustomed as I was to the dialect of the black folk.

"Back in the woods, there-far back!" She indicated the black depths with a swaying motion of her supple body rather than a gesture of her hand, smiling audaciously as she did so.

I knew there was no injured brother, and she knew I knew it, and laughed at me. But a strange turmoil of conflicting emotions stirred in me. I had never before paid any attention to a black or brown woman. But this quadroon girl was different from any I had ever seen. Her features were regular as a white woman's, and her speech was not that of a common wench. Yet she was barbaric, in the open lure of her smile, in the gleam of her eyes, in the shameless posturing of her voluptuous body. Every gesture, every motion she made set her apart from the ordinary run of women; her beauty was untamed and lawless, meant to madden rather than to soothe, to make a man blind and dizzy, to rouse in him all the unreined passions that are his heritage from his ape ancestors.

I hardly remember dismounting and tying my horse. My blood pounded suffocatingly through the veins in my temples as I scowled down at her, suspicious yet fascinated.

"How do you know my name? Who are you?"

With a provocative laugh, she seized my hand and drew me deeper into the shadows. Fascinated by the lights gleaming in her dark eyes, I was hardly aware of her action.

"Who does not know Kirby Buckner?" she laughed. "All the people of Canaan speak of you, white or black. Come! My poor brother longs to look upon you!" And she laughed with malicious triumph.

It was this brazen effrontery that brought me to my senses. Its cynical mockery broke the almost hypnotic spell in which I had fallen.

I stopped short, throwing her hand aside, snarling: "What devil's game are you up to, wench?"

Instantly the smiling siren was changed to a blood-mad jungle cat. Her eyes flamed murderously, her red lips writhed in a snarl as she leaped back, crying out shrilly. A rush of bare feet answered her call. The first faint light of dawn struck through the branches, revealing my assailants, three gaunt black giants. I saw the gleaming whites of their eyes, their bare glistening teeth, the sheen of naked steel in their hands.

My first bullet crashed through the head of the tallest man, knocking him dead in full stride. My second pistol snapped-the cap had somehow slipped from the nipple. I dashed it into a black face, and as the man fell, half stunned, I whipped out my bowie knife and closed with the other. I parried his stab and my counter-stroke ripped across the belly-muscles. He screamed like a swamp-panther and made a wild grab for my knife wrist, but I stuck him in the mouth with my clenched left fist, and felt his lips split and his teeth crumble under the impact as he reeled backward, his knife waving wildly. Before he could regain his balance I was after him, thrusting, and got home under his ribs. He groaned and slipped to the ground in a puddle of his own blood.

I wheeled about, looking for the other. He was just rising, blood streaming down his face and neck. As I started for him he sounded a panicky yell and plunged into the underbrush. The crashing of his blind flight came back to me, muffled with distance. The girl was gone.

2. The Stranger on Tularoosa

The curious glow that had first showed me the quadroon girl had vanished. In my confusion I had forgotten it. But I did not waste time on vain conjecture as to its source, as I groped my way back to the road. Mystery had come to the pinelands and a ghostly light that hovered among the trees was only part of it.

My horse snorted and pulled against his tether, frightened by the smell of blood that hung in the heavy damp air. Hoofs clattered down the road, forms bulked in the growing light. Voices challenged.

"Who's that? Step out and name yourself, before we shoot!"

"Hold on, Esau!" I called. "It's me--Kirby Buckner'"

"Kirby Buckner, by thunder!" ejaculated Esau McBride, lowering his pistol. The tall rangy forms of the other riders loomed behind him.

"We heard a shot," said McBride. "We was ridin' patrol on the roads around Grimesville like we've been ridin' every night for a week now--ever since they killed Ridge Jackson."

"Who killed Ridge Jackson?"

"The swamp niggers. That's all we know. Ridge come out of the woods early one mornin' and knocked at Cap'n Sorley's door. Cap'n says he was the color of ashes. He hollered for the Cap'n for God's sake to let him in, he had somethin' awful to tell him. Well, the Cap'n started down to open the door, but before he'd got down the stairs he heard an awful row among the dogs outside, and a man screamed he reckoned was Ridge. And when he got to the door, there wasn't nothin' but a dead dog layin' in the yard with his head knocked in, and the others all goin' crazy. They found Ridge later, out in the pines a few hundred yards from the house. From the way the ground and the bushes was tore up, he'd been dragged that far by four or five men. Maybe they got tired of haulin' him along. Anyway, they beat his head into a pulp and left him layin' there."

"I'll be damned!" I muttered. "Well, there's a couple of niggers lying back there in the brush. I want to see if you know them. I don't."

A moment later we were standing in the tiny glade, now white in the growing dawn. A black shape sprawled on the matted pine needles, his head in a pool of blood and brains. There were wide smears of blood on the ground and bushes on the other side of the little clearing, but the wounded black was gone.

McBride turned the carcass with his foot.

"One of them niggers that came in with Saul Stark," he muttered.

"Who the devil's that?" I demanded.

"Strange nigger that moved in since you went down the river last time. Come from South Carolina, he says. Lives in that old cabin in the Neck-you know, the shack where Colonel Reynolds' niggers used to live."

"Suppose you ride on to Grimesville with me, Esau, '" I said, "and tell me about this business as we ride. The rest of you might scout around and see if you can find a wounded nigger in the brush."

The agreed without question; the Buckners have always been tacitly considered leaders in Canaan, and it came natural for me to offer suggestions. Nobody gives orders to white men in Canaan.

"I reckoned you'd be showin' up soars," opined McBride, as we rode along the whitening road. "You usually manage to keep up with what's happenin' in Canaan."

"What is happening?" I inquired. "I don't know anything. An old black woman dropped me the word in New Orleans that there was trouble. Naturally I came home as fast as I could. Three strange niggers waylaid me-" I was curiously disinclined to mention the woman. "And now you tell me somebody killed Ridge Jackson. What's it all about?"

"The swamp niggers killed Ridge to shut his mouth," announced McBride. "That's the only way to figure it. They must have been close behind him when he knocked on Cap'n Sorley's door. Ridge worked for Cap'n Sorley most of his life; he thought a lot of the old man. Some kind of devilry's bein' brewed up in the swamps, and Ridge wanted to warn the Cap'n. That's the way I figure it."

"Warn him about what?"

"We don't know," confessed McBride. "That's why we're all on edge. It must be an uprisin'."

That word was enough to strike chill fear into the heart of any Canaan-dweller. The blacks had risen in 1845, and the red terror of that revolt was not forgotten, nor the three lesser rebellions before it, when the slaves rose and spread fire and slaughter from Tularoosa to the shores of Black River. The fear of a black uprising lurked for ever in the depths of that forgotten back-country; the very children absorbed it in their cradles.

"What makes you think it might be an uprising?" I asked.

"The niggers have all quit the fields, for one thing. They've all got business in Goshen. I ain't seen a nigger nigh Grimesville for a week. The town niggers have pulled out."

In Canaan we still draw a distinction born in antebellum days. "Town niggers are descendants of the houseservants of the old days, and most of them live in or near Grimesville There are not many, compared to the mass of "swamp niggers" who dwell on tiny farms along the creeks and the edge of the swamps, or in the black village of Goshen, on the Tularoosa. They are descendants of the field-hands of other days, and, untouched by the mellow civilization which refined the natures of the house-servants, they remain as primitive as their African ancestors."

"Where have the town niggers gone?" I asked.

"Nobody knows. They lit out a week ago. Probably hidin' down on Black River. If we win, they'll come back. If we don't, they'll take refuge in Sharpsville."

I found his matter-of-factness a bit ghastly, as if the actuality of the uprising were an assured fact.

"Well, what have you done?" I demanded.

"Ain't much we could do," he confessed. "The niggers ain't made no open move, outside of killin' Ridge Jackson; and we couldn't prove who done that, or why they done it.

"They ain't done nothin' but clear out. But that's mighty suspicious. We can't keep from thinkin' Saul Stark's behind it."

"Who is this fellow?" I asked.

"I told you all I know, already. He got permission to settle in that old deserted cabin on the Neck; a great big black devil that talks better English than I like to hear a nigger talk. But he was respectful enough. He had three or four big South Carolina bucks with him, and a brown wench which we don't know whether she's his daughter, sister, wife or What. He ain't been in to Grimesville but that one time, and a few weeks after he came to Canaan, the niggers begun actin' curious. Some of the boys wanted to ride over to Goshen and have a show-down, but that's takin' a desperate chance."

I knew he was thinking of a ghastly tale told us by our grandfathers of how a punitive expedition from Grimesville was once ambushed and butchered among the dense thickets that masked Goshen, then a rendezvous for runaway slaves, while another red-handed band devastated Grimesville, left defenseless by that reckless invasion.

"Might take all the men to get Saul Stark," said McBride. "And we don't dare leave the town unprotected. But we'll soon have to-hello, what's this?"

We had emerged from the trees and were just entering the village of Grimesville, the community center of the white population of Canaan. It was not pretentious. Log cabins, neat and whitewashed, were plentiful enough. Small cottages clustered about big, old-fashioned houses which sheltered the rude aristocracy of that backwoods democracy. All the "planter" families lived "in town." "The country" was occupied by their tenants, and by the small independent farmers, white and black.

A small log cabin stood near the point where the road wound out of the deep forest. Voices emanated from it, in accents of menace, and a tall lanky figure, rifle in hand, stood at the door.

"Howdy, Esau!" this man hailed us. "By golly, if it ain't Kirby Buckner! Glad to see you, Kirby."

"What's up, Dick?" asked McBride.

"Got a nigger in the shack, tryin' to make him talk. Bill Reynolds seen him sneakin' past the edge of town about daylight, and nabbed him."

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Tope Sorley. John Willoughby's gone after a blacksnake."

With a smothered oath I swung off my horse and strode in, followed by McBride. Half a dozen men in boots and gunbelts clustered about a pathetic figure cowering on an old broken bunk. Tope Sorley (his forebears had adopted the name of the family that owned them, in slave days) was a pitiable sight just then. His skin was ashy, his teeth chattered spasmodically, and his eyes seemed to be trying to roll back into his head.

"Here's Kirby!" ejaculated one of the men as I pushed my way through the group. "I'll bet he'll make this coon talk!"

"Here comes John with the blacksnake!" shouted someone, and a tremor ran through Tope Sorley's shivering body.

I pushed aside the butt of the ugly whip thrust eagerly into my hand.

"Tope," I said, "you've worked one of my father's farms for years. Has any Buckner ever treated you any way but square?"

"Nossuh," came faintly.

"Then what are you afraid of? Why don't you speak up? Something's going on in the swamps. You know, and I want you to tell us why the town niggers have all run away, why Ridge Jackson was killed, why the swamp niggers are acting so mysteriously."

"And what kind of devilment that cussed Saul Stark's cookin' up over on Tularoosa!" shouted one of the men.

Tope seemed to shrink into himself at the mention of Stark.

"I don't dast," he shuddered. "He'd put me in de swamp!"

"Who?" I demanded. "Stark? Is Stark a conjer man?"

Tope sank his head in his hands and did not answer. I laid my hand on his shoulder.

"Tope," I said, "you know if you'll talk, we'll protect you. If you don't talk, I don't think Stark can treat you much rougher than these men are likely to. Now spill itwhat's it all about?"

He lifted desperate eyes.

"You-all got to lemme stay here," he shuddered. "And guard me, and gimme money to git away on when de trouble's over."

"We'll do all that," I agreed instantly. "You can stay right here in this cabin, until you're ready to leave for New Orleans or wherever you want to go."

He capitulated, collapsed, and words tumbled from his livid lips.

"Saul Stark's a conjer man. He come here because it's way off in back-country. He aim to kill all de white folks in Canaan-"

A growl rose from the group, such a growl as rises unbidden from the throat of the wolf-pack that scents peril.

"He aim to make hisself king of Canaan. He sent me to spy dis mornin' to see if Mistah Kirby got through. He sent men to waylay him on de road, cause he knowed Mistah Kirby was comin' back to Canaan. Niggers makin' voodoo on Tularoosa, for weeks now. Ridge Jackson was goin' to tell Cap'n Sorley; so Stark's niggers foller him and kill him. That make Stark mad. He ain't want to kill Ridge; he want to put him in de swamp with Tunk Bixby and de others."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded.

Far out in the woods rose a strange, shrill cry, like the cry of a bird. But no such bird ever called before in Canaan. Tope cried out as if in answer, and shriveled into himself. He sank down on the bunk in a veritable palsy of fear.

"That was a signal!" I snapped. "Some of you go out there."

Half a dozen men hastened to follow my suggestion, and I returned to the task of making Tope renew his revelations. It was useless. Some hideous fear had sealed his lips. He lay shuddering like a stricken animal, and did not even seem to hear our questions. No one suggested the use of the blacksnake. Anyone could see the Negro was paralyzed with terror.

Presently the searchers returned empty-handed. They had seen no one, and the thick carpet of pine needles showed no foot-prints. The men looked at me expectantly. As Colonel Buckner's son, leadership was expected of me.

"What about it, Kirby?" asked McBride. "Breckinridge and the others have just rode in. They couldn't find that nigger you cut up."

"There was another' nigger I hit with a pistol," I said. "Maybe he came back and helped him. "Still I could not bring myself to mention the brown girl. "Leave Tope alone. Maybe he'll get over his scare after a while. Better keep a guard in the cabin all the time. The swamp niggers may try to get him as they got Ridge Jackson. Better scour the roads around the town, Esau; there may be some of them hiding in the woods."

"I will. I reckon you'll want to be gettin' up to the house, now, and seein' your folks."

"Yes. And I want to swap these toys for a couple of .44s. Then I'm going to ride out and tell the country people to come into Grimesville. If it's to be an uprising, we don't know when it will commence."

"You're not goin' alone!" protested McBride.

"I'll be all right," I answered impatiently. "All this may not amount to anything, but it's best to be on the safe side. That's why I'm going after the country folks. No, I don't want anybody to go with me. Just in case the niggers do get crazy enough to attack the town, you'll need every man you've got. But if I can get hold of some of the swamp niggers and talk to them, I don't think there'll be any attack."

"You won't get a glimpse of them," McBride predicted.

3. Shadows over Canaan

It was not yet noon when I rode out of the village westward along the old road. Thick woods swallowed me quickly. Dense walls of pines marched with me on either hand, giving way occasionally to fields enclosed with straggling rail fences, with the log cabins of the tenants or owners close by, with the usual litters of tow-headed children and lank hound dogs.

Some of the cabins were empty. The occupants, if white, had already gone into Grimesville; if black they had gone into the swamps, or fled to the hidden refuge of the town niggers, according to their affiliations. In any event, the vacancy of their hovels was sinister in its suggestion.

A tense silence brooded over the pinelands, broken only by the occasional wailing call of a plowman. My progress was not swift, for from time to time I turned off the main road to give warning to some lonely cabin huddled on the bank of one of the many thicket-fringed creeks. Most of these farms were south of the road; the white settlements did not extend far to the north; for in that direction lay Tularoosa Creek with its jungle-grown marshes that stretched inlets southward like groping fingers.

The actual warning was brief; there was no need to argue or explain. I called from the saddle: "Get into town; trouble's brewing on Tularoosa." Faces paled, and people dropped whatever they were doing: the men to grab guns and jerk mules from the plow to hitch to the wagons, the women to bundle necessary belongings together and shrill the children in from their play. As I rode I heard the cowhorns blowing up and down the creeks, summoning men from distant fields-blowing as they had not blown for a generation, a warning and a defiance which I knew carried to such ears as might be listening in the edges of the swamplands. The country emptied itself behind me, flowing in thin but steady streams toward Grimesville.

The sun was swinging low among the topmost branches of the pines when I reached the Richardson cabin, the westernmost "white" cabin in Canaan. Beyond it lay the Neck, the angle formed by the junction of Tularoosa with Black River, a jungle-like expanse occupied only by scattered Negro huts.

Mrs. Richardson called to me anxiously from the cabin stoop.

"Well, Mr. Kirby, I'm glad to see you back in Canaan! We been hearin' the horns all evenin', Mr. Kirby. What's it mean? It--it ain't--"

"You and Joe better get the children and light out for Grimesville," I answered. "Nothing's happened yet, and may not, but it's best to be on the safe side. All the people are going."

"We'll go right now!" she gasped, paling, as she snatched off her apron. "Lord, Mr. Kirby, you reckon they'll cut us off before we can git to town?"

I shook my head. "They'll strike at night, if at all. We're just playing safe. Probably nothing will come of it."

"I bet you're wrong there," she predicted, scurrying about in desperate activity. "I been hearin' a drum beatin' off toward Saul Stark's cabin, off and on, for a week now. They beat drums back in the Big Uprisin'. My pappy's told me about it many's the time. The nigger skinned his brother alive. The horns was blowin' all up and down the creeks, and the drums was beatin' louder'n the horns could blow. You'll be ridin' back with us, won't you, Mr. Kirby?"

"No; I'm going to scout down along the trail a piece."

"Don't go too far. You're liable to run into old Saul Stark and his devils. Lord! Where is that man? Joe! Joe!"

As I rode down the trail her shrill voice followed me, thin-edged with fear.

Beyond the Richardson farm pines gave way to liveoaks. The underbrush grew ranker. A scent of rotting vegetation impregnated the fitful breeze. Occasionally I sighted a nigger hut, half hidden under the trees, but always it stood silent and deserted. Empty nigger cabins meant but one thing: the blacks were collecting at Goshen, some miles to the east on the Tularoosa; and that gathering, too, could have but one meaning.

My goal was Saul Stark's hut. My intention had been formed when I heard Tope Sorley's incoherent tale. There could be no doubt that Saul Stark was the dominant figure in this web of mystery. With Saul Stark I meant to deal. That I might be risking my life was a chance any man must take who assumes the responsibility of leadership.

The sun slanted through the lower branches of the cypresses when I reached it-a log cabin set against a background of gloomy tropical jungle. A few steps beyond it began the uninhabitable swamp in which Tularoosa emptied its murky current into Black River. A reek of decay hung in the air; gray moss bearded the trees, and poisonous vines twisted in rank tangles.

I called: "Stark! Saul Stark! Come out here!"

There was no answer. A primitive silence hovered over the tiny clearing. I dismounted, tied my horse and approached the crude, heavy door. Perhaps this cabin held a clue to the mystery of Saul Stark; at least it doubtless contained the implements and paraphernalia of his noisome craft. The faint breeze dropped suddenly. The stillness became so intense it was like a physical impact. I paused, startled; it was as if some inner instinct had shouted urgent warning.

As I stood there every fiber of me quivered in response to that subconscious warning; some obscure, deep-hidden instinct sensed peril, as a man senses the presence of the rattlesnake in the darkness, or the swamp panther crouching in the bushes. I drew a pistol, sweeping the trees and bushes, but saw no shadow or movement to betray the ambush I feared. But my instinct was unerring; what I sensed was not lurking in the woods about me; it was inside the cabin-waiting. Trying to shake off the feeling, and irked by a vague half-memory that kept twitching at the back of my brain, I again advanced. And again I stopped short, with one foot on the tiny stoop, and a hand half advanced to pull open the door. A chill shivering swept over me, a sensation like that which shakes a man to whom a flicker of lightning has revealed the black abyss into which another blind step would have hurled him. For the first time in my life I knew the meaning of fear; I knew that black horror lurked in that sullen cabin under the moss-bearded cypresses-a horror against which every primitive instinct that was my heritage cried out in panic.

And that insistent half-memory woke suddenly. It was the memory of a story of how voodoo men leave their huts guarded in their absence by a powerful ju-ju spirit to deal madness and death to the intruder. White men ascribed such deaths to superstitious fright and hypnotic suggestion. But in that instant I understood my sense of lurking peril; I comprehended the horror that breathed like an invisible mist from that accursed hut. I sensed the reality of the ju-ju, of which the grotesque wooden images which voodoo men place in their huts are only a symbol.

Saul Stark was gone; but he had left a Presence to guard his hut.

I backed away, sweat beading the backs of my hands. Not for a bag of gold would I have peered into the shuttered windows or touched that unbolted door. My pistol hung in my hand, useless I knew against the Thing in that cabin. What it was I could not know, but I knew it was some brutish, soulless entity drawn from the black swamps by the spells of voodoo. Man and the natural animals are not the only sentient beings that haunt this planet. There are invisible Things-black spirits of the deep swamps and the slimes of the river beds-the Negroes know of them...

My horse was trembling like a leaf and he shouldered close to me as if seeking security in bodily contact. I mounted and reined away, fighting a panicky urge to strike in the spurs and bolt madly down the trail.

I breathed an involuntary sigh of relief as the somber clearing fell away behind me and was lost from sight. I did not, as soon as I was out of sight of the cabin, revile myself for a silly fool. My experience was too vivid in my mind. It was not cowardice that prompted my retreat from that empty hut; it was the natural instinct of self-preservation, such as keeps a

squirrel from entering the lair of a rattlesnake.

My horse snorted and shied violently. A gun was in my hand before I saw what had startled me. Again a rich musical laugh taunted me.

She was leaning against a bent tree-trunk, her hands clasped behind her sleek head, insolently posing her sensuous figure. The barbaric fascination of her was not dispelled by daylight; if anything, the glow of the lowhanging sun enhanced it.

"Why did you not go into the ju-ju cabin, Kirby Buckner?" she mocked, lowering her arms and moving insolently out from the tree.

She was clad as I had never seen a swamp woman, or any other woman, dressed. Snakeskin sandals were on her feet, sewn with tiny sea-shells that were never gathered on this continent. A short silken skirt of flaming crimson molded her full hips, and was upheld by a broad beadworked girdle. Barbaric anklets and armlets clashed as she moved, heavy ornaments of crudely hammered gold that were as African as her loftily piled coiffure. Nothing else she wore, and on her bosom, between her arching breasts, I glimpsed the faint lines of tattooing on her brown skin.

She posed derisively before me, not in allure, but in mockery. Triumphant malice blazed in her dark eyes; her red lips curled with cruel mirth. Looking at her then I found it easy to believe all the tales I had heard of torture and mutilations inflicted by the women of savage races on wounded enemies. She was alien, even in this primitive setting; she needed a grimmer, more bestial background, a background of steaming jungle, reeking black swamps, flaring fires and cannibal feasts, and the bloody altars of abysmal tribal gods.

"Kirby Buckner!" She seemed to caress the syllables with her red tongue, yet the very intonation was an obscene insult. "Why did you not enter Saul Stark's cabin? It was not locked! Did you fear what you might see there? Did you fear you might come out with your hair white like an old man's, and the drooling lips of an imbecile?"

"What's in that but?" I demanded.

She laughed in my face, and snapped her fingers with a peculiar gesture.

"One of the ones which come oozing like black mist out of the night when Saul Stark beats the ju-ju drum and shrieks the black incantation to the gods that crawl on their bellies in the swamp."

"What is he doing here? The black folk were quiet until he came."

Her red lips curled disdainfully. "Those black dogs? They are his slaves. If they disobey he kills them, or puts them in the swamp. For long we have looked for a place to begin our rule. We have chosen Canaan. You whites must go. And since we know that white people can never be driven away from their land, we must kill you all."

It was my turn to laugh, grimly.

"They tried that, back in '05."

"They did not have Saul Stark to lead them, then," she answered calmly.

"Well, suppose they won? Do you think that would be the end of it? Other white men would come into Canaan and kill them all."

"They would have to cross water," she answered. "We can defend the rivers and creeks. Saul Stark will have many servants in the swamps to do his bidding. He will be king of black Canaan. No one can cross the waters to come against him. He will rule his tribe, as his fathers ruled their tribes in the Ancient Land."

"Mad as a loon!" I muttered. Then curiosity impelled me to ask: "Who is this fool? What are you to him?"

"He is the son of a Kongo witch-finder, and he is the greatest voodoo priest out of the Ancient Land," she answered, laughing at me again. "I? You shall leant who I am, tonight in the swamp, in the House of Damballah."

"Yes?" I grunted. "What's to prevent me from taking you into Grimesville with me? You know the answers to questions I'd like to ask."

Her laughter was like the slash of a velvet whip.

"You drag me to the village of the whites? Not all death and hell could keep me from the Dance of the Skull, tonight in the House of Damballah. You are my captive, already." She laughed derisively as I started and glared into the shadows about me. "No one is hiding there. I am alone, and you are the strongest man in Canaan. Even Saul Stark fears you, for he sent me with three men to kill you before you could reach the village. Yet you are my captive. I have but to beckon, so"--she crooked a contemptuous finger--"and you will follow to the fires of Damballah and the knives of the torturers."

I laughed at her, but my mirth rang hollow. I could not deny the incredible magnetism of this brown enchantress; it fascinated and impelled, drawing me toward her, beating at my will power. I could not fail to recognize it any more than I could fail to recognize the peril in the ju-ju hut.

My agitation was apparent to her, for her eyes flashed with unholy triumph.

"Black men are fools, all but Saul Stark," she laughed. "White men are fools, too. I am the daughter of a white man, who lived in the but of a black king and mated with his daughters. I know the strength of white men, and their weakness. I failed last night when I met you in the woods, but now I cannot fail!" Savage exultation thrummed in her voice. "By the blood in your veins I have snared you. The knife of the man you killed scratched your handseven drops of blood that fell on the pine needles have given me your soul! I took that blood, and Saul Stark gave me the man who ran away. Saul Stark hates cowards. With his hot, quivering heart, and seven drops of your blood, Kirby Buckner, deep in the swamps I have made such magic as none but the Bride of Damballah can make. Already you feel its urge! Oh, you are strong! The man you fought with the knife died less than an hour later. But you cannot fight me. Your blood makes you my slave. I have put a conjurment upon you."

By heaven, it was not mere madness she was mouthing! Hypnotism, magic, call it what you will, I felt its onslaught on my brain and will-a blind, senseless impulse that seemed to be rushing me against my will to the brink of some nameless abyss.

"I have made a charm you cannot resist!" she cried. "When I call you, you will come! Into the deep swamps you will follow me. You will see the Dance of the Skull and you will see the doom of a poor fool who sought to betray Saul Stark-who dreamed he could resist the Call of Damballah when it came. Into the swamp he goes tonight, with Tunk Bixby and the other four fools who opposed Saul Stark. You shall see that. You shall know and understand your own doom. And then you too shall go into the swamp, into darkness and silence deep as the darkness of nighted Africa! But before the darkness engulfs you there will be sharp knives, and little fires-oh, you will scream for death, even for the death that is beyond death!"

With a choking cry I whipped out a pistol and leveled it full at her breast. It was cocked and my finger was on the trigger. At that range I could not miss. But she looked full into the black muzzle and laughed-laughed-laughed, in wild peals that froze the blood in my veins.

And I sat there like an image pointing a pistol I could not fire! A frightful paralysis gripped me. I knew, with numbing certainty, that my life depended on the pull of that trigger, but I could not crook my finger-not though every muscle in my body quivered with the effort and sweat broke out on my face in clammy beads.

She ceased laughing, then, and stood looking at me in a manner indescribably sinister.

"You cannot shoot me, Kirby Buckner," she said quietly. "I have enslaved your soul. You cannot understand my power, but it has ensnared you. It is the Lure of the Bride of Damballah-the blood I have mixed with the mystic waters of Africa drawing the blood in your veins. Tonight you will come to me, in the House of Damballah."

"You lie!" My voice was an unnatural croak bursting from dry lips. "You've hypnotized me, you she-devil, so I can't pull this trigger. But you can't drag me across the swamps to you."

"It is you who lie," she returned calmly. "You know you lie. Ride back toward Grimesville or wherever you will Kirby Buckner. But when the sun sets and the black shadows crawl out of the swamps, you will see me beckoning you, and you will follow me. Long I have planned your doom, Kirby Buckner, since first I heard the white men of Canaan talking to you. It was I who sent the word down the river that brought you back to Canaan. Not even Saul Stark knows of my plans for you.

"At dawn Grimesville shall go up in flames, and the heads of the white men will be tossed in the blood-running streets. But tonight is the Night of Damballah, and a white sacrifice shall be given to the black gods. Hidden among the trees you shall watch the Dance of the Skull-and then I shall call you forth-to die! And now, go fool! Run as far and as fast as you will. At sunset, wherever you are, you will turn your footsteps toward the House of Damballah!"

And with the spring of a panther she was gone into the thick brush, and as she vanished the strange paralysis dropped from me. With a gasped oath I fired blindly after her, but only a mocking laugh floated back to me.

Then in a panic I wrenched my horse about and spurred him down the trail. Reason and logic had momentarily vanished from my brain, leaving me in the grasp of blind primitive fear. I had confronted sorcery beyond my power to resist. I had felt my will mastered by the mesmerism in a brown woman's eyes. And now one driving urge overwhelmed me-a wild desire to cover as much distance as I could before that low-hanging sun dipped below the horizon and the black shadows came crawling from the swamps.

And yet I knew I could not outrun the grisly specter that menaced me. I was like a man fleeing in a nightmare, trying to escape from a monstrous phantom which kept pace with me despite my desperate speed.

I had not reached the Richardson cabin when above the drumming of my flight I heard the clop of hoofs ahead of me, and an instant later, sweeping around a kink in the trail, I almost rode down a tall, lanky man on an equally gaunt horse.

He yelped and dodged back as I jerked my horse to its haunches, my pistol presented at his breast.

"Look out, Kirby! It's me-Jim Braxton! My God, you look like you'd seen a ghost! What's chasin' you?"

"Where are you going?" I demanded, lowering my gun.

"Lookin' for you. Folks got worried as it got late and you didn't come in with the refugees: I 'lowed I'd light out and look for you. Miz Richardson said you rode into the Neck. Where in tarnation you been?"

"To Saul Stark's cabin."

"You takin' a big chance. What'd you find there?"

The sight of another white man had somewhat steadied ray nerves. I opened my mouth to narrate my adventure, and was shocked to hear myself saying, instead: "Nothing. He wasn't there."

"Thought I heard a gun crack, a while ago," he remarked, glancing sharply at me sidewise.

"I shot at a copperhead," I answered, and shuddered. This reticence regarding the brown woman was compulsory; I could no more speak of her than I could pull the trigger of the pistol aimed at her. And I cannot describe the horror that beset me when I realized this. The conjer spells the black men feared were not lies, I realized sickly; demons in human form did exist who were able to enslave men's will and thoughts.

Braxton was eyeing me strangely.

"We're lucky the woods ain't full of black copperheads," he said. "Tope Sorley's pulled out."

"What do you mean?" By an effort I pulled myself together.

"Just that. Tom Breckinridge was in the cabin with him. Tope hadn't said a word since you talked to him. Just laid on that bunk and shivered. Then a kind of holler begun way out in the woods, and Tom went to the door with his rifle-gun, but couldn't see nothin'. Well, while he was standin' there he got a lick on the head from behind, and as he fell lie seen that craxy nigger Tope jump over him and light out for the woods. Tom he taken a shot at him, but missed. Now what do you make of that?"

"The Call of Damballah!" I muttered, a chill perspiration beading my body. "God! The poor devil!"

"Huh? What's that?"

"For God's sake let's not stand here mouthing! The sun will soon be down!" In a frenzy of impatience I kicked my mount down the trail. Braxton followed me, obviously puzzled. With a terrific effort I got a grip on myself. How madly fantastic it was that Kirby Buckner should be shaking in the grip of unreasoning terror! It was so alien to my whole nature that it was no wonder Jim Braxton was unable to comprehend what ailed me.

"Tope didn't go of his own free will," I said. "That call was a summons he couldn't resist. Hypnotism, black magic, voodoo, whatever you want to call it, Saul Stark has some damnable power that enslaves men's willpower. The blacks are gathered somewhere in the swamp, for some kind of a devilish voodoo ceremony, which I have reason to believe will culminate in the murder of Tope Sorley. We've got to get to Grimesville if we can. I expect an attack at dawn."

Braxton was pale in the dimming light. He did not ask me where I got my knowledge.

"We'll lick 'em when they come; but it'll be slaughter."

I did not reply. My eyes were fixed with savage intensity on the sinking sun, and as it slid out of sight behind the trees I was shaken with an icy tremor. In vain I told myself that no occult power could draw me against my will. If she had been able to compel me, why had she not forced me to accompany her from the glade of the ju-ju hut? A grisly whisper seemed to tell me that she was but playing with me, as a cat allows a mouse almost to escape, only to be pounced upon again.

"Kirby, what's the matter with you?" I scarcely heard Braxton's anxious voice. "You're sweatin' and shakin' like you had the aggers. What-hey, what you stoppin' for?"

I had not consciously pulled on the rein, but my horse halted, and stood trembling and snorting, before the mouth of a narrow trail which meandered away at right angles from the road we were following-a trail that led north.

"Listen!" I hissed tensely.

"What is it?" Braxton drew a pistol. The brief twilight of the pinelands was deepening into dusk.

"Don't you hear it?" I muttered. "Drums! Drums beating in Goshen!"

"I don't hear nothin'," he mumbled uneasily. "If they was beatin' drums in Goshen you couldn't hear 'em this far away."

"Look there!" my sharp sudden cry made him start. I was pointing down the dim trail, at the figure which stood there in the dusk less than a hundred yards away. There in the dusk I saw her, even made out the gleam of her strange eyes, the mocking smile on her red lips. "Saul Stark's brown wench!" I raved, tearing at my scabbard. "My God, man, are you stone-blind? Don't you see her?"

"I don't see nobody!" he whispered, livid. "What are you talkin' about, Kirby?"

With eyes glaring I fired down the trail, and fired again, and yet again. This time no paralysis gripped my arm. But the smiling face still mocked me from the shadows. A slender, rounded arm lifted, a finger beckoned imperiously; and then she was gone and I was spurring my horse down the narrow trail, blind, dead and dumb, with a sensation as of being caught in a black tide that was carrying me with it as it rushed on to a destination beyond my comprehension.

Dimly I heard Braxton's urgent yells, and then he drew up beside me with a clatter of hoofs, and grabbed my reins, setting my horse back on its haunches. I remember striking at him with my gun-barrel, without realizing what I was doing. All the black rivers of Africa were suring and foaming within my consciousness, roaring into a torrent that was sweeping me down to engulf me in an ocean of doom.

"Kirby, are you crazy? This trail leads to Goshen!"

I shook my head dazedly. The foam of the rushing waters swirled in my brain, and my voice sounded far away. "Go back! Ride for Grimesville! I'm going to Goshen."

"Kirby, you're mad!"

"Mad or sane, I'm going to Goshen this night," I answered dully. I was fully conscious. I knew what I was saying, and what I was doing. I realized the incredible folly of my action, and I realized my inability to help myself. Some shred to sanity impelled me to try to conceal the grisly truth from my companion, to offer a rational reason for my madness. "Saul Stark is in Goshen. He's the one who's responsible for all this trouble. I'm going to kill him. That will stop the uprising before it starts."

He was trembling like a man with the ague.

"Then I'm goin' with you."

"You must go on to Grimesville and warn the people," I insisted, holding to sanity, but feeling a strong urge begin to seize me, an irresistible urge to be in motion-to be riding in the direction toward which I was so horribly drawn.

"They'll be on their guard," he said stubbornly.

"They won't need my warnin'. I'm goin' with you. I don't know what's got in you, but I ain't goin' to let you die alone among these black woods."

I did not argue. I could not. The blind rivers were sweeping me on-on-on! And down the trail, dim in the dusk, I glimpsed a supple figure, caught the gleam of uncanny eyes, the crook of a lifted finger...Then I was in motion, galloping down the trail, and I heard the drum of Braxton's horse's hoofs behind me.

4. The Dwellers in the Swamp

Night fell and the moon shone through the trees, blood-red behind the black branches. The horses were growing hard to manage.

"They got more sense'n us, Kirby," muttered Braxton.

"Panther, maybe," I replied absently, my eyes searching the gloom of the trail ahead.

"Naw, t'ain't. Closer we get to Goshen, the worse they git. And every time we swing nigh to a creek they shy and snort."

The trail had not yet crossed any of the narrow, muddy creeks that criss-crossed that end of Canaan, but several times it had swung so close to one of them that we glimpsed the black streak that was water glinting dully in the shadows of the thick growth. And each time, I remembered, the horses showed signs of fear.

But I had hardly noticed, wrestling as I was with the grisly compulsion that was driving me. Remember, I was not like a man in a hypnotic trance. I was fully aware, fully conscious. Even the daze in which I had seemed to hear the roar of black rivers had passed, leaving my mind clear, my thoughts lucid. And that was the sweating hell of it: to realize my folly clearly and poignantly, but to be unable to conquer it. Vividly I realized that I was riding to torture and death, and leading a faithful friend to the same end. But on I went. My efforts to break the spell that gripped me almost unseated my reason, but on I went. I cannot explain my compulsion, any more than I can explain why a sliver of steel is drawn to a magnet. It was a black power beyond the ring of white man's knowledge; a basic, elemental thing of which formal hypnotism is but scanty crumbs, spilled at random. A power beyond my control was drawing me to Goshen, and beyond; more I cannot explain, any more than the rabbit could explain why the eyes of the swaying serpent draw him into its gaping jaws.

We were not far from Goshen when Braxton's horse unseated its rider, and my own began snorting and plunging.

"They won't go no closer!" gasped Braxton, fighting at the reins.

I swung off, threw the reins over the saddle-horn.

"Go back, for God's sake, Jim! I'm going on afoot."

I heard him whimper an oath, then his horse was galloping after mine, and he was following me on foot. The thought that he must share my doom sickened me, but I could not dissuade him; and ahead of me a supple form was dancing in the shadows, luring me on--on-on...

I wasted no more bullets on that mocking shape. Braxton could not see it, and I knew it was part of my enchantment, no real woman of flesh and blood, but a hell-born will-o'-the-wisp, mocking me and leading me through the night to a hideous death. A "sending," the people of the Orient, who are wiser than we, call such a thing.

Braxton peered nervously at the black forest walls about us, and I knew his flesh was crawling with the fear of sawedoff shotguns blasting us suddenly from the shadows. But it was no ambush of lead or steel I feared as we emerged into the moonlit clearing that housed the cabins of Goshen.

The double line of log cabins faced each other across the dusty street. One line backed against the bank of Tularoosa Creek. The black stoops almost overhung the black waters. Nothing moved in the moonlight. No lights showed, no smoke oozed up from the stick-and-mud chimneys. It might have been a dead town, deserted and forgotten.

"It's a trap!" hissed Braxton, his eyes blazing slits. He bent forward like a skulking panther, a gun in each hand. "They're layin' for us in them huts!"

Then he cursed, but followed me as I strode down the street. I did not hail the silent huts. I knew Goshen was deserted. I felt its emptiness. Yet there was a contradictory sensation as of spying eyes fixed upon us. I did not try to reconcile these opposite convictions.

"They're gone," muttered Braxton, nervously. "I can't smell 'em. I can always smell niggers, if they're a lot of 'em, or if they're right close. You reckon they've gone to raid Grimesville?"

"No," I muttered. "They're in the House of Damballah."

He shot a quick glance at me.

"That's a neck of land in the Tularoosa about three miles west of here. My grandpap used to talk about it. The niggers held their heathen palavers there back in slave times. You ain't-Kirby-you-

"Listen!" I wiped the icy sweat from my face.

"Listen!"

Through the black woodlands the faint throb of a drum whispered on the wind that glided up the shadowy reaches of the Tularoosa.

Braxton shivered. "It's them, all right. But for, God's sake, Kirby-look out!"

With an oath he sprang toward the houses on the bank of the creek. I was after him just in time to glimpse a dark clumsy object scrambling or tumbling down, the sloping bank into the water. Braxton threw up his long pistol, then lowered it, with a baffled curse. A faint splash marked the disappearance of the creature. The shiny black surface crinkled with spreading ripples.

"What was it?" I demanded.

"A nigger on his all-fours!" swore Braxton. His face was strangely pallid in the moonlight. "He was crouched between them cabins there, watchin' us!"

"It must have been an alligator." What a mystery is the human mind! I was arguing for sanity and logic, I, the blind victim of a compulsion beyond sanity and logic. "A nigger would have to come up for air."

"He swum under the water and come up in the shadder of the bresh where we couldn't see him," maintained Braxton. "Now he'll go warn Saul Stark."

"Never mind!" The pulse was thrumming in my temples again, the roar of foaming water rising irresistibly in my brain. "I'm going-straight through the swamp. For the last time, go back!"

"No! Sane or mad, I'm goin' with you!"

The pulse of the drum was fitful, growing more distinct as we advanced. We struggled through jungle-thick growth; tangled vines tripped us; our boots sank in scummy mire. We were entering the fringe of the swamp which grew deeper and denser until it culminated in the uninhabitable morass where the Tularoosa flowed into Black River, miles farther to the west.

The moon had not yet set, but the shadows were black under the interlacing branches with their mossy beards. We plunged into the first creek we must cross, one of the many muddy streams flowing into the Tularoosa. The water was only thigh-deep, the moss-clogged bottom fairly firm. My foot felt the edge of a sheer drop, and I warned Braxton: "Look out

for a deep hole; keep right behind me."

His answer was unintelligible. He was breathing heavily, crowding close behind me. Just as I reached the sloping bank and pulled myself up by the slimy, projecting roots, the water was violently agitated behind me. Braxton cried out incoherently, and hurled himself up the bank, almost upsetting me. I wheeled, gun in hand, but saw only the black water seething and whirling, after his thrashing rush through it.

"What the devil, Jim?"

"Somethin' grabbed me!" he panted. "Somethin' out of the deep hole. I tore loose and busted up the bank. I tell you, Kirby, something's follerin' us! Somethin' that swims under the water."

"Maybe it was that nigger you saw. These swamp people swim like fish. Maybe he swam up under the water to try to drown you."

He shook his head, staring at the black water, gun in hand.

"It smelt like a nigger, and the little I saw of it looked like a nigger. But it didn't feel like any kind of a human."

"Well, it was an alligator then," I muttered absently as I turned away. As always when I halted, even for a moment, the roar of peremptory and imperious rivers shook the foundations of my reason.

He splashed after me without comment. Scummy puddles rose about our ankles, and we stumbled over mossgrown cypress knees. Ahead of us there loomed another, wider creek, and Braxton caught my arm.

"Don't do it, Kirby!" he gasped. "If we go into that water, it'll git us sure!"

"What?"

"I don't know. Whatever it was that flopped down that bank back there in Goshen. The same thing that grabbed me in that creek back yonder. Kirby, let's go back."

"Go back?" I laughed in bitter agony. "I wish to God I could! I've got to go on. Either Saul Stark or I must die before dawn."

He licked dry lips and whispered. "Go on, then; I'm with you, come heaven or hell." He thrust his pistol back into its scabbard, and drew a long keen knife from his boot. "Go ahead!"

I climbed down the sloping bank and splashed into the water that rose to my hips. The cypress branches bent a gloomy, moss-trailing arch over the creek. The water was black as midnight. Braxton was a blur, toiling behind me. I gained the first shelf of the opposite bank and paused, in water knee-deep, to turn and look back at him.

Everything happened at once, then. I saw Braxton halt short, staring at something on the bank behind me. He cried out, whipped out a gun and fired, just as I turned. In the flash of the gun I glimpsed a supple form reeling backward, a brown face fiendishly contorted. Then in the momentary blindness that followed the flash, I heard Jim Braxton scream.

Sight and brain cleared in time to show me a sudden swirl of the murky water, a round, black object breaking the surface behind Jim-and then Braxton gave a strangled cry and went under with a frantic thrashing and splashing. With an incoherent yell I sprang into the creek, stumbled and went to my knees, almost submerging myself. As I struggled up I saw Braxton's head, now streaming blood, break the surface for an instant, and I lunged toward it. It went under and another head appeared in its place, a shadowy black head. I stabbed-at it ferociously, and my knife cut only the blank water as the thing dipped out of sight.

I staggered from the wasted force of the blow, and when I righted myself, the water lay unbroken about me. I called Jim's name, but there was no answer. Then panic laid a cold hand on me, and I splashed to the bank, sweating and trembling. With the water no higher than my knees I halted and waited, for I knew not what. But presently, down the creek a short distance, I made out a vague object lying in the shallow water near the shore.

I waded to it, through the clinging mud and crawling vines. It was Jim Braxton, and he was dead. It was not the wound in his head which had killed him. Probably he had struck a submerged rock when he was dragged under. But the marks of strangling fingers showed black on his throat. At the sight a nameless horror oozed out of that black swamp and coiled itself clammily about my soul; for no human fingers ever left such marks as those.

I had seen a head rise in the water, a head that looked like that of a Negro, though the features had been indistinct in the darkness. But no man, white or black, ever possessed the fingers that had crushed the life out of Jim Braxton. The distant drum grunted as if in mockery.

I dragged the body up on the bank and left it. I could not linger longer, for the madness was foaming in my brain again, driving me with white-hot spurs. But as I climbed the bank, I found blood on the bushes, and was shaken by the implication.

I remembered the figure I had seen staggering in the flash of Braxton's gun. She had been there, waiting for me on the bank, then-not a spectral illusion, but the woman herself, in flesh and blood! Braxton had fired at her, and wounded her. But the wound could not have been mortal; for no corpse lay among the bushes, and the grim hypnosis that dragged me onward was unweakened. Dizzily I wondered if she could be killed by mortal weapons.

The moon had set. The starlight scarcely penetrated the interwoven branches. No more creeks barred my way, only shallow streams, through which I splashed with sweating haste. Yet I did not expect to be attacked. Twice the dweller in the depths had passed me by to attack my companion. In icy despair I knew I was being saved for the grimmer fate. Each stream I crossed might be hiding the monster that killed Jim Braxton. Those creeks were all connected in a network of winding waterways. It could follow me easily. But my horror of it was less than the horror of the jungle-born magnetism that lurked in a witch-woman's eyes.

And as I stumbled through the tangled vegetation, I heard the drum rumbling ahead of me, louder and louder, a demoniacal mockery. Then a human voice mingled with its mutter, in a long-drawn cry of horror and agony that set every fiber of me quivering with sympathy. Sweat coursed down my clammy flesh; soon my own voice might be lifted like that, under unnamable torture. But on I went, my feet moving like automatons, apart from my body, motivated by a will not my own.

The drum grew loud, and a fire glowed among the black trees. Presently, crouching among the bushes, I stared across the stretch of black water that separated Tae from a nightmare scene. My halting there was as compulsory as the rest of my actions had been. Vaguely I knew the stage for horror had been set, but the time for my entry upon it was not yet. When the time had come, I would receive my summons.

A low, wooded island split the black creek, connected with the shore opposite me by a narrow neck of land. At its lower end the creek split into a network of channels threading their way among hummocks and rotting logs and mossgrown, vine-tangled clumps of trees. Directly across from my refuge the shore of the island was deeply indented by an arm of open, deep black water. Bearded trees walled a small clearing, and partly hid a hut. Between the but and the shore burned afire that sent up weird twisting snake-tongues of green flames. Scores of black people squatted under the shadows of the overhanging branches. When the green fire lit their faces it lent them the appearance of drowned corpses.

In the midst of the glade stood a giant Negro, an awesome statue in black marble. He was clad in ragged trousers, but on his head was a band of beaten gold set with a huge red jewel, and on his feet were barbaric sandals. His features reflected titanic vitality no less than his huge body. But he was all Negro-flaring nostrils, thick lips, ebony skin. I knew I looked upon Saul Stark, the conjure man.

He was regarding something that lay in the sand before him, something dark and bulky that moaned feebly. Presently, lifting his head, he rolled out a sonorous invocation across the black waters. From the blacks huddled under the trees there came a shuddering response, like a wind wailing through midnight branches. Both invocation and response were framed in an unknown tongue-a guttural, primitive language.

Again he called out, this time a curious high-pitched wail. A shuddering sigh swept the black people. All eyes were fixed on the dusky water. And presently an object rose slowly from the depths. A sudden trembling shook me. It looked like the head of a Negro. One after another it was followed by similar objects until five heads reared above the black, cypress-shadowed water. They might have been five Negroes submerged except for their heads-but I knew this was not so. There was something diabolical here. Their silence, motionlessness, their whole aspect was unnatural. From the trees came the hysterical sobbing of women, and someone whispered a man's name.

Then Saul Stark lifted his hands, and the five heads silently sank out of sight. Like a ghostly whisper I seemed to hear the voice of the African witch: "He pals them in the swamp!"

Stark's deep voice rolled out across the narrow water: "And now the Dance of the Skull, to make the conjer sure!"

What had the witch said? "Hidden among the trees You shall watch the dance of the Skull!"

The drum struck up again, growling and rumbling. The blacks swayed on their haunches, lifting a wordless chant. Saul Stark paced measuredly about the figure on the sand, his arms weaving cryptic patterns. Then he wheeled and faced toward the other end of the glade. By some sleight of hand he now grasped a grinning human skull, and this he cast upon the wet sand beyond the body. "Bride of Damballah!" he thundered. "The sacrifice awaits!"

There was an expectant pause; the chanting sank. All eyes were glued on the farther end of the glade. Stark stood waiting, and I saw him scowl as if puzzled. Then as he opened his mouth to repeat the call, a barbaric figure moved out of the shadows.

At the sight of her a chill shuddering shook me. For a moment she stood motionless, the firelight glinting on her gold ornaments, her head hanging on her breast. A tense silence reigned and I saw Saul Stark staring at her sharply. She seemed to be detached, somehow, standing aloof and withdrawn, head bent strangely.

Then, as if rousing herself, she began to sway with a jerky rhythm, and presently whirled into the mazes of a dance that was ancient when the ocean drowned the black kings of Atlantis. I cannot describe it. It was bestiality and diabolism set to motion, framed in a writhing, spinning whirl of posturing and gesturing that would have appalled a dancer of the Pharaohs. And that cursed skull danced with her; rattling and clashing on the sand, it bounded and spun like a live thing in time with her leaps and prancings.

But there was something amiss. I sensed it. Her arms hung limp, her drooping head swayed. Her legs bent and faltered, making her lurch drunkenly and out of time. A murmur rose from the people, and bewilderment etched Saul Stark's black countenance. For the domination of a conjure man is a thing hinged on a hair-trigger. Any trifling dislocation of formula or ritual may disrupt the whole web of his enchantment.

As for me, I felt the perspiration freeze on my flesh as I watched the grisly dance. The unseen shackles that bound me to that gyrating she-devil were strangling, crushing me. I knew she was approaching a climax, when she would summon me from my hiding-place, to wade through the black waters to the House of Damballah, to my doom.

Now she whirled to a floating stop, and when she halted, poised on her toes, she faced toward the spot where I lay hidden, and I knew that she could see me as plainly as if I stood in the open; knew, too, somehow, that only she knew of my presence. I felt myself toppling on the edge of the abyss. She raised her head and I saw the flame of her eyes, even at that distance. Her face was lit with awful triumph. Slowly she raised her hand, and I felt my limbs begin to jerk in response to that terrible magnetism. She opened her mouth-

But from that open mouth sounded only a choking gurgle, and suddenly her lips were dyed crimson. And suddenly, without warning, her knees gave way and she pitched headlong into the sands.

And as she fell, so I too fell, sinking into the mire.

Something burst in my brain with a shower of flame. And then I was crouching among the trees, weak and trembling, but with such a sense of freedom and lightness of limb as I never dreamed a man could experience. The black spell that gripped me was broken; the foul incubus lifted from my soul. It was as if light had burst upon a night blacker than African midnight.

At the fall of the girl a wild cry rose from the blacks, and they sprang up, trembling on the verge of panic. I saw their rolling white eyeballs, their bared teeth glistening in the firelight. Saul Stark had worked their primitive natures up to a pitch of madness, meaning to turn this frenzy, at the proper time, into a fury of battle. It could as easily turn into an hysteria of terror. Stark shouted sharply at them.

But just then the girl in a last convulsion, rolled over on the wet sand, and the firelight shone on a round hole between her breasts, which still oozed crimson. Jim Braxton's bullet had found its mark.

From the first I had felt that she was not wholly human; some black jungle spirit sired her, lending her the abysmal subhuman vitality that made her what she was. She had said that neither death nor hell could keep her from the Dance of the Skull. And, shot through the heart and dying, she had come through the swamp from the creek where she had received her death-wound to the House of Damballah. And the Dance of the Skull had been her death dance.

Dazed as a condemned man just granted a reprieve, at first I hardly grasped the meaning of the scene that now unfolded before me.

The blacks were in a frenzy. In the sudden, and to them inexplicable, death of the sorceress they saw a fearsome portent. They had no way of knowing that she was dying when she entered the glade. To them, their prophetess and priestess had been struck down under their very eyes, by an invisible death. This was magic blacker than Saul Stark's wizardry-and obviously hostile to them.

Like fear-maddened cattle they stampeded. Howling, screaming, tearing at one another they blundered through the trees, heading for the neck of land and the shore beyond. Saul Stark stood transfixed, heedless of them as he stared down at the brown girl, dead at last. And suddenly I came to myself, and with my awakened manhood came cold fury and the lust to kill. I drew a gun, and aiming in the uncertain firelight, pulled the trigger. Only a click answered me. The powder in the cap-and-ball pistols was wet.

Saul Stark lifted his head and licked his lips. The sounds of flight faded in the distance, and he stood alone in the glade. His eyes rolled whitely toward the black woods around him. He bent, grasped the man-like object that lay on the sand, and dragged it into the hut. The instant he vanished I started toward the island, wading through the narrow channels at the lower end. I had almost reached the shore when a mass of driftwood gave way with me and I slid into a deep hole.

Instantly the water swirled about me, and a head rose beside me; a dim face was close to mine-the face of a Negrothe face of Tunk Bixby. But now it was inhuman; as expressionless and soulless as that of a catfish; the face of a being no longer human, and no longer mindful of its human origin.

Slimy, misshapen fingers gripped my throat, and I drove my knife into the sagging mouth. The features vanished in a wave of blood; mutely the thing sank out of sight, and I hauled myself up the bank, under the thick bushes.

Stark had run from his hut, a pistol in his hand. He was staring wildly about, alarmed by the noise he had heard, but I knew he could not see me. His ashy skin glistened with perspiration. He who had ruled by fear was now ruled by fear. He feared the unknown hand that had slain his mistress; feared the Negroes who had fled him; feared the abysmal swamp which had sheltered him, and the monstrosities he had created. He lifted a weird call that quavered with panic. He called again as only four heads broke the water, but he called in vain.

But the four heads began to move toward the shore and the man who stood there. He shot them one after another. They made no effort to avoid the bullets. They came straight on, sinking one by one. He had fired six shots before the last head vanished. The shots drowned the sounds of my approach. I was close behind him when he turned at last.

I know he knew me; recognition flooded his face and fear went with it, at the knowledge that he had a human being to deal with. With a scream he hurled his empty pistol at me and rushed after it with a lifted knife.

I ducked, parried his lunge and countered with a thrust that bit deep into his ribs. He caught my wrist and I gripped his, and there we strained, breast to breast. His eyes were like a mad dog's in the starlight, his muscles like steel cords.

I ground my heel down on his bare foot, crushing the instep. He howled and lost balance, and I tore my knife hand free and stabbed him in the belly. Blood spurted and he dragged me down with him. I jerked loose and rose, just as he pulled himself up on his elbow and hurled his knife. It sang past my ear, and I stamped on his breast. His ribs caved in under my heel. In a red killing-haze I knelt, jerked back his head and cut his throat from ear to ear.

There was a pouch of dry powder in his belt. Before I moved further I reloaded my pistols. Then I went into the but with a torch. And there I understood the doom the brown witch had meant for me. Tope Sorley lay moaning on a bunk. The transmutation that was to make him a mindless, soulless semi-human dweller in the water was not complete, but his mind was gone. Some of the physical changes had been made-by what godless sorcery out of Africa's black abyss I have no wish to know. His body was rounded and elongated, his legs dwarfed; his feet were flattened and broadened, his fingers horribly long, and webbed. His neck was inches longer than it should be. His features were not altered, but the expression was no more human than that of a great fish. And there, but for the loyalty of Jim Braxton, lay Kirby Buckner. I placed my pistol muzzle against Tope's head in grim mercy and pulled the trigger.

And so the nightmare closed, and I would not drag out the grisly narration. The white people of Canaan never found anything on the island except the bodies of Saul Stark and the brown woman. They think to this day that a swamp negro killed Jim Braxton, after he had killed the brown woman, and that I broke up the threatened uprising by killing Saul Stark. I let them think it. They will never know the shapes the black water of Tularoosa hides. That is a secret I share with the cowed and terror-haunted black people of Goshen and of it neither they nor I have ever spoken.

THE END

Contents

MOON OF ZAMBEBWEI

By Robert E. Howard

Chapter 1. The Horror in the Pines

The silence of the pine woods lay like a brooding cloak about the soul of Bristol McGrath. The black shadows seemed fixed, immovable as the weight of superstition that overhung this forgotten back-country. Vague ancestral dreads stirred at the back of McGrath's mind; for he was born in the pine woods, and sixteen years of roaming about the world had not erased their shadows. The fearsome tales at which he had shuddered as a child whispered again in his consciousness; tales of black shapes stalking the midnight glades . . . .

Cursing these childish memories, McGrath quickened his pace. The dim trail wound tortuously between dense walls of giant trees. No wonder he had been unable to hire anyone in the distant river village to drive him to the Ballville estate. The road was impassable for a vehicle, choked with rotting stumps and new growth. Ahead of him it bent sharply.

McGrath halted short, frozen to immobility. The silence had been broken at last, in such a way as to bring a chill tingling to the backs of his hands. For the sound had been the unmistakable groan of a human being in agony. Only for an instant was McGrath motionless. Then he was gliding about the bend of the trail with the noiseless slouch of a hunting panther.

A blue snub-nosed revolver had appeared as if by magic in his right hand. His left involuntarily clenched in his pocket on the bit of paper that was responsible for his presence in that grim forest. That paper was a frantic and mysterious appeal for aid; it was signed by McGrath's worst enemy, and contained the name of a woman long dead.

McGrath rounded the bend in the trail, every nerve tense and alert, expecting anything--except what he actually saw. His startled eyes hung on the grisly object for an instant, and then swept the forest walls. Nothing stirred there. A dozen feet back from the trail visibility vanished in a ghoulish twilight, where anything might lurk unseen. McGrath dropped to his knee beside the figure that lay in the trail before him.

It was a man, spread-eagled, hands and feet bound to four pegs driven deeply in the hard-packed earth; a blackbearded, hook-nosed, swarthy man. "Ahmed!", muttered McGrath. "Ballville's Arab Servant! God!"

For it was not the binding cords that brought the glaze to the Arab's eyes. A weaker man than McGrath might have sickened at the mutilations which keen knives had wrought on the man's body. McGrath recognized the work of an expert in the art of torture. Yet a spark of life still throbbed in the tough frame of the Arab. McGrath's gray eyes grew bleaker as he noted the position of the victim's body, and his-mind flew back to another, grimmer jungle, and a halfflayed black man pegged out on a path as a warning to the white man who dared invade a forbidden land.

He cut the cords, shifted the dying man to a more comfortable position. It was all he could do. He saw the delirium ebb momentarily in the bloodshot eyes, saw recognition glimmer there. Clots of bloody foam splashed the matted beard. The lips writhed soundlessly, and McGrath glimpsed the bloody stump of a severed tongue.

The black-nailed fingers began scrabbling in the dust. They shook, clawing erratically, but with purpose. McGrath bent close, tense with interest, and saw crooked lines grow under the quivering fingers. With the last effort of an iron will, the Arab was tracing a message in the characters of his own language. McGrath recognized the name: "Richard Ballville"; it was followed by "danger," and the hand waved weakly up the trail; then--and McGrath stiffened convulsively--"Constance." One final effort of the dragging finger traced "John De Al--".

Suddenly the bloody frame was convulsed by one last sharp agony; the lean, sinewy hand knotted spasmodically and then fell limp. Ahmed ibn Suleyman was beyond vengeance or mercy.

McGrath rose, dusting his hands, aware of the tense stillness of the grim woods around him; aware of a faint rustling in their depths that was not caused by any breeze. He looked down at the mangled figure with involuntary pity, though he knew well the foulness of the Arab's heart, a black evil that had matched that of Ahmed's master, Richard Ballville. Well, it seemed that master and man had at last met their match in human fiendishness. But who, or what? For a hundred years the Ballvilles had ruled supreme over this back-country, first over their wide plantations and hundreds of slaves, and later over the submissive descendants of those slaves. Richard, the last of the Ballvilles, had exercised as much authority over the pinelands as any of his autocratic ancestors. Yet from this country where men had bowed to the Ballvilles for a century, had come that frenzied cry of fear, a telegram that McGrath clenched in his coat pocket.

Stillness succeeded the rustling, more sinister than any sound. McGrath knew he was watched; knew that the spot where Ahmed's body lay was the iovisible deadline that had been drawn for him. He believed that he would be allowed to turn and retrace his steps unmolested to the distant village. He knew that if he continued on his way, death would strike him suddenly and unseen. Turning, he strode back the way he had come.

He made the turn and kept straight on until he had passed another crook in the trail. Then he halted, listened. All was silent. Quickly he drew the paper from his pocket, smoothed out the wrinkles and read, again, in the cramped scrawl of the man he hated most on earth:

Bristol:

If you still love Constance Brand, for God's sake forget your hate and come to Ballville Manor as quickly as the devil can drive you.

RICHARD BALLVILLE.

That was all. It reached him by telegraph in that Far Western city where McGrath had resided since his return from Africa. He would have ignored it, but for the mention of Constance Brand. That name had sent a choking, agonizing pulse of amazement through his soul, had sent him racing toward the land of his birth by train and plane, as if, indeed, the devil were on his heels. It was the name of one he thought dead for three years; the name of the only woman Bristol McGrath had ever loved.

Replacing the telegram, he left the trail and headed westward, pushing his powerful frame between the thickset trees. His feet made little sound on the matted pine needles. His progress was all but noiseless. Not for nothing had he spent his boyhood in the country of the big pines.

Three hundred yards from the old road he came upon that which he sought-an ancient trail paralleling the road. Choked with young growth, it was little more than a trace through the thick pines. He knew that it ran to the back of the Ballville mansion; did not believe the secret watchers would be guarding it. For how could they know he remembered it?

He hurried south along it, his ears whetted for any sound. Sight alone could not be trusted in that forest. The mansion, he knew, was not far away, now. He was passing through what had once been fields, in the days of Richard's grandfather, running almost up to the spacious lawns that girdled the Manor. But for half a century they had been abandoned to the advance of the forest.

But now he glimpsed the Manor, a hint of solid bulk among the pine tops ahead of him. And almost simultaneously his heart shot into his throat as a scream of human anguish knifed the stillness. He could not tell whether it was a man or a woman who screamed, and his thought that it might be a woman winged his feet in his reckless dash toward the building that loomed starkly up just beyond the straggling fringe of trees.

The young pines had even invaded the once generous lawns. The whole place wore an aspect of decay. Behind the Manor, the barns, and outhouses which once housed slave families, were crumbling in ruin. The mansion itself seemed to totter above the litter, a creaky giant, ratgnawed and rotting, ready to collapse at any untoward event. With the stealthy tread of a tiger Bristol McGrath approached a window on the side of the house. From that window sounds were issuing that were an affront to the tree-filtered sunlight and a crawling horror to the brain.

Nerving himself for what he might see, he peered within.

Chapter 2. Black Torture

He was looking into a great dusty chamber which might have served as a ballroom in ante-bellum days; its lofty ceiling was hung with cobwebs, its rich oak panels showed dark and stained. But there was a fire in the great fireplace-a small fire, just large enough to heat to a white glow the slender steel rods thrust into it.

But it was only later that Bristol McGrath saw the fire and the things that glowed on the hearth. His eyes were gripped like a spell on the master of the Manor; and once again he looked on a dying man.

A heavy beam had been nailed to the paneled wall, and from it jutted a rude cross-piece. From this cross-piece Richard Ballville hung by cords about his wrists. His toes barely touched the floor, tantalizingly, inviting him to stretch his frame continually in an effort to relieve the agonizing strain on his arms. The cords had cut deeply into his wrists; blood trickled down his arms; his hands were black and swollen almost to bursting. He was naked except for his trousers, and McGrath saw that already the white-hot irons had been horribly employed. There was reason enough for the deathly pallor of the man, the cold beads of agony upon his skin. Only his fierce vitality had allowed him thus long to survive the ghastly burns on his limbs and body.

On his breast had been burned a curious symbol-a cold hand laid itself on McGrath's spine. For he recognized that symbol, and once again his memory raced away across the world and the years to a black, grim, hideous jungle where drums bellowed in fire-shot darkness and naked priests of an abhorred cult traced a frightful symbol in quivering human flesh.

Between the fireplace and the dying man squatted a thick-set black man, clad only in ragged, muddy trousers.

His back was toward the window, presenting an impressive pair of shoulders. His bullet-head was set squarely between those gigantic shoulders, like that of a frog, and he appeared to be avidly watching the face of the man on the cross-piece.

Richard Ballville's bloodshot eyes were like those of a tortured animal, but they were fully sane and conscious: they blazed with desperate vitality. He lifted his head painfully and his gaze swept the room. Outside the window McGrath instinctively shrank back. He did not know whether Ballville saw him or not. The man showed no sign to betray the presence of the watcher to the bestial black who scrutinized him. Then the brute turned his head toward the fire, reaching a long ape-like arm toward a glowing iron-and Ballville's eyes blazed with a fierce and urgent meaning the watcher could not mistake. McGrath did not need the agonized motion of the tortured head that accompanied the look. With a tigerish bound he was over the window-sill and in the room, even as the startled black shot erect, whirling with apish agility.

McGrath had not drawn his gun. He dared not risk a shot that might bring other foes upon him. There was a butcher-knife in the belt that held up the ragged, muddy trousers. It seemed to leap like a living thing into the hand of the black as he turned. But in McGrath's hand gleamed a curved Afghan dagger that had served him well in many a bygone battle.

Knowing the advantage of instant and relentless attack, he did not pause. His feet scarcely touched the floor inside before they were hurling him at the astounded black man.

An inarticulate cry burst from the thick red lips. The eyes rolled wildly, the butcher-knife went back and hissed forward with the swiftness of a striking cobra that would have disembowled a man whose thews were less steely than those of Bristol McGrath.

But the black was involuntarily stumbling backward as he struck, and that instinctive action slowed his stroke just enough for McGrath to avoid it with a lightning-like twist of his torso. The long blade hissed under his arm-pit, slicing cloth and skin-and simultaneously the Afghan dagger ripped through the black, bull throat.

There was no cry, but only a choking gurgle as the man fell, spouting blood. McGrath had sprung free as a wolf springs after delivering the death-stroke. Without emotion he surveyed his handiwork. The black man was already dead, his head half severed from his body. That slicing sidewise lunge that slew in silence, severing the throat to the spinal column, was a favorite stroke of the hairy hillmen that haunt the crags overhanging the Khyber Pass. Less than a dozen white men have ever mastered it. Bristol McGrath was one.

McGrath turned to Richard Ballville. Foam dripped on the seared, naked breast, and blood trickled from the lips. McGrath feared that Ballville had suffered the same mutilation that had rendered Ahmed speechless; but it was only suffering and shock that numbed Ballville's tongue. McGrath cut his cords and eased him down on a worn old divan near by. Ballville's lean, muscle-corded body quivered like taut steel strings under McGrath's hands. He gagged, finding his voice.

"I knew you'd come!" he gasped, writhing at the contact of the divan against his seared flesh. "I've hated you for years, but I knew-"

McGrath's voice was harsh as the rasp of steel. "What did you mean by your mention of Constance Brand? She is dead."

A ghastly smile twisted the thin lips.

"No, she's not dead! But she soon will be, if you don't hurry. Quick! Brandy! There on the table-that beast didn't drink it all."

McGrath held the bottle to his lips; Ballville drank avidly. McGrath wondered at the man's iron nerve. That he was in ghastly agony was obvious. He should be screaming in a delirium of pain. Yet he held to sanity and spoke lucidly, though his voice was a laboring croak.

"I haven't much time," he choked. "Don't interrupt. Save your curses till later. We both loved Constance Brand. She loved you. Three years ago she disappeared. Her garments were found on the bank of a river. Her body was never recovered. You went to Africa to drown your sorrow; I retired to the estate of my ancestors and became a recluse.

"What you didn't know-what the world didn't know--was that Constance Brand came with me! No, she didn't drown. That ruse was my idea. For three years Constance Brand has lived in this house!" He achieved a ghastly laugh. "Oh, don't look so stunned, Bristol. She didn't come of her own free will. She loved you too much. I kidnapped her, brought her here by force-Bristol!" His voice rose to a frantic shriek. "If you kill me you'll never learn where she is!"

The frenzied hands that had locked on his corded throat relaxed and sanity returned to the red eyes of Bristol McGrath.

"Go on," he whispered in a voice not even he recognized.

"I couldn't help it," gasped the dying man. "She was the only woman I ever loved-oh, don't sneer, Bristol. The others didn't count. I brought her here where I was king. She couldn't escape, couldn't get word to the outside world. No one lives in this section except nigger descendants of the slaves owned by my family. My word is-was-their only law.

"I swear I didn't harm her. I only kept her prisoner, trying to force her to marry me. I didn't want her any other way. I was mad, but I couldn't help it. I come of a race of autocrats who took what they wanted, recognized no law but their own desires. You know that. You understand it. You come of the same breed yourself.

"Constance hates me, if that's any consolation to you, damn you. She's strong, too. I thought I could break her spirit. But I couldn't, not without the whip, and I couldn't bear to use that." He grinned hideously at the wild growl that rose unbidden to McGrath's lips. The big man's eyes were coals of fire; his hard hands knotted into iron mallets.

A spasm racked Ballville, and blood started from his lips. His grin faded and he hurried on.

"All went well until the foul fiend inspired me to send for John De Albor. I met him in Vienna, years ago. He's from East Africa-a devil in human form! He saw Constance-lusted for her as only a man of his type can. When I finally realized that, I tried to kill him. Then I found that he was stronger than I; that he'd made himself master of the niggers-my niggers, to whom my word had always been law. He told them his devilish cult-'

"Voodoo," muttered McGrath involuntarily.

"No! Voodoo is infantile beside this black fiendishness. Look at the symbol on my breast, where De Albor burned it with a white-hot iron. You have been in Africa. You understand the brand of Zambebwei.

"De Albor turned my negroes against me. I tried to escape with Constance and Ahmed. My own blacks hemmed me in. I did smuggle a telegram through to the village by a man who remained faithful to me--they suspected him and tortured him until he admitted it. John De Albor brought me his head.

"Before the final break I hid Constance in a place where no one will ever find her, except you. De Albor tortured Ahmed until he told that I had sent for a friend of the girl's to aid us. Then De Albor sent his men up the road with what was left of Ahmed, as a warning to you if you came. It was this morning that they seized us; I hid Constance last night. Not even Ahmed knew where. De Albor tortured me to make me tell-" the dying man's hands clenched and a fierce passionate light blazed in his eyes. McGrath knew that not all the torments of all the hells could ever have wrung that secret from Ballville's iron lips.

"It was the least you could do," he said, his voice harsh with conflicting emotions. "I've lived in hell for three years because of you-and Constance has. You deserve to die. If you weren't dying already I'd kill you myself."

"Damn you, do you think I want your forgiveness?" gasped the dying man. "I'm glad you suffered. If Constance didn't need your help, I'd like to see you dying as I'm dying-and I'll be waiting for you in hell. But enough of this. De Albor left me awhile to go up the road and assure himself that Ahmed was dead. This beast got to swilling my brandy and decided to torture me some himself.

"Now listen-Constance is hidden in Lost Cave. No man on earth knows of its existence except you and menot even the negroes. Long ago I put an iron door in the entrance, and I killed the man who did the work; so the secret is safe. There's no key. You've got to open it by working certain knobs."

It was more and more difficult for the man to enunciate intelligibly. Sweat dripped from his face, and the cords of his arms quivered.

"Run your fingers over the edge of the door until you find three knobs that form a triangle. You can't see them; you'll have to feel. Press each one in counter-clockwise motion, three times, around and around. Then pull on the bar. The door will open. Take Constance and fight your way out. If you see they're going to get you, shoot her! Don't let her fall into the hands of that black beast-"

The voice rose to a shriek, foam spattered from the livid writhing lips, and Richard Ballville heaved himself almost upright, then toppled limply back. The iron will that had animated the broken body had snapped at last, as a taut wire snaps.

McGrath looked down at the still form, his brain a maelstrom of seething emotions, then wheeled, glaring, every nerve atingle, his pistol springing into his hand.

Chapter 3. The Black Priest

A man stood in the doorway that opened upon the great outer hall-a tall man in a strange alien garb. He wore a turban and a silk coat belted with a gay-hued girdle. Turkish slippers were on his feet. His skin was not much darker than McGrath's, his features distinctly oriental in spite of the heavy glasses he wore.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded McGrath, covering him.

"Ali ibn Suleyman, effendi," answered the other in faultless Arabic. "I came to this place of devils at the urging of my brother, Ahmed ibn Suleyman, whose soul may the Prophet ease. In New Orleans the letter came to me. I hastened here. And lo, stealing through the woods, I saw black men dragging my brother's corpse to the river. I came on, seeking his master."

McGrath mutely indicated the dead man. The Arab bowed his head in stately reverence.

"My brother loved him," he said. "I would have vengeance for my brother and my brother's master. Ef fendi, let me go with you."

"All right." McGrath was afire with impatience. He knew the fanatical clan-loyalty of the Arabs, knew that Ahmed's one decent trait had been a fierce devotion for the scoundrel he served. "Follow me."

With a last glance at the master of the Manor and the black body sprawling like a human sacrifice before him, McGrath left the chamber of torture. Just so, he reflected,' one of Ballville's warrior-king ancestors might have lain in some dim past age, with a slaughtered slave at his feet to serve his spirit in the land of ghosts.

With the Arab at his heels, McGrath emerged into the girdling pines that slumbered in the still heat of the noon. Faintly to his ears a distant pulse of sound was borne by a vagrant drift of breeze. It sounded like the throb of a faraway drum.

"Come on!" McGrath strode through the cluster of outhouses and plunged into the woods that rose behind them. Here, too, had once stretched the fields that builded the wealth of the aristocratic Ballvilles; but for many years they had been abandoned. Paths straggled aimlessly through the ragged growth, until presently the growing denseness of the trees told the invaders that they were in forest that had never known the woodsman's ax. McGrath looked for a path. Impressions received in childhood are always enduring. Memory remains, overlaid by later things, but unerring through the years. McGrath found the path he sought, a dim trace, twisting through the trees.

They were forced to walk single file; the branches scraped their clothing, their feet sank into the carpet of pine needles. The land trended gradually lower. Pines gave way to cypresses, choked with underbrush. Scummy pools of stagnant water glimmered under the trees. Bullfrogs croaked, mosquitoes sang with maddening insistence about them. Again the distant drum throbbed across the pinelands.

McGrath shook the sweat out of his eyes. That drum roused memories well fitted to these somber surroundings. His thoughts reverted to the hideous scar seared on Richard Ballville's naked breast. Ballville had supposed that he, McGrath, knew its meaning; but he did not. That it portended black horror and madness he knew, but its full significance he did not know. Only once before had he seen that symbol, in the horror-haunted country of Zambebwei, into which few white men had ever ventured, and from which only one white man had ever escaped alive. Bristol McGrath was that man, and he had only penetrated the fringe of that abysmal land of jungle and black swamp. He had not been able to plunge deep enough into that forbidden realm either to prove or to disprove the ghastly tales men whispered of an ancient cult surviving a prehistoric age, of the worship of a monstrosity whose mold violated an accepted law of nature. Little enough he had seen; but what he had seen had filled him with shuddering horror that sometimes returned now in crimson nightmares.

No word had passed between the men since they had left the Manor. McGrath plunged on through the vegetation that choked the path. A fat, blunt-tailed moccasion slithered from under his feet and vanished. Water could not be far away; a few more steps revealed it. They stood on the edge of a dank, slimy marsh from which rose a miasma of rotting vegetable matter. Cypresses shadowed it. The path ended at its edge. The swamp stretched away and away, lost to sight swiftly in twilight dimness.

"What now, effendi?" asked Ali. "Are we to swim this morass?"

"It's full of bottomless quagmires," answered McGrath. "It would be suicide for a man to plunge into it. Not even the piny woods niggers have ever tried to cross it. But there is a way to get to the hill that rises in the middle of it. You can just barely glimpse it, among the branches of the cypresses, see? Years ago, when Ballville and I were boys-and friends--we discovered an old, old Indian path, a secret, submerged road that led to that hill. There's a cave in the hill, and a woman is imprisoned in that cave. I'm going to it. Do you want to follow me, or to wait for me here? The path is a dangerous one."

"I will go, effendi," answered the Arab.

McGrath nodded in appreciation, and began to scan the trees about him. Presently he found what he was looking for a faint blaze on a huge cypress, an old mark, almost imperceptible. Confidently then, he stepped into the marsh beside the tree. He himself had made that mark, long ago. Scummy water rose over his shoe soles, but no higher. He stood on a flat rock, or rather on a heap of rocks, the topmost of which was just below the stagnant surface. Locating a certain gnarled cypress far out in the shadow of the marsh, he began walking directly toward it, spacing his strides carefully, each carrying him to a rockstep invisible below the murky water. Ali ibn Suleyman followed him, imitating his motions.

Through the swamp they went, following the marked trees that were their guide-posts. McGrath wondered anew at the motives that had impelled the ancient builders of the trail to bring these huge rocks from afar and sink them like piles into the slush. The work must have been stupendous, requiring no mean engineering skill. Why had the Indians built this broken road to Lost Island? Surely that isle and the cave in it had some religious significance to the red men; or perhaps it was their refuge against some stronger foe.

The going was slow; a misstep meant a plunge into marshy ooze, into unstable mire that might swallow a man alive. The island grew out of the trees ahead of them-a small knoll, girdled by a vegetation-choked beach. Through the foliage was visible the rocky wall that rose sheer from the beach to a height of fifty or sixty feet. It was almost like a granite block rising from a flat sandy rim. The pinnacle was almost bare of growth.

McGrath was pale, his breath coming in quick gasps. As they stepped upon the beach-like strip, Ali, with a glance of commiseration, drew a flask from his pocket.

"Drink a little brandy, effendi," he urged, touching the mouth to his own lips, oriental-fashion. "It will aid you."

McGrath knew that Ali thought his evident agitation was a result of exhaustion. But he was scarcely aware of his recent exertions. It was the emotions that raged within him-the thought of Constance Brand, whose beautiful form had haunted his troubled dreams for three dreary years. He gulped deeply of the liquor, scarcely tasting it, and handed back the flask.

"Come on!"

The pounding of his own heart was suffocating, drowning the distant drum, as he thrust through the choking vegetation at the foot of the cliff. On the gray rock above the green mask appeared a curious carven symbol, as he had seen it years ago, when its discovery led him and Richard Ballville to the hidden cavern. He tore aside the clinging vines and fronds, and his breath sucked in at the sight of a heavy iron door set in the narrow mouth that opened in the granite wall.

McGrath's fingers were trembling as they swept over the metal, and behind him he could hear Ali breathing heavily. Some of the white man's excitement had imparted itself to the Arab. McGrath's hands found the three knobs, forming the apices of a triangle-mere protuberances, not apparent to the sight. Controlling his jumping nerves, he pressed them as Ballville had instructed him, and felt each give slightly at the third pressure. Then, holding his breath, he grasped the bar that was welded in the middle of the door, and pulled. Smoothly, on oiled hinges, the massive portal swung open.

They looked into a wide tunnel that ended in another door, this a grille of steel bars. The tunnel was not dark; it was clean and roomy, and the ceiling had been pierced to allow light to enter, the holes covered with screens to keep out insects and reptiles. But through the grille he glimpsed something that sent him racing along the tunnel, his heart almost bursting through his ribs. Ali was close at his heels.

The grille-door was not locked. It swung outward under his fingers. He stood motionless, almost stunned with the impact of his emotions.

His eyes were dazzled by a gleam of gold; a sunbeam slanted down through the pierced rock roof and struck mellow fire from the glorious profusion of golden hair that flowed over the white arm that pillowed the beautiful head on the carved oak table.

"Constance!" It was a cry of hunger and yearning that burst from his livid lips.

Echoing the cry, the girl started up, staring wildly, her hands at her temples, her lambent hair rippling over her shoulders. To his dizzy gaze she seemed to float in an aureole of golden light.

"Bristol! Bristol McGrath!" she echoed his call with a haunting, incredulous cry. Then she was in his arms, her white arms clutching him in a frantic embrace, as if she feared he were but a phantom that might vanish from her.

For the moment the world ceased to exist for Bristol McGrath. He might have been blind, deaf and dumb to the universe at large. His dazed brain was cognizant only of the woman in his arms, his senses drunken' with the softness and fragrange of her, his soul stunned with the overwhelming realization of a dream he had thought dead and vanished for ever.

When he could think consecutively again, he shook himself like a man coming out of a trance, and stared stupidly around him. He was in a wide chamber, cut in the solid rock. Like the tunnel, it was illumined from above, and the air was fresh and clean. There were chairs, tables and a hammock, carpets on the rocky floor, cans of food and a water-cooler. Ballville had not failed to provide for his captive's comfort. McGrath glanced around at the Arab, and saw him beyond the grille. Considerately he had not intruded upon their reunion.

"Three years!" the girl was sobbing. "Three years I've waited. I knew you'd come! I knew it! But we must be careful, my darling. Richard will kill you if he finds youkill us both!"

"He's beyond killing anyone," answered McGrath. "But just the same, we've got to get out of here."

Her eyes flared with new terror.

"Yes! John De Albor! Ballville was afraid of him. That's why he locked me in here. He said he'd sent for you. I was afraid for you-"

"Ali!" McGrath called. "Come in here. We're getting out of here now, and we'd better take some water and food with us. We may have to hide in the swamps for-"

Abruptly Constance shrieked, tore herself from her lover's arms. And McGrath, frozen by the sudden, awful fear in her wide eyes, felt the dull jolting impact of a savage blow at the base of his skull. Consciousness did not leave him, but a strange paralysis gripped him. He dropped like an empty sack on the stone floor and lay there like a dead man, helplessly staring up at the scene which tinged his brain with madness-Constance struggling frenziedly in the grasp of the man he had known as Ali ibn Suleyman, now terribly transformed.

The man had thrown off his turban and glasses. And in the murky whites of his eyes, McGrath read the truth with its grisly implications-the man was not an Arab. He was a negroid mixed breed. Yet some of his blood must have been Arab, for there was a slightly Semitic cast to his countenance, and this cast, together with his oriental garb and his perfect acting of his part, had made him seem genuine. But now all this was discarded and the negroid strain was uppermost; even his voice, which had enunciated the sonorous Arabic, was now the throaty gutturals of the negro.

"You've killed him!" the girl sobbed hysterically, striving vainly to break away from the cruel fingers that prisoned her white wrists.

"He's not dead yet," laughed the octoroon. "The fool quaffed drugged brandy-a drug found only in the Zambebwei jungles. It lies inactive in the system until made effective by a sharp blow on a nerve center."

"Please do something for him!" she begged.

The fellow laughed brutally.

"Why should I? He has served his purpose. Let him lie there until the swamp insects have picked his bones. I should like to watch that-but we will be far away before nightfall." His eyes blazed with the bestial gratification of possession. The sight of this white beauty struggling in his grasp seemed to rouse all the jungle lust in the man. McGrath's wrath and agony found expression only in his bloodshot eyes. He could not move hand or foot.

"It was well I returned alone to the Manor," laughed the octoroon. "I stole up to the window while this fool talked with Richard Ballville. The thought came to me to let him lead me to the place where you were hidden. It had never occurred to me that there was a hiding-place in the swamp. I had the Arab's coat, slippers and turban; I had thought I might use them sometime. The glasses helped, too. It was not difficult to make an Arab out of myself. This man had never seen John De Albor. I was born in East Africa and grew up a slave in the house of an Arabbefore I ran away and wandered to the land of Zambebwei.

"But enough. We must go. The drum has been muttering all day. The blacks are restless. I promised them a sacrifice to Zemba. I was going to use the Arab, but by the time I had tortured out of him the information I desired, he was no longer fit for a sacrifice. Well, let them bang their silly drum. They'd like to have you for the Bride of Zemba, but they don't know I've found you. I have a motor-boat hidden on the river five miles from here-"

"You fool!" shrieked Constance, struggling passionately. "Do you think you can carry a white girl down the river, like a slave?"

"I have a drug which will make you like a dead woman," he said. "You will lie in the bottom of the boat, covered by sacks. When I board the steamer that shall bear us from these shores, you will go into my cabin in a large, well-ventilated trunk. You will know nothing of the discomforts of the voyage. You will awake in Africa--"

He was fumbling in his shirt, necessarily releasing her with one hand. With a frenzied scream and a desperate wrench, she tore loose and sped out through the tunnel. John De Albor plunged after her, bellowing. A red haze floated before McGrath's maddened eyes. The girl would plunge to her death in the swamps, unless she remembered the guide-marks--perhaps it was death she sought, in preference to the fate planned for her by the fiendish negro.

They had vanished from his sight, out of the tunnel; but suddenly Constance screamed again, with a new poignancy. To McGrath's ears came an excited jabbering of negro gutturals. De Albor's accents were lifted in angry protest. Constance was sobbing hysterically. The voices were moving away. McGrath got a vague glimpse of a group of figures through the masking vegetation as they moved across the line of the tunnel mouth. He saw Constance being dragged along by half a dozen giant blacks typical pineland dwellers, and after them came John De Albor, his hands eloquent in dissension. That glimpse only, through the fronds, and then the tunnel mouth gaped empty and the sound of splashing water faded away through 'the marsh.

Chapter 4. The Black God's Hunger

In the brooding silence of the cavern Bristol McGrath lay staring blankly upward, his soul a seething hell. Fool, fool, to be taken in so easily! Yet, how could he have known? He had never seen De Albor; he had supposed he was a fullblooded negro. Ballville had called him a black beast, but he must have been referring to his soul. De Albor, but for the betraying murk of his eyes, might pass anywhere for a white man.

The presence of those black men meant but one thing: they had followed him and De Albor, had seized Constance as she rushed from the cave. De Albor's evident fear bore a hideous implication; he had said the blacks wanted to sacrifice Constance-now she was in their hands.

"God!" The word burst from McGrath's lips, startling in the stillness, startling to the speaker. He was electrified; a few moments before he had been dumb. But now he discovered he could move his lips, his tongue. Life was stealing back through his dead limbs; they stung as if with returning circulation. Frantically he encouraged that sluggish flow. Laboriously he worked his extremities, his fingers, hands, wrists and finally, with a surge of wild triumph, his arms and legs. Perhaps De Albor's hellish drug had lost some of its power through age. Perhaps McGrath's unusual stamina threw off the effects as another man could not have done.

The tunnel door had not been closed, and McGrath knew why; they did not want to shut out the insects which would soon dispose of a helpless body; already the pests were streaming through the door, a noisome horde.

McGrath rose at last, staggering drunkenly, but with his vitality surging more strongly each second. When he tottered from the cave, no living thing met his glare. Hours had passed since the negroes had departed with their prey. He strained his ears for the drum. It was silent. The stillness rose like an invisible black mist around him. Stumblingly he splashed along the rock-trail that led to hard ground. Had the blacks taken their captive back to the death-haunted Manor, or deeper into the pinelands?

Their tracks were thick in the mud: half a dozen pairs of bare, splay feet, the slender prints of Constance's shoes, the marks of De Albor's Turkish slippers. He followed them with increasing difficulty as the ground grew higher and harder.

He would have missed the spot where they turned off the dim trail but for the fluttering of a bit of silk in the faint breeze. Constance had brushed against a tree-trunk there, and the rough bark had shredded off a fragment of her dress. The band had been headed east, toward the Manor. At the spot where the bit of cloth hung, they had turned sharply southward. The matted pine needles showed no tracks, but disarranged vines and branches bent aside marked their progress, until McGrath, following these signs, came out upon another trail leading southward.

Here and there were marshy spots, and these showed the prints of feet, bare and shod. McGrath hastened along the trail, pistol in hand, in full possession of his faculties at last. His face was grim and pale. De Albor had not had an opportunity to disarm him after striking that treacherous blow. Both the octoroon and the blacks of the pinelands believed him to be lying helpless back in Lost Cave. That, at least, was to his advantage.

He kept straining his ears in vain for the drum he had heard earlier in the day. The silence did not reassure him. In a voodoo sacrifice drums would be thundering, but he knew he was dealing with something even more ancient and abhorrent than voodoo.

Voodoo was comparatively a young religion, after all, born in the hills of Haiti. Behind the froth of voodooism rose the grim religions of Africa, like granite cliffs glimpsed through a mask of green fronds. Voodooism was a mewling infant beside the black, immemorial colossus that had reared its terrible shape in the older land through uncounted ages, Zambebwei! The very name sent a shudder through him, symbolic of horror and fear. It was more than the name of a country and the mysterious tribe that inhabited that country; it signified something fearfully old and evil, something that had survived its natural epoch-a religion of the Night, and a deity whose name was Death and Horror.

He had seen no negro cabins. He knew these were farther to the east and south, most of them, huddling along the banks of the river and the tributary creeks. It was the instinct of the black man to build his habitation by a river, as he had built by the Congo, the Nile and the Niger since Time's first gray dawn. Zambebwei! The word beat like a throb of a tom-tom through the brain of Bristol McGrath. The soul of the black man had not changed, through the slumberous centuries. Change might come in the clangor of city streets, in the raw rhythms of Harlem; but the swamps of the Mississippi do not differ enough from the swamps of the Congo to work any great transmutation in the spirit of a race that was old before the first white king wove the thatch of his wattled hut-palace.

Following that winding path through the twilight dimness of the big pines, McGrath did not find it in his soul to marvel that black slimy tentacles from the depths of Africa had stretched across the world to breed nightmares in an alien land. Certain natural conditions produce certain effects, breed certain pestilences of body or mind, regardless of their geographical situation. The river-haunted pinelands were as abysmal in their way as were the reeking African jungles.

The trend of the trail was away from the river. The land sloped very gradually upward, and all signs of marsh vanished.

The trail widened, showing signs of frequent use. McGrath became nervous. At any moment he might meet someone. He took to the thick woods alongside the trail, and forced his way onward, each movement sounding cannon-loud to his whetted ears. Sweating with nervous tension, he came presently upon a smaller path, which meandered in the general direction he wished to go. The pinelands were crisscrossed by such paths.

He followed it with greater ease and stealth, and presently, coming to a crook in it, saw it join the main trail. Near the point of junction stood a small log cabin, and between him and the cabin squatted a big black man. This man was hidden behind the bole of a huge pine beside the narrow path, and peering around it toward the cabin. Obviously he was spying on someone, and it was quickly apparent who this was, as John De Albor came to the door and stared despairingly down the wide trail. The black watcher stiffened and lifted his fingers to his mouth as if to sound a far-carrying whistle, but De Albor shrugged his shoulders helplessly and turned back into the cabin again. The negro relaxed, though he did not alter his vigilance.

What this portended, McGrath did not know, nor did he pause to speculate. At the sight of De Albor a red mist turned the sunlight to blood, in which the black body before him floated like an ebony goblin.

A panther stealing upon its kill would have made as much noise as McGrath made in his glide down the path toward the squatting black. He was aware of no personal animosity toward the man, who was but an obstacle in his path of vengeance. Intent on the cabin, the black man did not hear that stealthy approach. Oblivious to all else, he did not move or turn-until the pistol butt descended on his woolly skull with an impact that stretched him senseless among the pine needles.

McGrath crouched above his motionless victim, listening. There was no sound near by-but suddenly, far away, there rose a long-drawn shriek that shuddered and died away. The blood congealed in McGrath's veins. Once before he had heard that sound-in the low forest-covered hills that fringe the borders of forbidden Zambebwei; his black boys had turned the color of ashes and fallen on their faces. What it was he did not know; and the explanation offered by the shuddering natives had been too monstrous to be accepted by a rational mind. They called it the voice of the god of Zambebwei.

Stung to action, McGrath rushed down the path and hurled himself against the back door of the cabin. He did not know how many blacks were inside; he did not care. He was beserk with grief and fury.

The door crashed inward under the impact. He lit on his feet inside, crouching, gun leveled hip-high, lips asnarl.

But only one man faced him--John De Albor, who sprang to his feet with a startled cry. The gun dropped from McGrath's fingers. Neither lead nor steel could glut his hate now. It must be with naked hands, turning back the pages of civilization to the red dawn days of the primordial.

With a growl that was less like the cry of a man than the grunt of a charging lion, McGrath's fierce hands locked about the octoroon's throat. De Albor was borne backward by the hurtling impact, and the men crashed together over a camp cot, smashing it to ruins. And as they tumbled on the dirt floor, McGrath set himself to kill his enemy with his bare fingers.

The octoroon was a tall man, rangy and strong. But against the berserk white man he had no chance. He was hurled about like a sack of straw, battered and smashed savagely against the floor, and the iron fingers that were crushing his throat sank deeper and deeper until his tongue protruded from his gaping blue lips and his eyes were starting from his head. With death no more than a hand's breadth from the octoroon, some measure of sanity returned to McGrath.

He shook his head like a dazed bull; eased his terrible grip a trifle, and snarled: "Where is the girl? Quick, before I kill you!"

De Albor retched and fought for breath, ashen-faced. "The blacks!" he gasped. "They have taken her to be the Bride of Zemba! I could not prevent them. They demand a sacrifice. I offered them you, but they said you were paralyzed and would die anyway-they were cleverer than I thought. They followed me back to the Manor from the spot where we left, the Arab in the road-followed us from the Manor to the island.

"They are out of hand-mad with blood-lust. But even I, who know black men as none else knows them, I had forgotten that not even a priest of Zambebwei can control them when the fire of worship runs in their veins. I am their priest and master-yet when I sought to save the girl, they forced me into this cabin and set a man to watch me until the sacrifice is over. You must have killed him; he would never have let you enter here."

With a chill grimness, McGrath picked up his pistol.

"You came here as Richard Ballville's friend," he said unemotionally. "To get possession of Constance Brand, you made devil-worshippers out of the black people. You deserve death for that. When the European authorities that govern Africa catch a priest of Zambebwei, they hang him. You have admitted that you are a priest. Your life is forfeit on that score, too. But it is because of your hellish teachings that Constance Brand is to die, and it's for that reason that I'm going to blow out your brains."

John De Albor shriveled. "She is not dead yet," he gasped, great drops of perspiration dripping from his ashy face. "She will not die until the moon is high above the pines. It is full tonight, the Moon of Zambebwei. Don't kill me. Only I can save her. I know I failed before. But if I go to them, appear to them suddenly and without warning, they'll think it is because of supernatural powers that I was able to escape from the but without being seen by the watchman. That will renew my prestige.

"You can't save her. You might shoot a few blacks, but there would still be scores left to kill you-and her. But I have a plan-yes, I am a priest of Zambebwei. When I was a boy I ran away from my Arab master and wandered far until I came to the land of Zambebwei. There I grew to manhood and became a priest, dwelling there until the white blood in me drew me

out in the world again to learn the ways of the white men. When I came to America I brought a Zemba with me-I can not tell you how.

"Let me save Constance Brand!" He was clawing at McGrath, shaking as if with an ague. "I love her, even as you love her. I will play fair with you both, I swear it! Let me save her! We can fight for her later, and I'll kill you if I can."

The frankness of that statement swayed McGrath more than anything else the octoroon could have said. It was a desperate gamble-but after all, Constance would be no worse off with John De Albor alive than she was already. She would be dead before midnight unless something was done swiftly.

"Where is the place of sacrifice?" asked McGrath.

"Three miles away, in an open glade," answered De Albor. "South on the trail that runs past my cabin. All the blacks are gathered there except my guard and some others who are watching the trail below the cabin. They are scattered out along it, the nearest out of sight of my cabin, but within sound of the loud, shrill whistle with which these people signal one another.

"This is my plan. You wait here in my cabin, or in the woods, as you choose. I'll avoid the watchers on the trail, and appear suddenly before the blacks at the House of Zemba. A sudden appearance will impress them deeply, as I said. I know I can not persuade them to abandon their plan, but I will make them postpone the sacrifice until just before dawn. And before that time I will manage to steal the girl and flee with her. I'll return to your hiding-place, and we'll fight our way out together."

McGrath laughed. "Do you think I'm an utter fool? You'd send your blacks to murder me, while you carried Constance away as you planned. I'm going with you. I'll hide at the edge of the clearing, to help you if you need help. And if you make a false move, I'll get you, if I don't get anybody else."

The octoroon's murky eyes glittered, but he nodded acquiescence.

"Help me bring your guard into the cabin," said McGrath. "He'll be coming to soon. We'll tie and gag him and leave him here."

The sun was setting and twilight was stealing over the pinelands as McGrath and his strange companion stole through the shadowy woods. They had circled to the west to avoid the watchers on the trail, and were now following on the many narrow footpaths which traced their way through the forest. Silence reigned ahead of them, and McGrath mentioned this.

"Zemba is a god of silence," muttered De Albor. "From sunset to sunrise on the night of the full moon, no drum is beaten. If a dog barks, it must be slain; if a baby cries, it must be killed. Silence locks the jaws of the people until Zemba roars. Only his voice is lifted on the night of the Moon of Zemba."

McGrath shuddered. The foul deity was an intangible spirit, of course, embodied only in legend; but De Albor spoke of it as a living thing.

A few stars were blinking out, and shadows crept through the thick woods, blurring the trunks of the trees that melted together in darkness. McGrath knew they could not be far from the House of Zemba. He sensed the close presence of a throng of people, though he heard nothing.

De Albor, ahead of him, halted suddenly, crouching. McGrath stopped, trying to pierce the surrounding mask of interlacing branches.

"What is it?" muttered the white man, reaching for his pistol.

De Albor shook his head, straightening. McGrath could not see the stone in his hand, caught up from the earth as he stooped.

"Do you hear something?" demanded McGrath.

De Albor motioned him to lean forward, as if to whisper in his ear. Caught off his guard, McGrath bent toward him-even so he divined the treacherous African's intention, but it was too late. The stone in De Albor's hand crashed sickeningly against the white man's temple. McGrath went down like a slaughtered ox, and De Albor sped away down the path to vanish like a ghost in the gloom.

Chapter 5. The Voice of Zemba

In the darkness of the woodland path McGrath stirred at last, and staggered groggily to his feet. That desperate blow might have crushed the skull of a man whose physique and vitality were not that of a bull. His head throbbed and there was dried blood on his temple; but his strongest sensation was burning scorn at himself for having again fallen victim to John De Albor. And yet, who would have suspected that move? He knew De Albor would kill him if he could, but he had not expected an attack before the rescue of Constance. The fellow was dangerous and unpredictable as a cobra. Had his pleas to be allowed to attempt Constance's rescue been but a ruse to escape death at the hands of McGrath?

McGrath stared dizzily at the stars that gleamed through the ebon branches, and sighed with relief to see that the moon had not yet risen. The pinewoods were black as only pinelands can be, with a darkness that was almost tangible, like a substance that could be cut with a knife.

McGrath had reason to be grateful for his rugged constitution. Twice that day had John De Albor outwitted him, and twice the white man's iron frame had survived the attack. His gun was in his scabbard, his knife in its sheath. De Albor had not paused to search, had not paused for a second stroke to make sure. Perhaps there had been a tinge of panic in the African's actions.

Well,--this did not change matters a great deal. He believed that De Albor would make an effort to save the girl. And McGrath intended to be on hand, whether to play a lone hand, or to aid the octoroon. This was no time to hold grudges, with the girl's life at stake. He groped down the path, spurred by a rising glow in the east.

He came upon the glade almost before he knew it. The moon hung in the low branches, blood-red, high enough to illumine it and the throng of black people who squatted in a vast semicircle about it, facing the moon. Their rolling eyes gleamed milkily in the shadows, their features were grotesque masks. None spoke. No head turned toward the bushes behind which he crouched.

He had vaguely expected blazing fires, a blood-stained altar, drums and the chant of maddened worshippers; that would be voodoo. But this was not voodoo, and there was a vast gulf between the two cults. There were no fires, no altars. But the breath hissed through his locked teeth. In a far land he had sought in vain for the rituals of Zambebwei; now he looked upon them within forty miles of the spot where he was born.

In the center of the glade the ground rose slightly to a flat level. On this stood a heavy iron-bound stake that was indeed but the sharpened trunk of a good-sized pine driven deep into the ground. And there was something living chained to that stake-something which caused McGrath to catch his breath in horrified unbelief.

He was looking upon a god of Zambebwei. Stories had told of such creatures, wild tales drifting down from the borders of the forbidden country, repeated by shivering natives about jungle fires, passed along until they reached the ears of skeptical white traders. McGrath had never really believed the stories, though he had gone searching for the being they described. For they spoke of a beast that was a blasphemy against nature-a beast that sought food strange to its natural species.

The thing chained to the stake was an ape, but such an ape as the world at large never dreamed of, even in nightmares. Its shaggy gray hair was shot with silver that shone in the rising moon; it looked gigantic as it squatted ghoulishly on its haunches. Upright, on its bent, gnarled legs, it would be as tall as a man, and much broader and thicker. But its prehensile fingers were armed with talons like those of a tiger-not the heavy blunt nails of the natural anthropoid, but the cruel simitar-curved claws of the great carnivora. Its face was like that of a gorilla, low browed, flaring-nostriled, chinless; but when it snarled, its wide flat nose wrinkled like that of a great cat, and the cavernous mouth disclosed saber-like fangs, the fangs of a beast of prey. This was Zemba, the creature sacred to the people of the land of Zambebwei-a monstrosity, a violation of an accepted law of nature-a carnivorous ape. Men had laughed at the story, hunters and zoologists and traders.

But now McGrath knew that such creatures dwelt in black Zambebwei and were worshipped, as primitive man is prone to worship an obscenity or perversion of nature. Or a survival of past eons: that was what the flesh-eating apes of Zambebwei were-survivors of a forgotten epoch, remnants of a vanished prehistoric age, when nature was experimenting with matter, and life took many monstrous forms.

The sight of the monstrosity filled McGrath with revulsion; it was abysmal, a reminder of that brutish and horrorshadowed past out of which mankind crawled so painfully, eons ago. This thing was an affront to sanity; it belonged in the dust of oblivion with the dinosaur, the mastodon, and the saber-toothed tiger.

It looked massive beyond the stature of modern beasts-shaped on the plan of another age, when all things were cast in a mightier mold. He wondered if the revolver at his hip would have any effect on it; wondered by what dark and subtle means John De Albor had brought the monster from Zambebwei to the pinelands.

But something was happening in the glade, heralded by the shaking of the brute's chain as it thrust forward its nightmare=head.

From the shadows of the trees came a file of black men and women, young, naked except for a mantle of monkeyskins and parrot-feathers thrown over the shoulders of each. More regalia brought by John De Albor, undoubtedly. They formed a semicircle at a safe distance from the chained brute, and sank to their knees, bending their heads to the ground before him. Thrice this motion was repeated. Then, rising, they formed two lines, men and women facing one another, and began to dance; at least it might by courtesy be called a dance. They hardly moved their feet at all, but all other parts of their bodies were in constant motion, twisting, rotating, writhing. The measured, rhythmical movements had no connection at all with the voodoo dances McGrath had witnessed. This dance was disquietingly archaic in its suggestion, though even more depraved and bestial-naked primitive passions framed in a cynical debauchery of motion.

No sound came from the dancers, or from the votaries squatting about the ring of trees. But the ape, apparently infuriated by the continued movements, lifted his head and sent into the night the frightful shriek McGrath had heard once before that day-he had heard it in the hills that border black Zambebwei. The brute plunged to the end of his heavy chain, foaming and gnashing his fangs, and the dancers fled like spume blown before a gust of wind. They scattered in all directions--and then McGrath started up in his covert, barely stifling a cry.

From the deep shadows had come a figure, gleaming tawnily in contrast to the black forms about it. It was John De Albor, naked except for a mantle of bright feathers, and on his head a circlet of gold that might have been forged in Atlantis. In his hand he bore a gold wand that was the scepter of the high priests of Zambebwei.

Behind him came a pitiful figure, at the sight of which the moon-lit forest reeled to McGrath's sight.

Constance had been drugged. Her face was that of a sleep-walker; she seemed not aware of her peril, or the fact that she was naked. She walked like a robot, mechanically responding to the urge of the cord tied about her white neck. The other end of that cord was in John De Albor's hand, and he half led, half dragged her toward the horror that squatted in the center of the glade. De Albor's face was ashy in the moonlight that now flooded the glade with molten silver. Sweat beaded his skin. His eyes gleamed with fear and ruthless determination. And in a staggering instant McGrath knew that the man had failed, that he had been unable to save Constance, and that now, to save his own life from his suspicious followers, he himself was dragging the girl to the gory sacrifice.

No vocal sound came from the votaries, but hissing intake of breath sucked through thick lips, and the rows of black bodies swayed like reeds in the wind. The great ape leaped up, his face a slavering devil's mask; he howled with frightful eagerness, gnashing his great fangs, that yearned to sink into that soft white flesh, and the hot blood beneath. He surged against his chain, and the stout post quivered. McGrath, in the bushes, stood frozen, paralyzed by the imminence of horror. And then John De Albor stepped behind the unresisting girl and gave her a powerful push that sent her reeling forward to pitch headlong on the ground under the monster's talons.

And simultaneously McGrath moved. His move was instinctive rather than conscious. His .44 jumped into his hand and spoke, and the great ape screamed like a man death-stricken and reeled, clapping misshapen hands to its head.

An instant the throng crouched frozen, white eyes bulging, jaws hanging slack. Then before any could move, the ape, blood gushing from his head, wheeled, seized the chain in both hands and snapped it with a wrench that twisted the heavy links apart as if they had been paper.

John De Albor stood directly before the mad brute, paralyzed in his tracks. Zemba raored and leaped, and the african went down under him, disembowled by the razorlike talons, his head crushed to a crimson pulp by a sweep of the great paw.

Ravening, the monster charged among the votaries, clawing and ripping and smiting, screaming intolerably. Zambebwei spoke, and death was in his bellowing Screaming, howling, fighting, the black people scrambled over one another in their mad flight. Men and women went down under those shearing talons, were dismembered by those gnashing fangs. It was a

red drama of the primitive-destruction amuck and ariot, the primordial embodied in fangs and talons, gone mad and plunging in slaughter. Blood and brains deluged the earth, black bodies and limbs and fragments of bodies littered the moonlighted glade in ghastly heaps before the last of the howling wretches found refuge among the trees. The sounds of their blundering, panic-stricken flight drifted back.

McGrath had leaped from his covert almost as soon as he had fired. Unnoticed by the terrified negroes, and himself scarcely cognizant of the slaughter raging around him, he raced across the glade toward the pitiful white figure that lay limply beside the iron-bound stake.

"Constance!" he cried, gathering her to his breast.

Languidly she opened her cloudy eyes. He held her close, heedless of the screams and devastation surging about them. Slowly recognition grew in those lovely eyes.

"Bristol!" she murmured, incoherently. Then she screamed, clung to him, sobbing hysterically. "Bristol! They told me you were dead! The blacks! The horrible blacks! They're going to kill me! They were going to kill De Albor too, but he promised to sacrifice-"

"Don't, girl, don't!" He subdued her frantic tremblings. "It's all right, now-" Abruptly he looked up into the grinning bloodstained face of nightmare and death. The great ape had ceased to rend his dead victims and was slinking toward the living pair in the center of the glade. Blood oozed from the wound in its sloping skull that had maddened it.

McGrath sprang toward it, shielding the prostrate girl; his pistol spurted flame, pouring a stream of lead into the mighty breast as the beast charged.

On it came, and his confidence waned. Bullet after bullet he sent crashing into its vitals, but it did not halt. Now he dashed the empty gun full into the gargoyle face without effect, and with a lurch and a roll it had him in its grasp. As the giant arms closed crushingly about him, he abandoned all hope, but following his fighting instinct to the last, he drove his dagger hilt-deep in the shaggy belly.

But even as he struck, he felt a shudder run through the gigantic frame. The great arms fell away-and then he was hurled to the ground in the last death throe of the monster, and the thing was swaying, its face a deathmask. Dead on its feet, it crumpled, toppled to the ground, quivered and lay still. Not even a man-eating ape of Zambebwei could survive that close-range volley of mushrooming lead.

As the man staggered up, Constance rose and reeled into his arms, crying hysterically.

"It's all right now, Constance," he panted, crushing her to him. "The Zemba's dead; De Albor's dead; Ballville's dead; the negroes have run away. There's nothing to prevent us leaving now. The Moon of Zambebwei was the end for them. But it's the beginning of life for us."

THE END

Contents

BLACK TALONS

By Robert E. Howard

Joel Brill slapped shut the book he had been scanning, and gave vent to his dissatisfaction in language more appropriate for the deck of a whaling ship than for the library of the exclusive Corinthian Club. Buckley, seated in an alcove nearby, grinned quietly. Buckley looked more like a college professor than a detective, and perhaps it was less because of a studious nature than a desire to play the part he looked, that caused him to loaf around the library of the Corinthian.

"It must be something unusual to drag you out of your lair at this time of the day," he remarked. "This is the first time I ever saw you in the evening. I thought you spent your evenings secluded in your rooms, pouring over musty tomes in the interests of that museum you're connected with."

"I do, ordinarily." Brill looked as little like a scientist as Buckley looked like a dick. He was squarely built, with thick shoulders and the jaw and fists of a prizefighter; low browed, with a mane of tousled black hair contrasting with his cold blue eyes.

"You've been shoving your nose into books here since six o'clock," asserted Buckley.

"I've been trying to get some information for the directors of the museum," answered Brill. "Look!" He pointed an accusing finger at the rows of lavishly bound volumes. "Books till it would sicken a dog--and not a blasted one can tell me the reason for a certain ceremonial dance practiced by a certain tribe on the West African Coast."

"A lot of the members have knocked around a bit," suggested Buckley. "Why not ask them?"

"I'm going to." Brill took down a phone from its hook.

"There's John Galt--" began Buckley.

"Too hard to locate. He flits about like a mosquito with the St. Vitus. I'll try Jim Reynolds." He twirled the dial.

"Thought you'd done some exploring in the tropics yourself," remarked Buckley.

"Not worthy of the name. I hung around that God-forsaken Hell hole of the West African Coast for a few months until I came down with malaria--Hello!"

A suave voice, too perfectly accented, came along the wire.

"Oh, is that you, Yut Wuen? I want to speak to Mr. Reynolds."

Polite surprise tinged the meticulous tone.

"Why, Mr. Reynolds went out in response to your call an hour ago, Mr. Brill."

"What's that?" demanded Brill. "Went where?"

"Why, surely you remember, Mr. Brill." A faint uneasiness seemed to edge the Chinaman's voice. "At about nine o'clock you called, and I answered the phone. You said you wished to speak to Mr. Reynolds. Mr. Reynolds talked to you, then told me to have his car brought around to the side entrance. He said that you had requested him to meet you at the cottage on White Lake shore."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Brill. "This is the first time I've phoned Reynolds for weeks! You've mistaken somebody else for me."

There was no reply, but a polite stubbornness seemed to flow over the wire. Brill replaced the phone and turned to Buckley, who was leaning forward with aroused interest.

"Something fishy here," scowled Brill. "Yut Wuen, Jim's Chinese servant, said I called, an hour ago, and Jim went out to meet me. Buckley, you've been here all evening. Did I call up anybody? I'm so infernally absent-minded--"

"No, you didn't," emphatically answered the detective. "I've been sitting right here close to the phone ever since six o'clock. Nobody's used it. And you haven't left the library during that time. I'm so accustomed to spying on people, I do it unconsciously."

"Well, say," said Brill, uneasily, "suppose you and I drive over to White Lake. If this is a joke, Jim may be over there waiting for me to show up."

As the city lights fell behind them, and houses gave way to clumps of trees and bushes, velvet black in the star-light, Buckley said: "Do you think Yut Wuen made a mistake?"

"What else could it be?" answered Brill, irritably.

"Somebody might have been playing a joke, as you suggested. Why should anybody impersonate you to Reynolds?"

"How should I know? But I'm about the only acquaintance he'd bestir himself for, at this time of night. He's reserved, suspicious of people. Hasn't many friends. I happen to be one of the few."

"Something of a traveler, isn't he?"

"There's no corner of the world with which he isn't familiar."

"How'd he make his money?" Buckley asked, abruptly.

"I've never asked him. But he has plenty of it."

The clumps on each side of the road grew denser, and scattered pinpoints of light that marked isolated farm houses faded out behind them. The road tilted gradually as they climbed higher and higher into the wild hill region which, an hour's drive from the city, locked the broad crystalline sheet of silver that men called White Lake. Now ahead of them a glint shivered among the trees, and topping a wooded crest, they saw the lake spread out below them, reflecting the stars in myriad flecks of silver. The road meandered along the curving shore.

"Where's Reynolds' lodge?" inquired Buckley.

Brill pointed. "See that thick clump of shadows, within a few yards of the water's edge? It's the only cottage on this side of the lake. The others are three or four miles away. None of them occupied, this time of the year. There's a car drawn up in front of the cottage."

"No light in the shack," grunted Buckley, pulling up beside the long low roadster that stood before the narrow stoop. The building reared dark and silent before them, blocked against the rippling silver sheen behind it.

"Hey, Jim!" called Brill. "Jim Reynolds!"

No answer. Only a vague echo shuddering down from the blackly wooded hills.

"Devil of a place at night," muttered Buckley, peering at the dense shadows that bordered the lake. "We might be a thousand miles from civilization."

Brill slid out of the car. "Reynolds must be here--unless he's gone for a midnight boat ride."

Their steps echoed loudly and emptily on the tiny stoop. Brill banged the door and shouted. Somewhere back in the woods a night bird lifted a drowsy note. There was no other answer.

Buckley shook the door. It was locked from the inside.

"I don't like this," he growled. "Car in front of the cottage--door locked on the inside--nobody answering it. I believe I'll break the door in--"

"No need." Brill fumbled in his pocket. "I'll use my key."

"How comes it you have a key to Reynolds' shack?" demanded Buckley.

"It was his own idea. I spent some time with him up here last summer, and he insisted on giving me a key, so I could use the cottage any time I wanted to. Turn on your flash, will you? I can't find the lock. All right, I've got it. Hey, Jim! Are you here?"

Buckley's flash played over chairs and card tables, coming to rest on a closed door in the opposite wall. They entered and Buckley heard Brill fumbling about with an arm elevated. A faint click followed and Brill swore.

"The juice is off. There's a line running out from town to supply the cottage owners with electricity, but it must be dead. As long as we're in here, let's go through the house. Reynolds may be sleeping somewhere--"

He broke off with a sharp intake of breath. Buckley had opened the door that led to the bedroom. His flash played on the interior--on a broken chair, a smashed table--a crumpled shape that lay in the midst of a dark widening pool.

"Good God, it's Reynolds!"

Buckley's gun glinted in his hand as he played the flash around the room, sifting the shadows for lurking shapes of menace; it rested on a bolted rear door; rested longer on an open window, the screen of which hung in tatters.

"We've got to have more light," he grunted. "Where's the switch? Maybe a fuse has blown."

"Outside, near that window." Stumblingly Brill led the way out of the house and around to the window. Buckley flashed his light, grunted.

"The switch has been pulled!" He pushed it back in place, and light flooded the cottage. The light streaming through the windows seemed to emphasize the blackness of the whispering woods around them. Buckley glared into the shadows, seemed to shiver. Brill had not spoken; he shook as with ague.

Back in the house they bent over the man who lay in the middle of the red-splashed floor.

Jim Reynolds had been a stocky, strongly built man of middle age. His skin was brown and weather-beaten, hinting of tropic suns. His features were masked with blood; his head lolled back, disclosing an awful wound beneath his chin.

"His throat's been cut!" stammered Brill. Buckley shook his head.

"Not cut--torn. Good God, it looks like a big cat had ripped him."

The whole throat had literally been torn out; muscles, arteries, windpipe and the great jugular vein had been severed; the bones of the vertebrae showed beneath.

"He's so bloody I wouldn't have recognized him," muttered the detective. "How did you know him so quickly? The instant we saw him, you cried out that it was Reynolds."

"I recognized his garments and his build," answered the other. "But what in God's name killed him?"

Buckley straightened and looked about. "Where does that door lead to?"

"To the kitchen; but it's locked on this side."

"And the outer door of the front room was locked on the inside," muttered Buckley. "Doesn't take a genius to see how the murderer got in--and he--or it--went out the same way."

"What do you mean, it?"

"Does that look like the work of a human being?" Buckley pointed to the dead man's mangled throat. Brill winced.

"I've seen black boys mauled by the big cats on the West Coast--"

"And whatever tore Reynolds' gullet out, tore that window screen. It wasn't cut with a knife."

"Do you suppose a panther from the hills--" began Brill.

"A panther smart enough to throw the electric switch before he slid through the window?" scoffed Buckley.

"We don't know the killer threw the switch."

"Was Reynolds fooling around in the dark, then? No; when I pushed the switch back in place, the light came on in here. That shows it had been on; the button hadn't been pushed back. Whoever killed Reynolds had a reason for wanting to work in the dark. Maybe this was it!" The detective indicated, with a square-shod toe, a stubby chunk of blue steel that lay not far from the body.

"From what I hear about Reynolds, he was quick enough on the trigger." Buckley slipped on a glove, carefully lifted the revolver, and scanned the chamber. His gaze, roving about the room again, halted at the window, and with a single long stride, he reached it and bent over the sill.

"One shot's been fired from this gun. The bullet's in the window sill. At least, one bullet is, and it's logical to suppose it's the one from the empty chamber of Reynolds' gun. Here's the way I reconstruct the crime: something sneaked up to the shack, threw the switch, and came busting through the window. Reynolds shot once in the dark and missed, and then the killer got in his work. I'll take this gun to headquarters; don't expect to find any fingerprints except Reynolds', however. We'll examine the light switch, too, though maybe my dumb pawing erased any fingerprints that might have been there. Say, it's a good thing you have an iron-clad alibi."

Brill started violently. "What the Hell do you mean?"

"Why, there's the Chinaman to swear you called Reynolds to his death."

"Why the devil should I do such a thing?" hotly demanded the scientist.

"Well," answered Buckley, "I know you were in the library of the club all evening. That's an unshakable alibi--I suppose."

Brill was tired as he locked the door of his garage and turned toward the house which rose dark and silent among the trees. He found himself wishing that his sister, with whom he was staying, had not left town for the weekend with her husband and children. Dark empty houses were vaguely repellent to him after the happenings of the night before.

He sighed wearily as he trudged toward the house, under the dense shadows of the trees that lined the driveway. It had been a morbid, and harrying day. Tag ends of thoughts and worries flitted through his mind. Uneasily he remembered Buckley's cryptic remark: "Either Yut Wuen is lying about that telephone call, or--" The detective had left the sentence unfinished, casting a glance at Brill that was as inscrutable as his speech. Nobody believed the Chinaman was deliberately lying. His devotion to his master was well known--a devotion shared by the other servants of the dead man. Police suspicion had failed to connect them in any way with the crime. Apparently none of them had left Reynolds' town house during the day or the night of the murder. Nor had the murder-cottage given up any clues. No tracks had been found on the hard earth, no fingerprints on the gun other than the dead man's nor any except Buckley's on the light switch. If Buckley had had any luck in trying to trace the mysterious phone call, he had not divulged anything.

Brill remembered, with a twinge of nervousness, the way in which they had looked at him, those inscrutable Orientals. Their features had been immobile, but in their dark eyes had gleamed suspicion and a threat. He had seen it in the eyes of Yut Wuen, the stocky yellow man; of Ali, the Egyptian, a lean, sinewy statue of bronze; of Jugra Singh, the tall, broad shouldered, turbaned Sikh. They had not spoken their thoughts; but their eyes had followed him, hot and burning, like beasts of prey.

Brill turned from the meandering driveway to cut across the lawn. As he passed under the black shadow of the trees, something sudden, clinging and smothering, enveloped his head, and steely arms locked fiercely about him. His reaction was as instinctive and violent as that of a trapped leopard. He exploded into a galvanized burst of frantic action, a bucking heave that tore the stifling cloak from his head, and freed his arms from the arms that pinioned him. But another pair of arms hung like grim Fate to his legs, and figures surged in on him from the darkness. He could not tell the nature of his assailants; they were like denser, moving shadows in the blackness.

Staggering, fighting for balance, he lashed out blindly, felt the jolt of a solid hit shoot up his arm, and saw one of the shadows sway and pitch backward. His other arm was caught in a savage grasp and twisted up behind his back so violently that he felt as if the tendons were being ripped from their roots. Hot breath hissed in his ear, and bending his head forward, he jerked it backward again with all the power of his thick neck muscles. He felt the back of his skull crash into something softer--a man's face. There was a groan, and the crippling grip on his imprisoned arm relaxed. With a desperate wrench he tore away, but the arms that clung to his legs tripped him. He pitched headlong, spreading his arms to break his fall, and even before his fingers touched the ground, something exploded in his brain, showering a suddenly starless night of blackness with red sparks that were engulfed abruptly in formless oblivion.

Joel Brill's first conscious thought was that he was being tossed about in an open boat on a stormy sea. Then as his dazed mind cleared, be realized that he was lying in an automobile which was speeding along an uneven road. His head throbbed; he was bound hand and foot, and blanketed in some kind of a cloak. He could see nothing; could hear nothing but the purr of the racing motor. Bewilderment clouded his mind as be sought for a clue to the identity of the kidnappers. Then a sudden suspicion brought out the cold sweat on his skin.

The car lurched to a halt. Powerful hands lifted him, cloak and all, and he felt himself being carried over a short stretch of level ground, and apparently up a step or so. A key grated in a lock, a door rasped on its hinges. Those carrying him advanced; there was a click, and light shone through the folds of the cloth over Brill's head. He felt himself being lowered onto what felt like a bed. Then the cloth was ripped away, and he blinked in the glare of the light. A cold premonitory shudder passed over him.

He was lying on the bed in the room in which James Reynolds had died. And about him stood, arms folded, three grim and silent shapes: Yut Wuen, Ali the Egyptian, and Jugra Singh. There was dried blood on the Chinaman's yellow face, and his lip was cut. A dark blue bruise showed on Jugra Singh's jaw.

"The sahib awakes," said the Sikh, in his perfect English.

"What the devil's the idea, Jugra?" demanded Brill, trying to struggle to a sitting posture. "What do you mean by this? Take these ropes off me--" His voice trailed away, a shaky resonance of futility as he read the meaning in the hot dark eyes that regarded him.

"In this room our master met his doom," said Ali.

"You called him forth," said Yut Wuen.

"But I didn't!" raged Brill, jerking wildly at the cords which cut into his flesh. "Damn it, I knew nothing about it!"

"Your voice came over the wire and our master followed it to his death," said Jugra Singh.

A panic of helplessness swept over Joel Brill. He felt like a man beating at an insurmountable wall--the wall of inexorable Oriental fatalism, of conviction unchangeable. If even Buckley believed that somehow he, Joel Brill, was connected with Reynolds' death, how was he to convince these immutable Orientals? He fought down an impulse to hysteria.

"The detective, Buckley, was with me all evening," he said, in a voice unnatural from his efforts at control. "He has told you that he did not see me touch a phone; nor did I leave his sight. I could not have killed my friend, your master, because while he was being killed, I was either in the library of the Corinthian Club, or driving from there with Buckley."

"How it was done, we do not know," answered the Sikh, tranquilly. "The ways of the sahibs are beyond us. But we know that somehow, in some manner, you caused our master's death. And we have brought you here to expiate your crime."

"You mean to murder me?" demanded Brill, his flesh crawling.

"If a sahib judge sentenced you, and a sahib hangman dropped you through a black trap, white men would call it execution. So it is execution we work upon you, not murder."

Brill opened his mouth, then closed it, realizing the utter futility of argument. The whole affair was like a fantastic nightmare from which he would presently awaken.

Ali came forward with something, the sight of which shook Brill with a nameless foreboding. It was a wire cage, in which a great gaunt rat squealed and bit at the wires. Yut Wuen laid upon a card table a copper bowl, furnished with a slot on each side of the rim, to one of which was made fast a long leather strap. Brill turned suddenly sick.

"These are the tools of execution, sahib," said Jugra Singh, somberly. "That bowl shall be laid on your naked belly, the strap drawn about your body and made fast so that the bowl shall not slip. Inside the bowl the rat will be imprisoned. He is ravenous with hunger, wild with fear and rage. For a while he will only run about the bowl, treading on your flesh. But with irons hot from the fire, we shall gradually heat the bowl, until, driven by pain, the rat begins to gnaw his way out. He can not gnaw through copper; he can gnaw through flesh--through flesh and muscles and intestines and bones, sahib."

Brill wet his lips three times before he found voice to speak.

"You'll hang for this!" he gasped, in a voice he did not himself recognize.

"If it be the will of Allah," assented Ali calmly. "This is your fate; what ours is, no man can say. It is the will of Allah that you die with a rat in your bowels. If it is Allah's will, we shall die on the gallows. Only Allah knows."

Brill made no reply. Some vestige of pride still remained to him. He set his jaw hard, feeling that if he opened his mouth to speak, to reason, to argue, he would collapse into shameful shrieks and entreaties. One was useless as the other, against the abysmal fatalism of the Orient.

Ali set the cage with its grisly Occupant on the table beside the copper bowl--without warning the light went out.

In the darkness Brill's heart began to pound suffocatingly. The Orientals stood still, patiently, expecting the light to come on again. But Brill instinctively felt that the stage was set for some drama darker and more hideous than that which menaced him. Silence reigned; somewhere off in the woods a night bird lifted a drowsy note. There was a faint scratching sound, somewhere--

"The electric torch," muttered a ghostly voice which Brill recognized as Jugra Singh's. "I laid it on the card table. Wait!"

He heard the Sikh fumbling in the dark; but he was watching the window, a square of dim, star-flecked sky blocked out of blackness. And as Brill watched, he saw something dark and bulky rear up in that square. Etched against the stars he saw a misshapen head, vague monstrous shoulders.

A scream sounded from inside the room, the crash of a wildly thrown missile. On the instant there was a scrambling sound, and the object blotted out the square of starlight, then vanished from it. It was inside the room.

Brill, lying frozen in his cords, heard all Hell and bedlam break loose in that dark room. Screams, shouts, strident cries of agony mingled with the smashing of furniture, the impact of blows, and a hideous, worrying, tearing sound that made Brill's flesh crawl. Once the battling pack staggered past the window, but Brill made out only a dim writhing of limbs, the pale glint of steel, and the terrible blaze of a pair of eyes he knew belonged to none of his three captors.

Somewhere a man was moaning horribly, his gasps growing weaker and weaker. There was a last convulsion of movement, the groaning impact of a heavy body; then the starlight in the window was for an instant blotted out again, and silence reigned once more in the cottage on the lake shore; silence broken only by the death gasps in the dark, and the labored panting of a wounded man.

Brill heard some one stumbling and floundering in the darkness, and it was from this one that the racking, panting was emanating. A circle of light flashed on, and in it Brill saw the blood-smeared face of Jugra Singh.

The light wandered erratically away, dancing crazily about the walls. Brill heard the Sikh blundering across the room, moving like a drunken man, or like one wounded unto death. The flash shone full in the scientist's face, blinding him. Fingers tugged awkwardly at his cords, a knife edge was dragged across them, slicing skin as well as hemp.

Jugra Singh sank to the floor. The flash thumped beside him and went out. Brill groped for him, found his shoulder. The cloth was soaked with what Brill knew was blood.

"You spoke truth, sahib," the Sikh whispered. "How the call came in the likeness of your voice, I do not know. But I know, now, what slew Reynolds, sahib. After all these years--but they never forget, though the broad sea lies between. Beware! The fiend may return. The gold--the gold was cursed--I told Reynolds, sahib--had he heeded me, he--"

A sudden welling of blood drowned the laboring voice. Under Brill's hand the great body stiffened and twisted in a brief convulsion, then went limp.

Groping on the floor, the scientist failed to find the flashlight. He groped along the wall, found the switch and flooded the cottage with light.

Turning back into the room, a stifled cry escaped his lips.

Jugra Singh lay slumped near the bed; huddled in a corner was Yut Wuen, his yellow hands, palms upturned, limp on the floor at his sides; Ali sprawled face down in the middle of the room. All three were dead. Throats, breasts and bellies were slashed to ribbons; their garments were in strips, and among the rags hung bloody tatters of flesh. Yut Wuen had been disemboweled, and the gaping wounds of the others were like those of sheep after a mountain lion has ranged through the fold.

A blackjack still stuck in Yut Wuen's belt. Ali's dead hand clutched a knife, but it was unstained. Death had struck them before they could use their weapons. But on the floor near Jugra Singh lay a great curved dagger, and it was red to the hilt. Bloody stains led across the floor and up over the window sill. Brill found the flash, snapped it on, and leaned out the window, playing the white beam on the ground outside. Dark, irregular splotches showed, leading off toward the dense woods.

With the flash in one hand and the Sikh's knife in the other, Brill followed those stains. At the edge of the trees he came upon a track, and the short hairs lifted on his scalp. A foot, planted in a pool of blood, had limned its imprint in crimson on the hard loam. And the foot, bare and splay, was that of a human.

That print upset vague theories of a feline or anthropoid killer, stirred nebulous thoughts at the back of his mind--dim and awful race memories of semi-human ghouls, of werewolves who walked like men and slew like beasts.

A low groan brought him to a halt, his flesh crawling. Under the black trees in the silence, that sound was pregnant with grisly probabilities. Gripping the knife firmly, he flashed the beam ahead of him. The thin light wavered, then focused on a black heap that was not part of the forest.

Brill bent over the figure and stood transfixed, transported back across the years and across the world to another wilder, grimmer woodland.

It was a naked black man that lay at his feet, his glassy eyes reflecting the waning light. His legs were short, bowed and gnarled, his arms long, his shoulders abnormally broad, his shaven head set plump between them without visible neck. That head was hideously malformed; the forehead projected almost into a peek, while the back of the skull was unnaturally flattened. White paint banded face, shoulders and breast. But it was at the creature's fingers which Brill looked longest. At first glance they seemed monstrously deformed. Then he saw that those hands were furnished with long curving steel hooks, sharp-pointed, and keen-edged on the concave side. To each finger one of these barbarous weapons was made fast, and those fingers, like the hooks clotted and smeared with blood, twitched exactly as the talons of a leopard twitch.

A light step brought him round. His dimming light played on a tall figure, and Brill mumbled: "John Galt!" in no great surprise. He was so numbed by bewilderment that the strangeness of the man's presence did not occur to him.

"What in God's name is this?" demanded the tall explorer, taking the light from Brill's hand and directing it on the mangled shape. "What in Heaven's name is that?"

"A black nightmare from Africa!" Brill found his tongue at last, and speech came in a rush. "An Egbo! A leopard man! I learned of them when I was on the West Coast. He belongs to a native cult which worships the leopard. They take a male infant and subject his head to pressure, to make it deformed; and he is brought up to believe that the spirit of a leopard inhabits his body. He does the bidding of the cult's head, which mainly consists of executing the enemies of the cult. He is, in effect, a human leopard!"

"What's he doing here?" demanded Galt, in seeming incredulity.

"God knows. But he must have been the thing that killed Reynolds. He killed Reynolds' three servants tonight--would have killed me, too, I suppose, but Jugra Singh wounded him, and he evidently dragged himself away like a wild beast to die in the jungle--"

Galt seemed curiously uninterested in Brill's stammering narrative.

"Sure he's dead?" he muttered, bending closer to flash the light into the hideous face. The illumination was dim; the battery was swiftly burning out.

As Brill was about to speak, the painted face was briefly convulsed. The glazed eyes gleamed as with a last surge of life. A clawed hand stirred, lifted feebly up toward Galt. A few gutturals seeped through the blubbery lips; the fingers writhed weakly, slipped from the iron talons, which the black man lifted, as if trying to hand them to Galt. Then he shuddered, sank back and lay still. He had been stabbed under the heart, and only a beast-like vitality had carried him so far.

Galt straightened and faced Brill, turning the light on him. A beat of silence cut between them, in which the atmosphere was electric with tension.

"You understand the Ekoi dialect?" It was more an assertion than a question.

Brill's heart was pounding, a new bewilderment vying with a rising wrath. "Yes," he answered shortly.

"What did that fool say?" softly asked Galt.

Brill set his teeth and stubbornly took the plunge reason cried out against. "He said," he replied between his teeth, "'Master, take my tools to the tribe, and tell them of our vengeance; they will give you what I promised you.'"

Even as he ground out the words, his powerful body crouched, his nerves taut for the grapple. But before he could move, the black muzzle of an automatic trained on his belly.

"Too bad you had to understand that death-bed confession, Brill," said Galt, coolly. "I don't want to kill you. I've kept blood off my hands so far through this affair. Listen, you're a poor man, like most scientists--how'd you consider cutting in on a fortune? Wouldn't that be preferable to getting a slug through your guts and being planted alongside those yellow-bellied stiffs down in Reynolds' shack for them to get the blame?"

"No man wants to die," answered Brill, his gaze fixed on the light in Galt's hand--the glow which was rapidly turning redder and dimmer.

"Good!" snapped Galt. "I'll give you the low down. Reynolds got his money in the Kameroons--stole gold from the Ekoi, which they had stored in the ju-ju hut; he killed a priest of the Egbo cult in getting away. Jugra Singh was with him. But they didn't get all the gold. And after that the Ekoi took good care to guard it so nobody could steal what was left.

"I knew this fellow, Guja, when I was in Africa. I was after the Ekoi gold then, but I never had a chance to locate it. I met Guja a few months ago, again. He'd been exiled from his tribe for some crime, had wandered to the Coast and been picked up with some more natives who were brought to America for exhibition in the World's Fair.

"Guja was mad to get back to his people, and he spilled the whole story of the gold. Told me that if he could kill Reynolds, his tribe would forgive him. He knew that Reynolds was somewhere in America, but he was helpless as a child to find him. I offered to arrange his meeting with the gold-thief, if Guja would agree to give me some of the gold his tribe hoarded.

"He swore by the skull of the great leopard. I brought him secretly into these hills, and hid him up yonder in a shack the existence of which nobody suspects. It took me a wretched time to teach him just what he was to do--he'd no more brains than an ape. Night after night I went through the thing with him, until he learned the procedure: to watch in the hills until he saw a light flash in Reynolds' shack. Then steal down there, jerk the switch--and kill. These leopard men can see like cats at night.

"I called Reynolds up myself; it wasn't hard to imitate your voice. I used to do impersonations in vaudeville. While Guja was tearing the life out of Reynolds, I was dining at a well-known night club, in full sight of all.

"I came here tonight to smuggle him out of the country. But his blood-lust must have betrayed him. When he saw the light flash on in the cottage again, it must have started a train of associations that led him once more to the cottage, to kill whoever he found there. I saw the tag-end of the business--saw him stagger away from the shack, and then you follow him.

"Now then, I've shot the works. Nobody knows I'm mixed up in this business, but you. Will you keep your mouth shut and take a share of the Ekoi gold?"

The glow went out. In the sudden darkness, Brill, his pent-up feelings exploding at last, yelled: "Damn you, no! You murdering dog!" and sprang aside. The pistol cracked, an orange jet sliced the darkness, and the bullet fanned Brill's ear as he threw the heavy knife blindly. He heard it rattle futilely through the bushes, and stood frozen with the realization that he had lost his desperate gamble.

But even as he braced himself against the tearing impact of the bullet he expected, a sudden beam drilled the blackness, illuminating the convulsed features of John Galt.

"Don't move, Galt; I've got the drop on you."

It was the voice of Buckley. With a snarl, Galt took as desperate a chance as Brill had taken. He wheeled toward the source of the light, snapping down his automatic. But even as he did so, the detective's .45 crashed, and outlined against the brief glare, Galt swayed and fell like a tall tree struck by lightning.

"Dead?" asked the scientist, mechanically.

"Bullet tore through his forearm and smashed his shoulder," grunted Buckley. "Just knocked out temporarily. He'll live to decorate the gallows."

"You--you heard--?" Brill stuttered.

"Everything. I was just coming around the bend of the lake shore and saw a light in Reynolds' cottage, then your flash bobbing among the trees. I came sneaking through the bushes just in time to hear you give your translation of the nigger's dying words. I've been prowling around this lake all night."

"You suspected Galt all the time?"

The detective grinned wryly.

"I ought to say yes, and establish myself as a super sleuth. But the fact is, I suspected you all the time. That's why I came up here tonight--trying to figure out your connection with the murder. That alibi of yours was so iron-clad it looked phony to me. I had a sneaking suspicion that I'd bumped into a master-mind trying to put over the 'perfect crime.' I apologize! I've been reading too many detective stories lately!"

THE END

Contents

BLACK VULMEA'S VENGEANCE

By Robert E. Howard

CHAPTER I

Out of the Cockatoo's cabin staggered Black Terence Vulmea, pipe in one hand and flagon in the other. He stood with booted legs wide, teetering slightly to the gentle lift of the lofty poop. He was bareheaded and his shirt was open, revealing his broad hairy chest. He emptied the flagon and tossed it over the side with a gusty sigh of satisfaction, then directed his somewhat blurred gaze on the deck below. From poop ladder to forecastle it was littered by sprawling figures. The ship smelt like a brewery. Empty barrels, with their heads stove in, stood or rolled between the prostrate forms. Vulmea was the only man on his feet. From galley-boy to first mate the rest of the ship's company lay senseless after a debauch that had lasted a whole night long. There was not even a man at the helm.

But it was lashed securely and in that placid sea no hand was needed on the wheel. The breeze was light but steady. Land was a thin blue line to the east. A stainless blue sky held a sun whose heat had not yet become fierce. Vulmea blinked indulgently down upon the sprawled figures of his crew, and glanced idly over the larboard side. H e grunted incredulously and batted his eyes. A ship loomed where he had expected to see only naked ocean stretching to the skyline. She was little more than a hundred yards away, and was bearing down swiftly on the Cockatoo, obviously with the intention of laying her alongside. She was tall and square-rigged, her white canvas flashing dazzlingly in the sun. From the maintruck the flag of England whipped red against the blue. Her bulwarks were lined with tense figures, bristling with boarding-pikes and grappling irons, and through her open ports the astounded pirate glimpsed the glow of the burning matches the gunners held ready.

"All hands to battle-quarters!" yelled Vulmea confusedly. Reverberant snores answered the summons. All hands remained as they were.

"Wake up, you lousy dogs!" roared their captain. "U p, curse you! A king's ship is at our throats!"

His only response came in the form of staccato commands from the frigate's deck, barking across the narrowing strip of blue water.

"Damnation!"

Cursing luridly he lurched in a reeling run across the poop to the swivel-gun which stood at the head of the larboard ladder. Seizing this he swung it about until its muzzle bore full on the bulwark of the approaching frigate. Objects wavered dizzily before his bloodshot eyes, but he squinted along its barrel as if he were aiming a musket.

"Strike your colors, you damned pirate!" came a hail from the trim figure that trod the warship's poop, sword in hand.

"Go to hell!" roared Vulmea, and knocked the glowing coals of his pipe into the vent of the gun-breech. The falcon crashed, smoke puffed out in a white cloud, and the double handful of musket balls with which the gun had been charged mowed a ghastly lane through the boarding party clustered along the frigate's bulwark. Like a clap of thunder came the answering broadside and a storm of metal raked the Cockatoo's decks, turning them into a red shambles.

Sails ripped, ropes parted, timbers splintered, and blood and brains mingled with the pools of liquor spilt on the decks. A round shot as big as a man's head smashed into the falcon, ripping it loose from the swivel and dashing it against the man who had fired it. The impact knocked him backward headlong across the poop where his head hit the rail with a crack that was too much even for an Irish skull. Black Vulmea sagged senseless to the boards. He was as deaf to the triumphant shouts and the stamp of victorious feet on his red-streaming decks as were his men who had gone from the sleep of drunkenness to the black sleep of death without knowing what had hi, them.

Captain John Wentyard, of his Majesty's frigate the Redoubtable, sipped his wine delicately and set down the glass with a gesture that in another man would have smacked of affectation. Wentyard was a tall man, with a narrow, pale face, colorless eyes, and a prominent nose. His costume was almost sober in comparison with the glitter of his officers who sat in respectful silence about the mahogany table in the main cabin.

"Bring in the prisoner," he ordered, and there was a glint of satisfaction in his cold eyes.

They brought in Black Vulmea, between four brawny sailors, his hands manacled before him and a chain on his ankles that was just long enough to allow him to walk without tripping. Blood was clotted in the pirate's thick black hair. His shirt was in tatters, revealing a torso bronzed by the sun and rippling with great muscles. Through the stern-windows, he could see the topmasts of the Cockatoo, just sinking out of sight. That close-range broadside had robbed the frigate of a prize. His conquerors were before him and there was no mercy in their stares, but Vulmea did not seem at all abashed or intimidated. He met the stern eyes of the officers with a level gaze that reflected only a sardonic amusement. Wentyard frowned. He preferred that his captives cringe before him. It made him feel more like Justice personified, looking unemotionally down from a great height on the sufferings of the evil.

"You are Black Vulmea, the notorious pirate?"

"I'm Vulmea," was the laconic answer.

"I suppose you will say, as do all these rogues," sneered Wentyard, "that you hold a commission from the Governor of Tortuga? These privateer commissions from the French mean nothing to his Majesty. You--"

"Save your breath, fish-eyes!" Vulmea grinned hardly. "I hold no commission from anybody. I'm not one of your accursed swashbucklers who hide behind the name of buccaneer. I'm a pirate, and I've plundered English ships as well as Spanish--and be damed to you, heron-beak!"

The officers gasped at this effrontery, and Wentyard smiled a ghastly, mirthless smile, white with the anger he held in rein.

"You know that I have the authority to hang you out of hand?" he reminded the other.

"I know," answered the pirate softly. "It won't be the first time you've hanged me, John Wentyard."

"What?" The Englishman stared.

A flame grew in Vulmea's blue eyes and his voice changed subtly in tone and inflection; the brogue thickened almost imperceptibly.

"On the Galway coast it was, years ago, captain. You were a young officer then, scarce more than a boy-but with all your ruthlessness fully developed. There were some wholesale evictions, with the military to see the job was done, and the Irish were mad enough to make a fight of it-poor, ragged, half-starved peasants, fighting with sticks against full-armed English soldiers and sailors. After the massacre and the usual hangings, a boy crept into a thicket to watch-a lad of ten, who didn't even know what it was all about. You spied him, John Wentyard, and had your dogs drag him forth and string him up alongside the kicking bodies of the others. `He's Irish,' you said as they heaved him aloft. `Little snakes grow into big ones.' I was that boy. I've looked forward to this meeting, you English dog!"

Vulmea still smiled, but the veins knotted in his temples and the great muscles stood out distinctly on his manacled arms. Ironed and guarded though the pirate was, Wentyard involuntarily drew back, daunted by the stark and naked hate that blazed from those savage eyes.

"How did you escape your just deserts?" he asked coldly, recovering his poise.

Vulmea laughed shortly.

"Some of the peasants escaped the massacre and were hiding in the thickets. As soon as you left they came out, and not being civilized, cultured Englishmen, but only poor, savage Irishry, they cut me down along with the others, and found there was still a bit of life in me. We Gaels are hard to kill, as you Britons have learned to your cost."

"You fell into our hands easily enough this time," observed Wentyard.

Vulmea grinned. His eyes were grimly amused now, but the glint of murderous hate still lurked in their deeps.

"Who'd have thought to meet a king's ship in these western seas? It's been weeks since we sighted a sail of any kind, save for the carrach we took yesterday, with a cargo of wine bound for Panama from Valparaiso. It's not the time of year for rich prizes. When the lads wanted a drinking bout, who was I to deny them? We drew out of the lanes the Spaniards mostly follow, and thought we had the ocean to ourselves. I'd been sleeping in my cabin for some hours before I came on deck to smoke a pipe or so, and saw you about to board us without firing a shot."

"You killed seven of my men," harshly accused Wentyard.

"And you killed all of mine," retorted Vulmea. "Poor devils, they'll wake up in hell without knowing how they got there."

He grinned again, fiercely. His toes dug hard against the floor, unnoticed by the men who gripped him on either side. The blood was rioting through his veins, and the berserk feel of his great strength was upon him. He knew he could, in a sudden, volcanic explosion of power, tear free from the men who held him, clear the space between him and his enemy with one bound, despite his chains, and crush Wentyard's skull with a smashing swing of his manacled fists. That he himself would die an instant later mattered not at all. In that moment he felt neither fears nor regrets--only a reckless, ferocious exultation and a cruel contempt for these stupid Englishmen about him. He laughed in their faces, joying in the knowledge that they did not know why he laughed. So they thought to chain the tiger, did they? Little they guessed of the devastating fury that lurked in his catlike thews.

He began filling his great chest, drawing in his breath slowly, imperceptibly, as his calves knotted and the muscles of his arms grew hard. Then Wentyard spoke again.

"I will not be overstepping my authority if I hang you within the hour. In any event you hang, either from my yardarm or from a gibbet on the Port Royal wharves. But life is sweet, even to rogues like you, who notoriously cling to every moment granted them by outraged society. It would gain you a few more months of life if I were to take you back to Jamaica to be sentenced by the governor. This I might be persuaded to do, on one condition."

"What's that?" Vulmea's tensed muscles did not relax; imperceptibly he began to settle into a semi-crouch.

"That you tell me the whereabouts of the pirate, Van Raven."

In that instant, while his knotted muscles went pliant again, Vulmea unerringly gauged and appraised the man who faced him, and changed his plan. He straightened and smiled.

"And why the Dutchman, Wentyard?" he asked softly. "Why not Tranicos, or Villiers, or McVeigh, or a dozen others more destructive to English trade than Van Raven? Is it because of the treasure he took from the Spanish plate-fleet? Aye, the king would like well to set his hands on that hoard, and there's a rich prize would go to the captain lucky or bold enough to find Van Raven and plunder him. Is that why you came all the way around the Horn, John Wentyard?"

"We are at peace with Spain," answered Wentyard acidly. "As for the purposes of an officer in his Majesty's navy, they are not for you to question."

Vulmea laughed at him, the blue flame in his eyes.

"Once I sank a king's cruiser off Hispaniola," he, said. "Damn you and your prating of `His Majesty'! Your English king is no more to me than so much rotten driftwood. Van Raven? He's a bird of passage. Who knows where he sails? But if it's treasure you want, I can show you a hoard that would make the Dutchman's loot look like a peat-pool beside the Caribbean Sea!"

A pale spark seemed to snap from Wentyard's colorless eyes, and his officers leaned forward tensely. Vulmea grinned hardly. He knew the credulity of navy men, which they shared with landsmen and honest mariners, in regard to pirates and plunder. Every seaman not himself a rover, believed that every buccaneer had knowledge of vast hidden wealth. The loot the men of the Red Brotherhood took from the Spaniards, rich enough as it was, was magnified a thousand times in the telling, and rumor made every swaggering sea-rat the guardian of a treasure-trove.

Coolly plumbing the avarice of Wentyard's hard soul, Vulmea said: "Ten days' sail from here there's a nameless bay on the coast of Ecuador. Four years ago Dick Harston, the English pirate and I anchored there, in quest of a hoard of ancient jewels called the Fangs of Satan. An Indian swore he had found them, hidden in a ruined temple in an uninhabited jungle a day's march inland, but superstitious fear of the old gods kept him from helping himself. But he was willing to guide us there.

"We marched inland with both crews, for neither of us trusted the other. To make a long tale short, we found the ruins of an old city, and beneath an ancient, broken altar, we found the jewels-rubies, diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, bloodstones, big as hen eggs, making a quivering flame of fire about the crumbling old shrine!"

The flame grew in Wentyard's eyes. His white fingers knotted about the slender stem of his wine glass.

"The sight of them was enough to madden a man," Vulmea continued, watching the captain narrowly. "We camped there for the night, and, one way or another, we fell out over the division of the spoil, though there was enough to make every man of us rich for life. We came to blows, though, and whilst we fought among ourselves, there came a scout running with word that a Spanish fleet had come into the bay, driven our ships away, and sent five hundred men ashore to pursue us. By Satan, they were on us before the scout ceased the telling! One of my men snatched the plunder away and hid it in the old temple, and we scattered, each band for itself. There was no time to take the plunder. We barely got away with our naked lives. Eventually I, with most of my crew, made my way back to the coast and was picked up by my ship which came slinking back after escaping from the Spaniards.

"Harston gained his ship with a handful of men, after skirmishing all the way with the Spaniards who chased him instead of us, and later was slain by savages on the coast of California.

"The Dons harried me all the way around the Horn, and I never had an opportunity to go back after the loot-until this voyage. It was there I was going when you overhauled me. The treasure's still there. Promise me my life and I'll take you to it."

"That is impossible," snapped Wentyard. "The best I can promise you is trial before the governor of Jamaica."

"Well," said Vulmea, "Maybe the governor might be more lenient than you. And much may happen between here and Jamaica."

Wentyard did not reply, but spread a map on the broad table.

"Where is this bay?"

Vulmea indicated a certain spot on the coast. The sailors released their grip on his arms while he marked it, and Wentyard's head was within reach, but the Irishman's plans were changed, and they included a chance for life-desperate, but nevertheless a chance.

"Very well. Take him below."

Vulmea went out with his guards, and Wentyard sneered coldly.

"A gentleman of his Majesty's navy is not bound by a promise to such a rogue as he. Once the treasure is aboard the Redoubtable, gentlemen, I promise you he shall swing from a yard-arm."

Ten days later the anchors rattled down in the nameless bay Vulmea had described.

CHAPTER II

It seemed desolate enough to have been the coast of an uninhabited continent. The bay was merely a shallow indentation of the shore-line. Dense jungle crowded the narrow strip of white sand that was the beach. Gay-plumed birds flitted among the broad fronds, and the silence of primordial savagery brooded over all. But a dim trail led back into the twilight vistas of green-walled mystery.

Dawn was a white mist on the water when seventeen men marched down the dim path. One was John Wentyard. On an expedition designed to find treasure, he would trust the command to none but himself. Fifteen were soldiers, armed with hangers and muskets. The seventeenth was Black Vulmea. The Irishman's legs, perforce, were free, and the irons had been removed from his arms. But his wrists were bound before him with cords, and one end of the cord was in the grip of a brawny marine whose other hand held a cutlass ready to chop down the pirate if he made any move to escape.

"Fifteen men are enough," Vulmea had told Wentyard. "Too many! Men go mad easily in the tropics, and the sight of the Fangs of Satan is enough to madden any man, king's man or not. The more that see the jewels, the greater chance of mutiny before you raise the Horn again. You don't need more than three or four. Who are you afraid of? You said England was at peace with Spain, and there are no Spaniards anywhere near this spot, in any event."

"I wasn't thinking of Spaniards," answered Wentyard coldly. "I am providing against any attempt you might make to escape."

"Well," laughed Vulmea, "do you think you need fifteen men for that?"

"I'm taking no chances," was the grim retort. "You are stronger than two or three ordinary men, Vulmea, and full of wiles. My men will march with pieces ready, and if you try to bolt, they will shoot you down like the dog you are-should you, by any chance, avoid being cut down by your guard. Besides, there is always the chance of savages."

The pirate jeered.

"Go beyond the Cordilleras if you seek real savages. There are Indians there who cut off your head and shrink it no bigger than your fist. But they never come on this side of the mountains. As for the race that built the temple, they've all been dead for centuries. Bring your armed escort if you want to. It will be of no use. One strong man can carry away the whole hoard."

"One strong man!" murmured Wentyard, licking his lips as his mind reeled at the thought of the wealth represented by a load of jewels that required the full strength of a strong man to carry. Confused visions of knighthood and admiralty whirled through his head. "What about the path?" he asked suspiciously. "If this coast is uninhabited, how comes it there?"

"It was an old road, centuries ago, probably used by the race that built the city. In some places you can see where it was paved. But Harston and I were the first to use it for centuries. And you can tell it hasn't been used since. You can see where the young growth has sprung up above the scars of the axes we used to clear a way."

Wentyard was forced to agree. So now, before sunrise, the landing party was swinging inland at a steady gait that ate up the miles. The bay and the ship were quickly lost to sight. All morning they tramped along through steaming heat, between green, tangled jungle walls where gay-hued birds flitted silently and monkeys chattered. Thick vines hung low across the trail, impeding their progress, and they were sorely annoyed by gnats and other insects. At noon they paused only long enough to drink some water and eat the ready-cooked food they had brought along. The men were stolid veterans, inured to long marches, and Wentyard would allow them no more rest than was necessary for their brief meal. He was afire with savage eagerness to view the hoard Vulmea had described.

The trail did not twist as much as most jungle paths. It was overgrown with vegetation, but it gave evidence that it had once been a road, well-built and broad. Pieces of paving were still visible here and there. By mid-afternoon the land began to rise slightly to be broken by low, jungle-choked hills. They were aware of this only by the rising and dipping of the trail. The dense walls on either hand shut off their view.

Neither Wentyard nor any of his men glimpsed the furtive, shadowy shapes which now glided along through the jungle on either hand. Vulmea was aware of their presence, but he only smiled grimly and said nothing. Carefully and so subtly that his guard did not suspect it, the pirate worked at the cords on his wrists, weakening and straining the strands by continual tugging and twisting. He had been doing this all day, and he could feel them slowly giving way.

The sun hung low in the jungle branches when the pirate halted and pointed to where the old road bent almost at right angles and disappeared into the mouth of a ravine.

"Down that ravine lies the old temple where the jewels are hidden."

"On, then!" snapped Wentyard, fanning himself with his plumed hat. Sweat trickled down his face, wilting the collar of his crimson, gilt-embroidered coat. A frenzy of impatience was on him, his eyes dazzled by the imagined glitter of the gems Vulmea had so vividly described. Avarice makes for credulity, and it never occurred to Wentyard to doubt Vulmea's tale. He saw in the Irishman only a hulking brute eager to buy a few months more of life. Gentlemen of his Majesty's navy were not accustomed to analyzing the character of pirates. Wentyard's code was painfully simple: a heavy hand and a roughshod directness. He had never bothered to study or try to understand outlaw types.

They entered the mouth of the ravine and marched on between cliffs fringed with overhanging fronds. Wentyard fanned himself with his hat and gnawed his lip with impatience as he stared eagerly about for some sign of the ruins described by his captive. His face was paler than ever, despite the heat which reddened the bluff faces of his men, tramping ponderously after him. Vulmea's brown face showed no undue moisture. He did not tramp: he moved with the sure, supple tread of a panther, and without a suggestion of a seaman's lurching roll. His eyes ranged the walls above them and when a frond swayed without a breath of wind to move it, he did not miss it.

The ravine was some fifty feet wide, the floor carpeted by a low, thick growth of vegetation. The jungle ran densely along the rims of the walls, which were some forty feet high. They were sheer for the most part, but here and there natural ramps ran down into the gulch, half-covered with tangled vines. A few hundred yards ahead of them they saw that the ravine bent out of sight around a rocky shoulder. From the opposite wall there jutted a corresponding crag. The outlines of these boulders were blurred by moss and creepers, but they seemed too symmetrical to be the work of nature alone.

Vulmea stopped, near one of the natural ramps that sloped down from the rim. His captors looked at him questioningly.

"Why are you stopping?" demanded Wentyard fretfully. His foot struck something in the rank grass and he kicked it aside. It rolled free and grinned up at him-a rotting human skull. He saw glints of white in the green all about him-skulls and bones almost covered by the dense vegetation.

"Is this where you piratical dogs slew each other?" he demanded crossly. "What are you waiting on? What are you listening for?"

Vulmea relaxed his tense attitude and smiled indulgently.

"That used to be a gateway there ahead of us," he said. "Those rocks on each side are really gate-pillars. This ravine was a roadway, leading to the city when people lived there. It's the only approach to it, for it's surrounded by sheer cliffs on all sides." He laughed harshly. "This is like the road to Hell, John Wentyard: easy to go down-not so easy to go up again."

"What are you maundering about?" snarled Wentyard, clapping his hat viciously on his head. "You Irish are all babblers and mooncalves! Get on with-"

From the jungle beyond the mouth of the ravine came a sharp twang. Something whined venomously down the gulch, ending its flight with a vicious thud. One of the soldiers gulped and started convulsively. His musket clattered to the earth and he reeled, clawing at his throat from which protruded a long shaft, vibrating like a serpent's head. Suddenly he pitched to the ground and lay twitching.

"Indians!" yelped Wentyard, and turned furiously on his prisoner. "Dog! Look at that! You said there were no savages hereabouts!"

Vulmea laughed scornfully.

"Do you call them savages? Bah! Poor-spirited dogs that skulk in the jungle, too fearful to show themselves on the coast. Don't you see them slinking among the trees? Best give them a volley before they grow too bold."

Wentyard snarled at him, but the Englishman knew the value of a display of firearms when dealing with natives, and he had a glimpse of brown figures moving among the green foliage. He barked an order and fourteen muskets crashed, and the bullets rattled among the leaves. A few severed fronds drifted down; that was all. But even as the smoke puffed out in a cloud, Vulmea snapped the frayed cords on his wrists, knocked his guard staggering with a buffet under the ear, snatched his cutlass and was gone, running like a cat up the steep wall of the ravine. The soldiers with their empty muskets gaped helplessly after him, and Wentyard's pistol banged futilely, an instant too late. From the green fringe above them came a mocking laugh.

"Fools! You stand in the door of Hell!"

"Dog!" yelled Wentyard, beside himself, but with his greed still uppermost in his befuddled mind. "We'll find the treasure without your help!"

"You can't find something that doesn't exist," retorted the unseen pirate. "There never were any jewels. It was a lie to draw you into a trap. Dick Harston never came here. I came here, and the Indians butchered all my crew in that ravine, as those skulls in the grass there testify."

"Liar!" was all Wentyard could find tongue for. "Lying dog! You told me there were no Indians hereabouts!"

"I told you the head-hunters never came over the mountains," retorted Vulmea. "They don't either. I told you the people who built the city were all dead. That's so, too. I didn't tell you that a tribe of brown devils live in the jungle near here. They never go down to the coast, and they don't like to have white men come into the jungle. I think they were the people who wiped out the race that built the city, long ago. Anyway, they wiped out my men, and the only reason I got away was because I'd lived with the red men of North America and learned their woodscraft. You're in a trap you won't get out of, Wentyard!"

"Climb that wall and take him!" ordered Wentyard, and half a dozen men slung their muskets on their backs and began clumsily to essay the rugged ramp up which the pirate had run with such catlike ease.

"Better trim sail and stand by to repel boarders," Vulmea advised him from above. "There are hundreds of red devils out there-and no tame dogs to run at the crack of a caliver, either."

"And you'd betray white men to savages!" raged Wentyard.

"It goes against my principles," the Irishman admitted, "but it was my only chance for life. I'm sorry for your men. That's why I advised you to bring only a handful. I wanted to spare as many as possible. There are enough Indians out there in the jungle to eat your whole ship's company. As for you, you filthy dog, what you did in Ireland forfeited any consideration you might expect as a white man. I gambled on my neck and took my chances with all of you. It might have been me that arrow hit."

The voice ceased abruptly, and just as Wentyard was wondering if there were no Indians on the wall above them, the foliage was violently agitated, there sounded a wild yell, and down came a naked brown body, all asprawl, limbs revolving in the air, it crashed on the floor of the ravine and lay motionless--the figure of a brawny warrior, naked but for a loin-cloth of bark. The dead man was deep-chested, broad-shouldered and muscular, with features not unintelligent, but hard and brutal. He had been slashed across the neck.

The bushes waved briefly, and then again, further along the rim, which Wentyard believed marked the flight of the Irishman along the ravine wall, pursued by the companions of the dead warrior, who must have stolen up on Vulmea while the pirate was shouting his taunts.

The chase was made in deadly silence, but down in the ravine conditions were anything but silent. At the sight of the falling body a blood-curdling ululation burst forth from the jungle outside the mouth of the ravine, and a storm of arrows came whistling down it. Another man fell, and three more were wounded, and Wentyard called down the men who were laboriously struggling up the vine-matted ramp. He fell back down the ravine, almost to the bend where the ancient gate-posts jutted, and beyond that point he feared to go. He felt sure that the ravine beyond the Gateway was filled with lurking savages. They would not have hemmed him in on all sides and then left open an avenue of escape.

At the spot where he halted there was a cluster of broken rocks that looked as though as they might once have formed the walls of a building of some sort. Among them Wentyard made his stand. He ordered his men to lie prone, their musket barrels resting on the rocks. One man he detailed to watch for savages creeping up the ravine from behind them, the others watched the green wall visible beyond the path that ran into the mouth of the ravine. Fear chilled Wentyard's heart. The sun was already lost behind the trees and the shadows were lengthening. In the brief dusk of the tropic twilight, how could a white man's eye pick out a swift, flitting brown body, or a musket ball find its mark? And when darkness fell--Wentyard shivered despite the heat.

Arrows kept singing down the ravine, but they fell short or splintered on the rocks. But now bowmen hidden on the walls drove down their shafts, and from their vantage point the stones afforded little protection. The screams of men skewered to the ground rose harrowingly. Wentyard saw his command melting away under his eyes. The only thing that kept them from being instantly exterminated was the steady fire he had them keep up at the foliage on the cliffs. They seldom saw their foes; they only saw the fronds shake, had an occasional glimpse of a brown arm. But the heavy balls, ripping through the broad leaves, made the hidden archers wary, and the shafts came at intervals instead of in volleys. Once a piercing death yell announced that a blind ball had gone home, and the English raised a croaking cheer.

Perhaps it was this which brought the infuriated warriors out of the jungle. Perhaps, like the white men, they disliked fighting in the dark, and wanted to conclude the slaughter before night fell. Perhaps they were ashamed longer to lurk hidden from a handful of men.

At any rate, they came out of the jungle beyond the trail suddenly, and by the scores, not scrawny primitives, but brawny, hard-muscled warriors, confident of their strength and physically a match for even the sinewy Englishmen. They came in a wave of brown bodies that suddenly flooded the ravine, and others leaped down the walls, swinging from the lianas. They were hundreds against the handful of Englishmen left. These rose from the rocks without orders, meeting death with the bulldog stubbornness of their breed. They fired a volley full into the tide of snarling faces that surged upon them, and then drew hangers and clubbed empty muskets. There was no time to reload. Their blast tore lanes in the onsweeping human torrent, but it did not falter; it came on and engulfed the white men in a snarling, slashing, smiting whirlpool.

Hangers whirred and bit through flesh and bone, clubbed muskets rose and fell, spattering brains. But copper-headed axes flashed dully in the twilight, warclubs made a red ruin of the skulls they kissed, and there were a score of red arms to drag down each struggling white man. The ravine was choked with a milling, eddying mass, revolving about a fast-dwindling cluster of desperate, white-skinned figures.

Not until his last man fell did Wentyard break away, blood smeared on his arms, dripping from his sword. He was hemmed in by a surging ring of ferocious figures, but he had one loaded pistol left. He fired it full in a painted face surmounted by a feathered chest and saw it vanish in bloody ruin. He clubbed a shaven head with the empty barrel, and rushed through the gap made by the falling bodies. A wild figure leaped at him, swinging a war-club, but the sword was quicker. Wentyard tore the blade free as the savage fell. Dusk was ebbing swiftly into darkness, and the figures swirling about him were becoming indistinct, vague of outline. Twilight waned quickly in the ravine and darkness had settled there before it veiled the jungle outside. It was the darkness that saved Wentyard, confusing his attackers. As the sworded Indian fell he found himself free, though men were rushing on him from behind, with clubs lifted.

Blindly he fled down the ravine. It lay empty before him. Fear lent wings to his feet. He raced through the stone abutted Gateway. Beyond it he saw the ravine widen out; stone walls rose ahead of him, almost hidden by vines and creepers, pierced with blank windows and doorways. His flesh crawled with the momentary expectation of a thrust in the back. His heart was pounding so loudly, the blood hammering so agonizingly in his temples that he could not tell whether or not bare feet were thudding close behind him.

His hat and coat were gone, his shirt torn and bloodstained, though somehow he had come through that desperate melee unwounded. Before him he saw a vine-tangled wall, and an empty doorway. He ran reelingly into the door and turned, falling to his knee from sheer exhaustion. He shook the sweat from his eyes, panting gaspingly as he fumbled to reload his pistols. The ravine was a dim alleyway before him, running to the rock-buttressed bend. Moment by moment he expected to see it thronged with fierce faces, with swarming figures. But it lay empty and fierce cries of the victorious warriors drew no nearer. For some reason they had not followed him through the Gateway.

Terror that they were creeping on him from behind brought him to his feet, pistols cocked, staring this way and that.

He was in a room whose stone walls seemed ready to crumble. It was roofless, and grass grew between the broken stones of the floor. Through the gaping roof he could see the stars just blinking out, and the frond-fringed rim of the cliff. Through a door opposite the one by which he crouched he had a vague glimpse of other vegetationchoked, roofless chambers beyond.

Silence brooded over the ruins, and now silence had fallen beyond the bend of the ravine. He fixed his eyes on the blur that was the Gateway and waited. It stood empty. Yet he knew that the Indians were aware of his flight. Why did they not rush in and cut his throat? Were they afraid of his pistols? They had shown no fear of his soldiers' muskets. Had they gone away, for some inexplicable reason? Were those shadowy chambers behind him filled with lurking warriors? If so, why in God's name were they waiting?

He rose and went to the opposite door, craned his neck warily through it, and after some hesitation, entered the adjoining chamber. It had no outlet into the open. All its doors led into other chambers, equally ruinous, with broken roofs, cracked floors and crumbling walls. Three or four he traversed, his tread, as he crushed down the vegetation growirg among the broken stones, seeming intolerably loud in the stillness. Abandoning his explorations-for the labyrinth seemed endless-he returned to the room that opened toward the ravine. No sound came up the gulch, but it was so dark under the cliff that men could have entered the Gateway and been crouching near him, without his being able to see them.

At last he could endure the suspense no longer. Walking as quietly as he was able, he left the ruins and approached the Gateway, now a well of blackness. A few moments later he was hugging the left-hand abutment and straining his eyes to see into the ravine beyond. It was too dark to see anything more than the stars blinking over the rims of the walls. He took a cautious step beyond the Gateway--it was the swift swish of feet through the vegetation on the floor that saved his life. He sensed rather than saw a black shape loom out of the darkness, and he fired blindly and point-blank. The flash lighted a ferocious face, falling backward, and beyond it the Englishman dimly glimpsed other figures, solid ranks of them, surging inexorably toward him.

With a choked cry he hurled himself back around the gate-pillar, stumbled and fell and lay dumb and quaking, clenching his teeth against the sharp agony he expected in the shape of a spear-thrust. None came. No figure came lunging after him. Incredulously he gathered himself to his feet, his pistols shaking in his hands. They were waiting, beyond that bend, but they would not come through the Gateway, not even to glut their blood-lust. This fact forced itself upon him, with its implication of inexplicable mystery.

Stumblingly he made his way back to the ruins and groped into the black doorway, overcoming an instinctive aversion against entering the roofless chamber. Starlight shone through the broken roof, lightening the gloom a little, but black shadows clustered along the walls and the inner door was an ebon wall of mystery. Like most Englishmen of his generation, John Wentyard more than believed in ghosts, and he felt that if ever there was a place fit to be haunted by the phantoms of a lost and forgotten race, it was these sullen ruins.

He glanced fearfully through the broken roof at the dark fringe of overhanging fronds on the cliffs above, hanging motionless in the breathless air, and wondered if moonrise, illuminating his refuge, would bring arrows questing down through the roof. Except for the far lone cry of a nightbird, the jungle was silent. There was not so much as the rustle of a leaf. If there were men on the cliffs there was no sign to show it. He was aware of hunger and an increasing thirst; rage gnawed at him, and a fear that was already tinged with panic.

He crouched at the doorway, pistols in his hands, naked sword at his knee, and after a while the moon rose, touching the overhanging fronds with silver long before it untangled itself from the trees and rose high enough to pour its light over the cliffs. Its light invaded the ruins, but no arrows came from the cliff, nor was there any sound from beyond the Gateway. Wentyard thrust his head through the door and surveyed his retreat.

The ravine, after it passed between the ancient gate-pillars, opened into a broad bowl, walled by cliffs, and unbroken except for the mouth of the gulch. Wentyard saw the rim as a continuous, roughly circular line, now edged with the fire of moonlight. The ruins in which he had taken refuge almost filled this bowl, being butted against the cliffs on one side. Decayed and smothering vines had almost obliterated the original architectural plan. He saw the structure as a maze of roofless chambers, the outer doors opening upon the broad space left between it and the opposite wall of the cliff. This space was covered with low, dense vegetation, which also choked some of the chambers.

Wentyard saw no way of escape. The cliffs were not like the walls of the ravine. They were of solid rock and sheer, even jutting outward a little at the rim. No vines trailed down them. They did not rise many yards above the broken roofs of the ruins, but they were as far out of his reach as if they had towered a thousand feet. He was caught like a rat in a trap. The only way out was up the ravine, where the blood-lusting warriors waited with grim patience. He remembered Vulmea's mocking warning: "--Like the road to Hell: easy to go down; not so easy to go up again!" Passionately he hoped that the Indians had caught the Irishman and slain him slowly and painfully. He could have watched Vulmea flayed alive with intense satisfaction.

Presently, despite hunger and thirst and fear, he fell asleep, to dream of ancient temples where drums muttered and strange figures in parrot-feather mantles moved through the smoke of sacrificial fires; and he dreamed at last of a silent, hideous shape which came to the inner door of his roofless chamber and regarded him with cold, inhuman eyes.

It was from this dream that he awakened, bathed in cold sweat, to start up with an incoherent cry, clutching his pistols. Then, fully awake, he stood in the middle of the chamber, trying to gather his scattered wits. Memory of the dream was vague but terrifying. Had he actually seen a shadow sway in the doorway and vanish as he awoke, or had it been only part of his nightmare? The red, lopsided moon was poised on the western rim of the cliffs, and that side of the bowl was in thick shadow, but still an illusive light found its way into the ruins. Wentyard peered through the inner doorway, pistols cocked. Light floated rather than streamed down from above, and showed him an empty chamber beyond. The vegetation on the floor was crushed down, but he remembered having walked back and forth across it several times.

Cursing his nervous imagination he returned to the outer doorway. He told himself that he chose that place the better to guard against an attack from the ravine, but the real reason was that he could not bring himself to select a spot deeper in the gloomy interior of the ancient ruins.

He sat down cross-legged just inside the doorway, his back against the wall, his pistols beside him and his sword across his knees. His eyes burned and his lips felt baked with the thirst that tortured him. The sight of the heavy globules of dew that hung on the grass almost maddened him, but he did not seek to quench his thirst by that means, believing as he did that it was rank poison, he drew his belt closer, against his hunger, and told himself that he would not sleep. But he did sleep, in spite of everything.

CHAPTER III

It was a frightful scream close at hand that awakened Wentyard. He was on his feet before he was fully awake, glaring wildly about him. The moon had set and the interior of the chamber was dark as Egypt, in which the outer doorway was but a somewhat lighter blur. But outside it there sounded a blood-chilling gurgling, the heaving and flopping of a heavy body. Then silence.

It was a human being that had screamed. Wentyard groped for his pistols, found his sword instead, and hurried forth, his taut nerves thrumming. The starlight in the bowl, dim as it was, was less Stygian than the absolute blackness of' the ruins. But he did not see the figure stretched in the grass until he stumbled over it. That was all he saw, then-just that dim form stretched on the ground before the doorway. The foliage hanging over the cliff rustled a little in the faint breeze. Shadows hung thick under the wall and about the ruins. A score of men might have been lurking near him, unseen. But there was no sound.

After a while, Wentyard knelt beside the figure, straining his eyes in the starlight. He grunted softly. The dead man was not an Indian, but a black man, a brawny ebon giant, clad, like the red men, in a bark loin clout, with a crest of parrot feathers on his head. A murderous copperheaded axe lay near his hand, and a great gash showed in his muscular breast, a lesser wound under his shoulder blade. He had been stabbed so savagely that the blade had transfixed him and come out through his back.

Wentyard swore at the accumulated mystery of it. The presence of the black man was not inexplicable. Negro slaves, fleeing from Spanish masters, frequently took to the jungle and lived with the natives. This black evidently did not share in whatever superstition or caution kept the Indians outside the bowl; he had come in alone to butcher the victim they had at bay. But the mystery of his death remained. The blow that had impaled him had been driven with more than ordinary strength. There was a sinister suggestion about the episode, though the mysterious killer had saved Wentyard from being brained in his sleep--it was as if some inscrutable being, having claimed the Englishman for its own, refused to be robbed of its prey. Wentyard shivered, shaking off the thought.

Then he realized that he was armed only with his sword. He had rushed out of the ruins half asleep, leaving his pistols behind him, after a brief fumbling that failed to find them in the darkness. He turned and hurried back into the chamber and began to grope on the floor, first irritably, then with growing horror. The pistols were gone.

At this realization panic overwhelmed Wentyard. He found himself out in the starlight again without knowing just how he had got there. He was sweating, trembling in every limb, biting his tongue to keep from screaming in hysterical terror.

Frantically he fought for control. It was not imagination, then, which peopled those ghastly ruins with furtive, sinister shapes that glided from room to shadowy room on noiseless feet, and spied upon him while he slept. Something besides himself had been in that room-something that had stolen his pistols either while he was fumbling over the dead man outside, or--grisly thought!-while he slept. He believed the latter had been the case. He had heard no sound in the ruins while he was outside. But why had it not taken his sword as well? Was it the Indians, after all, playing a horrible game with him? Was it their eyes he seemed to feel burning upon him from the shadows? But he did not believe it was the Indians. They would have no reason to kill their black ally.

Wentyard felt that he was near the end of his rope. He was nearly frantic with thirst and hunger, and he shrank from the contemplation of another day of heat in that waterless bowl. He went toward the ravine mouth, grasping his sword in desperation, telling himself that it was better to be speared quickly than haunted to an unknown doom by unseen phantoms, or perish of thirst. But the blind instinct to live drove him back from the rock-buttressed Gateway. He could not bring himself to exchange an uncertain fate for certain death. Faint noises beyond the bend told him that men, many men, were waiting there, and retreated, cursing weakly.

In a futile gust of passion he dragged the black man's body to the Gateway and thrust it through. At least he would not have it for a companion to poison the air when it rotted in the heat.

He sat down about half-way between the ruins and the ravine-mouth, hugging his sword and straining his eyes into the shadowy starlight, and felt that he was being watched from the ruins; he sensed a Presence there, inscrutable, inhuman, waiting--waiting.

He was still sitting there when dawn flooded jungle and cliffs with grey light, and a brown warrior, appearing in the Gateway, bent his bow and sent an arrow at the figure hunkered in the open space. The shaft cut into the grass near Wentyard's foot, and the white man sprang up stiffly and ran into the doorway of the ruins. The warrior did not shoot again. As if frightened by his own temerity, he turned and hurried back through the Gateway and vanished from sight.

Wentyard spat dryly and swore. Daylight dispelled some of the phantom terrors of the night, and he was suffering so much from thirst that his fear was temporarily submerged. He was determined to explore the ruins by each crevice and cranny and bring to bay whatever was lurking among them. At least he would have daylight by which to face it.

To this end he turned toward the inner door, and then he stopped in his tracks, his heart in his throat. In the inner doorway stood a great gourd, newly cut and hollowed, and filled with water; beside it was a stack of fruit, and in another calabash there was meat, still smoking faintly. With a stride he reached the door and glared through. Only an empty chamber met his eyes.

Sight of water and scent of food drove from his mind all thoughts of anything except his physical needs. He seized the water-gourd and drank gulpingly, the precious liquid splashing on his breast. The water was fresh and sweet, and no wine had ever given him such delirious satisfaction. The meat he found was still warm. What it was he neither knew nor cared. He ate ravenously, grasping the joints in his fingers and tearing away the flesh with his teeth. It had evidently been roasted over an open fire, and without salt or seasoning, but it tasted like food of the gods to the ravenous man. He did not seek to explain the miracle, nor to wonder if the food were poisoned. The inscrutable haunter of the ruins which had saved his life that night, and which had stolen his pistols, apparently meant to preserve him for the time being, at least, and Wentyard accepted the gifts without question.

And having eaten he lay down and slept. He did not believe the Indians would invade the ruins; he did not care much if they did, and speared him in his sleep. He believed that the unknown being which haunted the rooms could slay him any time it wished. It had been close to him again and again and had not struck. It had showed no signs of hostility so far, except to steal his pistols. To go searching for it might drive it into hostility.

Wentyard, despite his slaked thirst and full belly, was at the point where he had a desperate indifference to consequences. His world seemed to have crumbled about him. He had led his men into a trap to see them butchered; he had seen his prisoner escape; he was caught like a caged rat himself; the wealth he had lusted after and dreamed about had proved a lie. Worn out with vain ragings against his fate, he slept.

The sun was high when he awoke and sat up with a startled oath. Black Vulmea stood looking down at him.

"Damn!" Wentyard sprang up, snatching at his sword. His mind was a riot of maddening emotions, but physically he was a new man, and nerved to a rage that was tinged with near-insanity.

"You dog!" he raved. "So the Indians didn't catch you on the cliffs!"

"Those red dogs?" Vulmea laughed. "They didn't follow me past the Gateway. They don't come on the cliffs overlooking these ruins. They've got a cordon of men strung through the jungle, surrounding this place, but I can get through any time I want to. I cooked your breakfast-and mine-right under their noses, and they never saw me."

"My breakfast!" Wentyard glared wildly. "You mean it was you brought water and food for me?"

"Who else?"

"But-but why?" Wentyard was floundering in a maze of bewilderment.

Vulmea laughed, but he laughed only with his lips. His eyes were burning. "Well, at first I thought it would satisfy me if I saw you get an arrow through your guts. Then when you broke away and got in here, I said, `Better still! They'll keep the swine there until he starves, and I'll lurk about and watch him die slowly.' I knew they wouldn't come in after you. When they ambushed me and my crew in the ravine, I cut my way through them and got in here, just as you did, and they didn't follow me in. But I got out of here the first night. I made sure you wouldn't get out the way I did that time, and then settled myself to watch you die. I could come or go as I pleased after nightfall, and you'd never see or hear me."

"But in that case, I don't see why-"

"You probably wouldn't understand!" snarled Vulmea. "But just watching you starve wasn't enough. I wanted to kill you myself-I wanted to see your blood gush, and watch your eyes glaze!" The Irishman's voice thickened with his passion, and his great hands clenched until the knuckles showed white. "And I didn't want to kill a man half-dead with want. So I went back up into the jungle on the cliffs and got water and fruit, and knocked a monkey off a limb with a stone, and roasted him. I brought you a good meal and set it there in the door while you were sitting outside the ruins. You couldn't see me from where you were sitting, and of course you didn't hear anything. You English are all dull-eared."

"And it was you who stole my pistols last night!" muttered Wentyard, staring at the butts jutting from Vulmea's Spanish girdle.

"Aye! I took them from the floor beside you while you slept. I learned stealth from the Indians of North America. I didn't want you to shoot me when I came to pay my debt. While I was getting them I heard somebody sneaking up outside, and saw a black man coming toward the doorway. I didn't want him to be robbing me of my revenge, so f stuck my cutlass through him. You awakened when he howled, and ran out, as you'll remember, but I stepped back around the corner and in at another door. I didn't want to meet you except in broad open daylight and you in fighting trim."

"Then it was you who spied on me from the inner door," muttered Wentyard. "You whose shadow I saw just before the moon sank behind the cliffs."

"Not I!" Vulmea's denial was genuine. "I didn't come down into the ruins until after moonset, when I came to steal your pistols. Then I went back up on the cliffs, and came again just before dawn to leave your food."

"But enough of this talk!" he roared gustily, whipping out his cutlass: "I'm mad with thinking of the Galway coast and dead men kicking in a row, and a rope that strangled me! I've tricked you, trapped you, and now I'm going to kill you!"

Wentyard's face was a ghastly mask of hate, livid, with bared teeth and glaring eyes.

"Dog!" with a screech he lunged, trying to catch Vulmea offguard.

But the cutlass met and deflected the straight blade, and Wentyard bounded back just in time to avoid the decapitating sweep of the pirate's steel. Vulmea laughed fiercely and came on like a storm, and Wentyard met him with a drowning man's desperation.

Like most officers of the British navy, Wentyard was proficient in the use of the long straight sword he carried. He was almost as tall as Vulmea, and though he looked slender beside the powerful figure of the pirate, he believed that his skill would offset the sheer strength of the Irishman.

He was disillusioned within the first few moments of the fight. Vulmea was neither slow nor clumsy. He was as quick as a wounded panther, and his sword-play was no less crafty than Wentyard's. It only seemed so, because of the pirate's furious style of attack, showering blow on blow with what looked like sheer recklessness. But the very ferocity of his attack was his best defense, for it gave his opponent no time to launch a counter-attack.

The power of his blows, beating down on Wentyard's blade, rocked and shook the Englishman to his heels, numbing his wrist and arm with their impact. Bliad fury, humiliation, naked fright combined to rob the captain of his poise and cunning. A stamp of feet, a louder clash of steel, and Wentyard's blade whirred into a corner. The Englishman reeled back, his face livid, his eyes like those of a madman.

"Pick up your sword!" Vulmea was panting, not so much from exertion as from rage. Wentyard did not seem to hear him.

"Bah!" Vulmea threw aside his cutlass in a spasm of disgust. "Can't you even fight? I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

He slapped Wentyard viciously first on one side of the face and then on the other. The Englishman screamed wordlessly and launched himself at the pirate's throat, and Vulmea checked him with a buffet in the face and knocked him sprawling with a savage smash under the heart. Wentyard got to his knees and shook the blood from his face, while Vulmea stood over him, his brows black and his great fists knotted.

"Get up"' muttered the Irishman thickly. "Get up, you hangman of peasants and children!"

Wentyard did not heed him. He was groping inside his shirt, from which he drew out something he stared at with painful intensity.

"Get up, damn you, before I set my boot-heels on your face-"

Vulmea broke off, glaring incredulously. Wentyard, crouching over the object he had drawn from his shirt, was weeping in great, racking sobs.

"What the hell!" Vulmea jerked it away from him, consumed by wonder to learn what could bring tears from John Wentyard. It was a skillfully painted miniature. The blow he had struck Wentyard had cracked it, but not enough to obliterate the soft gentle faces of a pretty young woman and child which smiled up at the scowling Irishman.

"Well, I'm damned!" Vulmea stared from the broken portrait in his hand to the man crouching miserably on the floor. "Your wife and daughter?"

Wentyard, his bloody face sunk in his hands, nodded mutely. He had endured much within the last night and day. The breaking of the portrait he always carried over his heart was the last straw; it seemed like an attack on the one soft spot in his hard soul, and it left him dazed and demoralized.

Vulmea scowled ferociously, but it somehow seemed forced.

"I didn't know you had a wife and child," he said almost defensively.

"The lass is but five years old," gulped Wentyard. "I haven't seen them in nearly a year My God, what's to become of them now? A navy captain's pay is none so great. I've never been able to save anything. It was for them I sailed in search of Van Raven and his treasure. I hoped to get a prize that would take care of them if aught happened to me. Kill me!" he cried shrilly, his voice cracking at the highest pitch. "Kill me and be done with it, before I lose my manhood with thinking of them, and beg for my life like a craven dog!"

But Vulmea stood looking down at him with a frown. Varying expressions crossed his dark face, and suddenly he thrust the portrait back in the Englishman's hand.

"You're too poor a creature for me to soil my hands with!" he sneered, and turning on his heel, strode through the inner door.

Wentyard stared dully after him, then, still on his knees, began to caress the broken picture, whimpering softly like an animal in pain as if the breaks in the ivory were wounds in his own flesh. Men break suddenly and unexpectedly in the tropics, and Wentyard's collapse was appalling.

He did not look up when the swift stamp of boots announced Vulmea's sudden return, without the pirate's usual stealth. A savage clutch on his shoulder raised him to stare stupidly into the Irishman's convulsed face.

"You're an infernal dog!" snarled Vulmea, in a fury that differed strangely from his former murderous hate. He broke into lurid imprecations, cursing Wentyard with all the proficiency he had acquired during his years at sea. "I ought to split your skull," he wound up. "For years I've dreamed of it, especially when I was drunk. I'm a cursed fool not to stretch you dead on the floor. I don't owe you any consideration, blast you! Your wife and daughter don't mean anything to me. But I'm a fool, like all the Irish, a blasted, chicken-hearted, sentimental fool, and I can't be the cause of a helpless woman and her colleen starving. Get up and quit sniveling!"

Wentyard looked up at him stupidly.

"You--you came back to help me?'

"I might as well stab you as leave you here to starve!" roared the pirate, sheathing his sword. "Get up and stick your skewer back in its scabbard. Who'd have ever thought that a scraun like you would have womenfolk like those innocents? Hell's fire! You ought to be shot! Pick up your sword. You may need it before we get away. But remember, I don't trust you any further than I can throw a whale by the tail, and I'm keeping your pistols. If you try to stab me when I'm not looking I'll break your head with my cutlass hilt."

Wentyard, like a man in a daze, replaced the painting carefully in his bosom and mechanically picked up his sword and sheathed it. His numbed wits began to thaw out, and he tried to pull himself together.

"What are we to do now?" he asked.

"Shut up!" growled the pirate. "I'm going to save you for the sake of the lady and the lass, but I don't have to talk to you!" With rare consistency he then continued: "We'll leave this trap the same way I came and went.

"Listen: four years ago I came here with a hundred men. I'd heard rumors of a ruined city up here, and I thought there might be loot hidden in it. I followed the old road from the beach, and those brown dogs let me and my men get in the ravine before they started butchering us. There must have been five or six hundred of them. They raked us from the walls, and then charged us-some came down the ravine and others jumped down the walls behind us and cut us off. I was the only one who got away, and I managed to cut my way through them, and ran into this bowl. They didn't follow me in, but stayed outside the Gateway to see that I didn't get out.

"But I found another way-a slab had fallen away from the wall of a room that was built against the cliff, and a stairway was cut in the rock. I followed it and came out of a sort of trap door up on the cliffs. A slab of rock was over it, but I don't think the Indians knew anything about it anyway, because they never go up on the cliffs that overhang the basin. They never come in here from the ravine, either. There's something here they're afraid of-ghosts, most likely.

"The cliffs slope down into the jungle on the outer sides, and the slopes and the crest are covered with trees and thickets. They had a cordon of men strung around the foot of the slopes, but I got through at night easily enough, made my way to the coast and sailed away with the handful of men I'd left aboard my ship.

"When you captured me the other day, I was going to kill you with my manacles, but you started talking about treasure, and a thought sprang in my mind to steer you into a trap that I might possibly get out of. I remembered this place, and I mixed a lot of truth in with some lies. The Fangs of Satan are no myth; they are a hoard of jewels hidden somewhere on this coast, but this isn't the place. There's no plunder about here.

"The Indians have a ring of men strung around this place, as they did before. I can get through, but it isn't going to be so easy getting you through. You English are like buffaloes when you start through the brush. We'll start just after dark and try to get through before the moon rises.

"Come on; I'll show you the stair."

Wentyard followed him through a series of crumbling, vine-tangled chambers, until he halted against the cliff. A thick slab leaned against the wall which obviously served as a door. The Englishman saw a flight of narrow steps, carved in the solid rock, leading upward through a shaft tunneled in the cliff.

"I meant to block the upper mouth by heaping big rocks on the slab that covers it," said Vulmea. "That was when I was going to let you starve. I knew you might find the stair. I doubt if the Indians know anything about it, as they never come in here or go up on the cliffs. But they know a man might be able to get out over the cliffs some way, so they've thrown that cordon around the slopes.

"That black I killed was a different proposition. A slave ship was wrecked off this coast a year ago, and the blacks escaped and took to the jungle. There's a regular mob of them living somewhere near here. This particular black man wasn't afraid to come into the ruins. If there are more of his kind out there with the Indians, they may try again tonight. But I believe he was the only one, or he wouldn't have come alone."

"Why don't we go up the cliff now and hide among the trees?" asked Wentyard.

"Because we might be seen by the men watching below the slopes, and they'd guess that we were going to make a break tonight, and redouble their vigilance. After awhile I'll go and get some more food. They won't see me."

The men returned to the chamber where Wentyard had slept. Vulmea grew taciturn, and Wentyard made no attempt at conversation. They sat in silence while the afternoon dragged by. An hour or so before sundown Vulmea rose with a curt word, went up the stair and emerged on the cliffs. Among the trees he brought down a monkey with a dextrously-thrown stone, skinned it, and brought it back into the ruins along with a calabash of water from a spring on the hillside. For all his woodscraft he was not aware that he was being watched; he did not see the fierce black face that glared at him from a thicket that stood where the cliffs began to slope down into the jungle below.

Later, when he and Wentyard were roasting the meat over a fire built in the ruins, he raised his head and listened intently.

"What do you hear?" asked Wentyard.

"A drum," grunted the Irishman.

"I hear it," said Wentyard after a moment. "Nothing unusual about that."

"It doesn't sound like an Indian drum," answered Vulmea. "Sounds more like an African drum."

Wentyard nodded agreement; his ship had lain off the mangrove swamps of the Slave Coast, and he had heard such drums rumbling to one another through the steaming night. There was a subtle difference in the rhythm and timbre that distinguished it from an Indian drum.

Evening came on and ripened slowly to dusk. The drum ceased to throb. Back in the low hills, beyond the ring of cliffs, a fire glinted under the dusky trees, casting brown and black faces into sharp relief.

An Indian whose ornaments and bearing marked him as a chief squatted on his hams, his immobile face turned toward the ebony giant who stood facing him. This man was nearly a head taller than any other man there, his proportions overshadowing both the Indians squatting about the fire and the black warriors who stood in a close group behind him. A jaguar-skin mantle was cast carelessly over his brawny shoulders, and copper bracelets ornamented his thickly-muscled arms. There was an ivory ring on his head, and parrot-feathers stood tip from his kinky hair. A shield of hard wood and toughened bullhide was on his left arm, and in his right hand he gripped a great spear whose hammered iron head was as broad as a man's hand.

"I came swiftly when I heard the drum," he said gutturally, in the bastard-Spanish that served as a common speech for the savages of both colors. "I knew it was N'Onga who called me. N'Onga had gone from my camp to fetch Ajumba, who was lingering with your tribe. N'Onga told me by the drum-talk that a white man was at bay, and Ajumba was dead. I came in haste. Now you tell me that you dare not enter the Old City."

"I have told you a devil dwells there," answered the Indian doggedly. "He has chosen the white man for his own. He will be angry it you try to take him away from him. It is death to enter his kingdom."

The black chief lifted his great spear and shook it defiantly.

"I was a slave to the Spaniards long enough to know that the only devil is a white man! I do not fear your devil. In my land his brothers are big as he, and I have slain one with a spear like this. A day and a night have passed since the white man fled into the Old City. Why has not the devil devoured him, or this other who lingers on the cliffs?"

"The devil is not hungry," muttered the Indian. "He waits until he is hungry. He has eaten recently. When he is hungry again he will take them. I will not go into his lair with my men. You are a stranger in this country. You do not understand these things."

"I understand that Bigomba who was a king in his own country fears nothing, neither man nor demon," retorted the black giant. "You tell me that Ajumba went into the Old City by night, and died. I have seen his body. The devil did not slay him. One of the white men stabbed him. If Ajumba could go into the Old City and not be seized by the devil, then I and my thirty men can go. I know how the big white man comes and goes between the cliffs and the ruins. There is a hole in the rock with a slab for a door over it. N'Onga watched from the bushes high up on the slopes and saw him come forth and later return through it. I have placed men there to watch it. If the white men come again through that hole, my warriors will spear them. If they do not come, we will go in as soon as the moon rises. Your men hold the ravine, and they can not flee that way. We will hunt them like rats through the crumbling houses."

CHAPTER IV

"Easy now," muttered Vulmea. "It's as dark as Hell in this shaft." Dusk had deepened into early darkness. The white men were groping their way up the steps cut in the rock. Looking back and down Wentyard made out the lower mouth of the shaft only as a slightly lighter blur in the blackness. They climbed on, feeling their way, and presently Vulmea halted with a muttered warning. Wentyard, groping, touched his thigh and felt the muscles tensing upon it. He knew that Vulmea had placed his shoulders under the slab that closed the upper entrance, and was heaving it up. He saw a crack appear suddenly in the blackness above him, limning the Irishman's bent head and foreshortened figure.

The stone came clear and starlight gleamed through the aperture, laced by the overhanging branches of the trees. Vulmea let the slab fall on the stone rim, and started to climb out of the shaft. He had emerged head, shoulders and hips when without warning a black form loomed against the stars and a gleam of steel hissed downward at his breast.

Vulmea threw up his cutlass and the spear rang against it, staggering him on the steps with the impact. Snatching a pistol from his belt with his left hand he fired point-blank and the black man groaned and fell head and arms dangling in the opening. He struck the pirate as he fell, destroying Vulmea's already precarious balance. He toppled backward down the steps, carrying Wentyard with him. A dozen steps down they brought up in a sprawling heap, and staring upward, saw the square well above them fringed with indistinct black blobs they knew were heads outlined against the stars.

"I thought you said the Indians never-" panted Wentyard.

"They're not Indians," growled Vulmea, rising. "They're Negroes. Cimarroons! The same dogs who escaped from the slave ship. That drum we heard was one of them calling the others. Look out!"

Spears came whirring down the shaft, splintering on the steps, glancing from the walls. The white men hurled themselves recklessly down the steps at the risk of broken limbs. They tumbled through the lower doorway and Vulmea slammed the heavy slab in place.

"They'll be coming down it next," he snarled. "We've got to heap enough rocks against it to hold it--no, wait a minute! If they've got the guts to come at all, they'll come by the ravine if they can't get in this way, or on ropes hung from the cliffs. This place is easy enough to get into-not so damned easy to get out of. We'll leave the shaft open. If they come this way we can get them in a bunch as they try to come out."

He pulled the slab aside, standing carefully away from the door.

"Suppose they come from the ravine and this way, too?"

"They probably will," growled Vulmea, "but maybe they'll come this way first, and maybe if they come down in a bunch we can kill them all. There may not be more than a dozen of them. They'll never persuade the Indians to follow them in."

He set about reloading the pistol he had fired, with quick sure hands in the dark. It consumed the last grain of powder in the flask. The white men lurked like phantoms of murder about the doorway of the stair, waiting to strike suddenly and deadly. Time dragged. No sound came from above. Wentyard's imagination was at work again, picturing an invasion from the ravine, and dusky figures gliding about them, surrounding the chamber. He spoke of this and Vulmea shook his head.

"When they come I'll hear them; nothing on two legs can get in here without my knowing it."

Suddenly Wentyard was aware of a dim glow pervading the ruins. The moon was rising above the cliffs. Vulmea swore.

"No chance of our getting away tonight. Maybe those black dogs were waiting for the moon to come up. Go into the chamber where you slept and watch the ravine. If you see them sneaking in that way, let me know. I can take care of any that come down the stair."

Wentyard felt his flesh crawl as he made his way through those dim chambers. The moonlight glinted down through vines tangled across the broken roofs, and shadows lay thick across his path. He reached the chamber where he had slept, and where the coals of the fire still glowed dully. He started across toward the outer door when a soft sound brought him whirling around. A cry was wrenched from his throat.

Out of the darkness of a corner rose a swaying shape; a great wedge-shaped head and an arched neck were outlined against the moonlight. In one brain-staggering instant the mystery of the ruins became clear to him; he knew what had watched him with lidless eyes as he lay sleeping, and what had glided away from his door as he awoke-he knew why the Indians would not come into the ruins or mount the cliffs above them. He was face to face with the devil of the deserted city, hungry at last-and that devil was a giant anaconda!

In that moment John Wentyard experienced such fear and loathing horror as ordinarily come to men only in foul nightmares. He could not run, and after that first scream his tongue seemed frozen to his palate. Only when the hideous head darted toward him did he break free from the paralysis that engulfed him and then it was too late.

He struck at it wildly and futilely, and in an instant it had him--lapped and wrapped about with coils which were like huge cables of cold, pliant steel. He shrieked again, fighting madly against the crushing constriction--he heard the rush of Vulmea's boots--then the pirate's pistols crashed together and he heard plainly the thud of the bullets into the great snake's body. It jerked convulsively and whipped from about him, hurling him sprawling to the floor, and then it came at Vulmea like the rush of a hurricane through the grass, its forked tongue licking in and out in the moonlight, and the noise of its hissing filling the chamber.

Vulmea avoided the battering-ram stroke of the blunt nose with a sidewise spring that would have shamed a starving jaguar, and his cutlass was a sheen in the moonlight as it hewed deep into the mighty neck. Blood spurted and the great reptile rolled and knotted, sweeping the floor and dislodging stones from the wall with its thrashing tail. Vulmea leaped high, clearing it as it lashed but Wentyard, just climbing to his feet, was struck and knocked sprawling into a corner. Vulmea was springing in again, cutlass lifted, when the monster rolled aside and fled through the inner door, with a loud rushing sound through the thick vegetation.

Vulmea was after it, his berserk fury fully roused. He did not wish the wounded reptile to crawl away and hide, perhaps to return later and take them by surprise. Through chamber after chamber the chase led, in a direction neither of the men had followed in his former explorations, and at last into a room almost choked by tangled vines. Tearing these aside Vulmea stared into a black aperture in the wall, just in time to see the monster vanishing into its depths. Wentyard, trembling in every limb, had followed, and now looked over the pirate's shoulder. A reptilian reek came from the aperture, which they now saw as an arched doorway, partly masked by thick vines. Enough moonlight found its way through the roof to reveal a glimpse of stone steps leading up into darkness.

"I missed this," muttered Vulmea. "When I found the stair I didn't look any further for an exit. Look how the doorsill glistens with scales that have been rubbed off that brute's belly. He uses it often. I believe those steps lead to a tunnel that goes clear through the cliffs. There's nothing in this bowl that even a snake could eat or drink. He has to go out into the jungle to get water and food. If he was in the habit of going out by the way of the ravine, there'd be a path worn away through the vegetation, like there is in the room. Besides, the Indians wouldn't stay in the ravine. Unless there's some other exit we haven't found, I believe that he comes and goes this way, and that means it lets into the outer world. It's worth trying, anyway."

"You mean to follow that fiend into that black tunnel?" ejaculated Wentyard aghast.

"Why not? We've got to follow and kill him anyway. If we run into a nest of them--well, we've got to die some time, and if we wait here much longer the Cimarroons will be cutting our throats. This is a chance to get away, I believe. But we won't go in the dark."

Hurrying back to the room where they had cooked the monkey, Vulmea caught up a faggot, wrapped a torn strip of his shirt about one end and set it smouldering in the coals which he blew into a tiny flame. The improvised torch flickered and smoked, but it cast light of a sort. Vulmea strode back to the chamber where the snake had vanished, followed by Wentyard who stayed close within the dancing ring of light, and saw writhing serpents in every vine that swayed overhead.

The torch revealed blood thickly spattered on the stone steps. Squeezing their way between the tangled vines which did not admit a man's body as easily as a serpent's they mounted the steps warily. Vulmea went first, holding the torch high and ahead of him, his cutlass in his right hand. He had thrown away the useless, empty pistols. They climbed half a dozen steps and came into a tunnel some fifteen feet wide and perhaps ten feet high from the stone floor to the vaulted roof. The serpent-reek and the glisten of the floor told of long occupancy by the brute, and the blood-drops ran on before them.

The walls, floor and roof of the tunnel were in much better state of preservation than were the ruins outside, and Wentyard found time to marvel at the ingenuity of the ancient race which had built it.

Meanwhile, in the moonlit chamber they had just quitted, a giant black man appeared as silently as a shadow. His great spear glinted in the moonlight, and the plumes on his head rustled as he turned to look about him. Four warriors followed him.

"They went into that door," said one of these, pointing to the vine-tangled entrance. "I saw their torch vanish into it. But I feared to follow them, alone as I was, and I ran to tell you, Bigomba."

"But what of the screams and the shot we heard just before we descended the shaft?" asked another uneasily.

"I think they met the demon and slew it," answered Bigomba. "Then they went into this door. Perhaps it is a tunnel which leads through the cliffs. One of you go gather the rest of the warriors who are scattered through the rooms searching for the white dogs. Bring them after me. Bring torches with you. As for me, I will follow with the other three, at once. Bigomba sees like a lion in the dark."

As Vulmea and Wentyard advanced through the tunnel Wentyard watched the torch fearfully. It was not very satisfactory, but it gave some light, and he shuddered to think of its going out or burning to a stump and leaving them in darkness. He strained his eyes into the gloom ahead, momentarily expecting to see a vague, hideous figure rear up amidst it. But when Vulmea halted suddenly it was not because of an appearance of the reptile. They had reached a point where a smaller corridor branched off the main tunnel, leading away to the left.

"Which shall we take?"

Vulmea bent over the floor, lowering his torch.

"The blood-drops go to the left," he grunted. "That's the way he went."

"Wait!" Wentyard gripped his arm and pointed along the main tunnel. "Look! There ahead of us! Light!"

Vulmea thrust his torch behind him, for its flickering glare made the shadows seem blacker beyond its feeble radius. Ahead of them, then, he saw something like a floating gray mist, and knew it was moonlight finding its way somehow into the tunnel. Abandoning the hunt for the wounded reptile, the men rushed forward and emerged into a broad square chamber, hewn out of solid rock. But Wentyard swore in bitter disappointment. The moonlight was coming, not from a door opening into the jungle, but from a square shaft in the roof, high above their heads.

An archway opened in each wall, and the one opposite the arch by which they had entered was fitted with a heavy door, corroded and eaten by decay. Against the wall to their right stood a stone image, taller than a man, a carven grotesque, at once manlike and bestial. A stone altar stood before it, its surface channeled and darkly stained. Something on the idol's breast caught the moonlight in a frosty sparkle.

"The devil!" Vulmea sprang forward and wrenched it away. He held it up-a thing like a giant's necklace, made of jointed plates of hammered gold, each as broad as a man's palm and set with curiously-cut jewels.

"I thought I lied when I told you there were gems here," grunted the pirate. "It seems I spoke the truth unwittingly! These are the the Fangs of Satan, but they'll fetch a tidy fortune anywhere in Europe."

"What are you doing?" demanded Wentyard, as the Irishman laid the huge necklace on the altar and lifted his cutlass. Vulmea's reply was a stroke that severed the ornament into equal halves. One half he thrust into Wentyard's astounded hands.

"If we get out of here alive that will provide for the wife and child," he grunted.

"But you--" stammered Wentyard. "You hate me--yet you save my life and then give me this--"

"Shut up!" snarled the pirate. "I'm not giving it to you; I'm giving it to the girl and her baby. Don't you venture to thank me, curse you! I hate you as much as I--"

He stiffened suddenly, wheeling to glare down the tunnel up which they had come. He stamped out the torch and crouched down behind the altar, drawing Wentyard with him.

"Men!" he snarled. "Coming down the tunnel, I heard steel clink on stone. I hope they didn't see the torch. Maybe they didn't. It wasn't much more than a coal in the moonlight."

They strained their eyes down the tunnel. The moon hovered at an angle above the open shaft which allowed some of its light to stream a short way down the tunnel. Vision ceased at the spot where the smaller corridor branched off. Presently four shadows bulked out of the blackness beyond, taking shape gradually like figures emerging from a thick fog. They halted, and the white men saw the largest one-a giant who towered above the others-point silently with his spear, up the tunnel, then down the corridor. Two of the shadowy shapes detached themselves from the group and moved off down the corridor out of sight. The giant and the other man came on up the tunnel.

"The Cimarroons, hunting us," muttered Vulmea. "They're splitting their party to make sure they find us. Lie low; there may be a whole crew right behind them."

They crouched lower behind the altar while the two blacks came up the tunnel, growing more distinct as they advanced. Wentyard's skin crawled at the sight of the broad-bladed spears held ready in their hands. The biggest one moved with the supple tread of a great panther, head thrust forward, spear poised, shield lifted. He was a formidable image of rampant barbarism, and Wentyard wondered if even such a man as Vulmea could stand before him with naked steel and live.

They halted in the doorway, and the white men caught the white flash of their eyes as they glared suspiciously about the chamber. The smaller black seized the giant's arm convulsively and pointed, and Wentyard's heart jumped into his throat. He thought they had been discovered, but the Negro was pointing at the idol. The big man grunted contemptuously. However, slavishly in awe he might be of the fetishes of his native coast, the gods and demons of other races held no terrors for him.

But he moved forward majestically to investigate, and Wentyard realized that discovery was inevitable.

Vulmea whispered fiercely in his ear: "We've got to get them, quick! Take the brave. I'll take the chief. Now!"

They sprang up together, and the blacks cried out involuntarily, recoiling from the unexpected apparitions. In that instant the white men were upon them.

The shock of their sudden appearance had stunned the smaller black. He was small only in comparison with his gigantic companion. He was as tall as Wentyard and the great muscles knotted under his sleek skin. But he was staggering back, gaping stupidly, spear and shield lowered on limply hanging arms. Only the bite of steel brought him to his senses, and then it was too late. He screamed and lunged madly, but Wentyard's sword had girded deep into his vitals and his lunge was wild. The Englishman side-stepped and thrust again and yet again, under and over the shield, fleshing his blade in groin and throat. The black man swayed in his rush, his arms fell, shield and spear clattered to the floor and he toppled down upon them.

Wentyard turned to stare at the battle waging behind him, where the two giants fought under the square beam of moonlight, black and white, spear and shield against cutlass.

Bigomba, quicker-witted than his follower, had not gone down under the unexpected rush of the white man. He had reacted instantly to his fighting instinct. Instead of retreating he had thrown up his shield to catch the down-swinging cutlass, and had countered with a ferocious lunge that scraped blood from the Irishman's neck as he ducked aside.

Now they fought in grim silence, while Wentyard circled about them, unable to get in a thrust that might not imperil Vulmea. Both moved with the sure-footed quickness of tigers. The black man towered above the white, but even his magnificent proportions could not overshadow the sinewy physique of the pirate. In the moonlight the great muscles of both men knotted, rippled and coiled in response to their herculean exertions. The play was bewildering, almost blinding the eye that tried to follow it.

Again and again the pirate barely avoided the dart of the great spear, and again and again Bigomba caught on his shield a stroke that otherwise would have shorn him asunder. Speed of foot and strength of wrist alone saved Vulmea, for he had no defensive armor. But repeatedly he either dodged or side-stepped, the savage thrusts, or beat aside the spear with his blade. And he rained blow on blow with his cutlass, slashing the bullhide to ribbons, until the shield was little more than a wooden framework through which, slipping in a lightning-like thrust, the cutlass drew first blood as it raked through the flesh across the black chief's ribs.

At that Bigomba roared like a wounded lion, and like a wounded lion he leaped. Hurling the shield at Vulmea's head he threw all his giant body behind the arm that drove the spear at the Irishman's breast. The muscles leaped up in quivering bunches on his arm as he smote, and Wentyard cried out, unable to believe that Vulmea could avoid the lunge. But chain-lightning was slow compared to the pirate's shift. He ducked, side-stepped, and as the spear whipped past under his arm-pit, he dealt a cut that found no shield in the way. The cutlass was a blinding flicker of steel in the moonlight, ending its arc in a butchershop crunch. Bigomba fell as a tree falls and lay still. His head had been all but severed from his body.

Vulmea stepped back, panting. His great chest heaved under the tattered shirt, and sweat dripped from his face. At last he had met a man almost his match, and the strain of that terrible encounter left the tendons of his thighs quivering.

"We've got to get out of here before the rest of them come," he gasped, catching up his half of the idol's necklace. "That smaller corridor must lead to the outside, but those blacks are in it, and we haven't any torch. Let's try this door. Maybe we can get out that way."

The ancient door was a rotten mass of crumbling panels and corroded copper bands. It cracked and splintered under the impact of Vulmea's heavy shoulder, and through the apertures the pirate felt the stir of fresh air, and caught the scent of a damp river-reek. He drew back to smash again at the door, when a chorus of fierce yells brought him about snarling like a trapped wolf. Swift feet pattered up the tunnel, torches waved, and barbaric shouts re-echoed under the vaulted roof. The white men saw a mass of fierce faces and flashing spears, thrown into relief by the flaring torches, surging up the tunnel. The light of their coming streamed before them. They had heard and interpreted the sounds of combat as they hurried up the tunnel, and now they had sighted their enemies, and they burst into a run, howling like wolves.

"Break the door, quick!" cried Wentyard!

"No time now," grunted Vulmea. "They'd be on us before we could get through. We'll make our stand here."

He ran across the chamber to meet them before they could emerge from the comparatively narrow archway, and Wentyard followed him. Despair gripped the Englishman and in a spasm of futile rage he hurled the half-necklace from him. The glint of its jewels was mockery. He fought down the sick memory of those who waited for him in Englnad as he took his place at the door beside the giant pirate.

As they saw their prey at bay the howls of the oncoming blacks grew wilder. Spears were brandished among the torches-then a shriek of different timbre cut the din. The foremost blacks had almost reached the point where the corridor branched off the tunnel-and out of the corridor raced a frantic figure. It was one of the black men who had gone down it exploring. And behind him came a blood-smeared nightmare. The great serpent had turned at bay at last.

It was among the blacks before they knew what was happening. Yells of hate changed to screams of terror, and in an instant all was madness, a clustering tangle of struggling black bodies and limbs, and that great sinuous cable-like trunk writhing and whipping among them, the wedge-shaped head darting and battering. Torches were knocked against the walls, scattering sparks. One man, caught in the squirming coils, was crushed and killed almost instantly, and others were dashed to the floor or hurled with bone-splintering force against the walls by the battering-ram head, or the lashing, beam-like tail. Shot and slashed as it was, wounded mortally, the great snake clung to life with the horrible vitality of its kind, and in the blind fury of its death-throes it became an appalling engine of destruction.

Within a matter of moments the blacks who survived had broken away and were fleeing down the tunnel, screaming their fear. Half a dozen limp and broken bodies lay sprawled behind them, and the serpent, unlooping himself from these victims, swept down the tunnel after the living who fled from him. Fugitives and pursuer vanished into the darkness, from which frantic yells came back faintly.

"God!" Wentyard wiped his brow with a trembling hand. "That might have happened to us!"

"Those men who went groping down the corridor must have stumbled onto him lying in the dark," muttered Vulmea. "I guess he got tired of running. Or maybe he knew he had his death-wound and turned back to kill somebody before he died. He'll chase those blacks until either he's killed them all, or died himself. They may turn on him and spear him to death when they get into the open. Pick up your part of the necklace. I'm going to try that door again."

Three powerful drives of his shoulder were required before the ancient door finally gave way. Fresh, damp air poured through, though the interior was dark. But Vulmea entered without hesitation, and Wentyard followed him. After a few yards of groping in the dark, the narrow corridor turned sharply to the left, and they emerged into a somewhat wider passage, where a familiar, nauseating reek made Wentyard shudder.

"The snake used this tunnel," said Vulmea. "This must be the corridor that branches off the tunnel on the other side of the idol-room. There must be a regular network of subterranean rooms and tunnels under these cliffs. I wonder what we'd find if we explored all of them."

Wentyard fervently disavowed any curiosity in that direction, and an instant later jumped convulsively when Vulmea snapped suddenly: "Look there!"

"Where? How can a man look anywhere in this darkness?"

"Ahead of us, damn it! It's light at the other end of this tunnel!"

"Your eyes are better than mine," muttered Wentyard, but he followed the pirate with new eagerness, and soon he too could see the tiny disk of grey that seemed set in a solid black wall. After that it seemed to the Englishman that they walked for miles. It was not that far in reality, but the disk grew slowly in size and clarity, and Wentyard knew that they had come a long way from the idol-room when at last they thrust their heads through a round, vine-crossed opening and saw the stars reflected in the black water of a sullen river flowing beneath them.

"This is the way he came and went, all right," grunted Vulmea.

The tunnel opened in the steep bank and there was a narrow strip of beach below it, probably existent only in dry seasons. They dropped down to it and looked about at the dense jungle walls which hung over the river.

"Where are we?" asked Wentyard helplessly, his sense of direction entirely muddled.

"Beyond the foot of the slopes," answered Vulmea, "and that means we're outside the cordon the Indians have strung around the cliffs. The coast lies in that direction; come on!"

The sun hung high above the western horizon when two men emerged from the jungle that fringed the beach, and saw the tiny bay stretching before them.

Vulmea stopped in the shadow of the trees.

"There's your ship, lying at anchor where we left her. All you've got to do now is hail her for a boat to be sent ashore, and your part of the adventure is over."

Wentyard looked at his companion. The Englishman was bruised, scratched by briars, his clothing hanging in tatters. He could hardly have been recognized as the trim captain of the Redoubtable. But the change was not limited to his appearance. It went deeper. He was a different man than the one who marched his prisoner ashore in quest of a mythical hoard of gems.

"What of you? I owe you a debt that I can never-"

"You owe me nothing," Vulmea broke in. "I don't trust you, Wentyard."

The other winced. Vulmea did not know that it was the cruelest thing he could have said. He did not mean it as cruelty. He was simply speaking his mind, and it did not occur to him that it would hurt the Englishman.

"Do you think I could ever harm you now, after this?" exclaimed Wentyard. "Pirate or not, I could never-"

"You're grateful and full of the milk of human kindness now," answered Vulmea, and laughed hardly. "But you might change your mind after you got back on your decks. John Wentyard lost in the jungle is one man; Captain Wentyard aboard his king's warship is another."

"I swear-" began Wentyard desperately, and then stopped, realizing the futility of his protestations. He realized, with an almost physical pain, that a man can never escape the consequences of a wrong, even though the victim may forgive him. His punishment now was an inability to convince Vulmea of his sincerity, and it hurt him far more bitterly than the Irishman could ever realize. But he could not expect Vulmea to trust him, he realized miserably. In that moment he loathed himself for what he had been, and for the smug, self-sufficient arrogance which had caused him to ruthlessly trample on all who fell outside the charmed circle of his approval. At that moment there was nothing in the world he desired more than the firm handclasp of the man who had fought and wrought so tremendously for him; but he knew he did not deserve it.

"You can't stay here!" he protested weakly.

"The Indians never come to this coast," answered Vulmea. "I'm not afraid of the Cimarroons. Don't worry about me." He laughed again, at what he considered the jest of anyone worrying about his safety. "I've lived in the wilds before now. I'm not the only pirate in these seas. There's a rendezvous you know nothing about. I can reach it easily. I'll be back on the Main with a ship and a crew the next time you hear about me."

And turning supply, he strode into the foliage and vanished, while Wentyard, dangling in his hand a jeweled strip of gold, stared helplessly after him.

THE END

Contents

THE CAIRN ON THE HEADLAND

By Robert E. Howard

And the next instant this great red loon was shaking me like a dog shaking a rat. "Where is Meve MacDonnal?" he was screaming. By the saints, it's a grisly thing to hear a madman in a lonely place at midnight screaming the name of a woman dead three hundred years.--The Longshoreman's Tale.

"This is the cairn you seek," I said, laying my hand gingerly on one of the rough stones which composed the strangely symmetrical heap.

An avid interest burned in Ortali's dark eyes. His gaze swept the landscape and came back to rest on the great pile of massive weather-worn boulders.

"What a wild, weird, desolate place!" he said. "Who would have thought to find such a spot in this vicinity? Except for the smoke rising yonder, one would scarcely dream that bey and that headland lies a great city! Here there is scarcely even a fisherman's but within sight."

"The people shun the cairn as they have shunned it for centuries," I replied.

"Why?"

"You've asked me that before," I replied impatiently. "I can only answer that they now avoid by habit what their ancestors avoided through knowledge."

"Knowledge!" he laughed derisively. "Superstition!"

I looked at him sombrely with unveiled hate. Two men could scarcely have been of more opposite types. He was slender, self-possessed, unmistakably Latin with his dark eyes and sophisticated air. I am massive, clumsy and bearlike, with cold blue eyes and tousled red hair. We were countrymen in that we were born in the same land; but the homelands of our ancestors were as far apar as South from North.

"Nordic superstition," he repeated. "It cannot imagine a Latin people allowing such a mystery as this to gounexplored all these years. The Latins are too practicaltoo prosaic, if you will. Are you sure of the date of this pile?"

"I find no mention of it in any manuscript prior to 1014 A.D.," I growled, "and I've read all such manuscripts extant, in the original. MacLiag, King Brian Boru's poet, speaks of the rearing of the cairn immediately after the battle, and there can be little doubt that this is the pile referred to. It is mentioned briefly in the later chronicles of the Four Masters, also in the Book of Leinster, compiled in the late 1150's, and again in the Book of Lecan, compiled by the MacFirbis about 1416. All connect it with the battle of Clontarf, without mentioning why it was built."

"Well, what is the mystery about it?" he queried. "What more 'natural than that the defeated Norsemen should rear a cairn above the body of some great chief who had fallen in the battle?"

"In the first place," I answered, "there is a mystery concerning the existence of it. The building of cairns above the dead was a Norse, not an Irish, custom. Yet according to the chroniclers, it was not Norsemen who reared this heap. How could then have built-it immediately after the battle, in which they had been cut to pieces and driven in headlong flight through the gates of Dublin? Their chieftains lay where they had fallen and the ravens picked their bones. It was Irish hands that heaped these stones."

"Well, was that so strange?" persisted Ortali. "In old times the Irish heaped up stones before they went into battle, each man putting a stone in place; after the battle the living removed their stones, leaving in that manner a simple tally of the slain for any who wished to count the remaining stones."

I shook my head.

"That was in more ancient times; not in the battle of Clontarf. In the first place, there were more than twenty thousand warriors, and four thousand fell here; this cairn is not large enough to have served as a tally of the men killed in battle. And it is too symmetrically built. Hardly a stone has fallen away in all these centuries. No, it was reared to cover something."

"Nordic superstitions!" the man sneered again.

"Aye, superstitions if you will!" Fired by his scorn, I exclaimed so savagely that he involuntarily stepped back; his hand slipping inside his coat. "We of North Europe had gods and demons before which the pallid mythologies of the South fade to childishness. At a time when your ancestors were lolling on silken cushions among the crumbling marble pillars of a decaying civilization, my ancestors were building their own civilization in hardships and gigantic battles against foes human and inhuman.

"Here on this very plain the Dark Ages came to an end and the light of a new era dawned on the world of hate and anarchy. Here, as even you know, in the year 2014, Brian Boru and his Dalcassian ax wielders broke the power of the heathen Norsemen forever--those grim anarchistic plunderers who had held back the progress of civilization for centuries."

"It was more than a struggle between Gael and Dane for the crown of Ireland. It--was a war between the White Christ and Odin, between Christian and pagan. It was the last stand of the heathen--of the people of the old, grim ways. For three hundred years the world had writhed beneath the heel of the Viking, and here on Clontarf that scourge was lifted forever.

"Then, as now, the importance of that battle was underestimated by polite Latin and Latinized writers and historians. The polished sophisticates of the civilized cities of the South were not interested in the battles of barbarians in the remote northwestern corner of the world--a place and peoples of whose very names they were only vaguely aware. They only knew that suddenly the terrible raids of the sea kings ceased to sweep along their coasts, and in another century the wild age of plunder and slaughter had almost been forgotten-all because a rude, half-civilized people who scantily covered their nakedness with wolf hides rose up against the conquerors."

"Here was Ragnarok, the fall of the Gods! Here in very truth Odin fell, for his religion was given its death blow. He was last of all the heathen gods to stand before Christianity, and it looked for a time as if his children might prevail and plunge the world back into darkness and savagery. Before Clontarf, legends say, he often appeared on earth to his worshippers, dimly seen in the smoke of the sacrifices naked human victims died screaming, or riding the wind-torn clouds, his wild locks flying in the gale, or, appareled like a Norse warrior, dealing thunderous blows in the forefront of nameless battles. But after Clontarf he was seen no more; his worshippers called on him in vain with wild chants and grim sacrifices. They lost faith in him, who had failed them in their wildest hour; his altars crumbled, his priests turned grey and died, and men turned--to his conqueror, the White Christ. The reign of blood and iron was forgotten; the age of the red-handed sea kings passed. The rising sun, slowly, dimly, lighted the night of the Dark Ages, and men forgot Odin, who came no more on earth."

"Aye, laugh if you will! But who knows what shapes of horror have-had birth in the darkness, the cold gloom; and the whistling black gulfs of the North? In the southern lands the sun shines and flowers bloom; under the soft skies men laugh at demons. But in the North, who can say what elemental spirits of evil dwell in the fierce storms and the darkness? Well may it be that from such fiends of the night men evolved the worship of the grim ones, Odin and Thor, and their terrible kin."

Ortali was silent for an instant, as if taken aback by my vehemence; then he laughed. "Well said, my northern philosopher! We will, argue these questions another time. I could hardly expect a descendant of Nordic barbarians to escape some trace of the dreams and mysticism of his race. But you cannot expect me to be moved.. by your imaginings, either. I still believe that this cairn covers no grimmer secret than a Norse chief who fell in the battle-and really your ravings concerning Nordic devils have no bearing on the matter. Will you help me tear into this cairn?"

"No," I answered shortly.

"A few hours' work will suffice to lay bare whatever it may hide," he continued as if he had not heard. "By the way, speaking of superstitions, is there not some wild tale concerning holly connected with this heap?"

"An old legend says that all trees bearing holly were cut do-%in for a league in all directions, for some mysterious reason," I answered sullenly. "That's another mystery. Holly was an important part of Norse magic-making. The Four Masters tell of a Norseman-a white bearded ancient of wild aspect, and apparently a priest of Odin-who was slain by the natives while attempting to lay a branch of holly on the cairn, a year after the battle."

"Well," he laughed, "I have procured a sprig of holly--see?--and shall wear it in my lapel; perhaps it will protect me against your Nordic devils. I feel more certain than ever that the cairn covers a sea king-and they were always laid to rest with all their riches; golden cups and jewel-set sword hilts and silver corselets. I feel that this cairn holds wealth, wealth over which clumsy-footed Irish peasants have been stumbling for centuries, living in want and dying in hunger. Bah! We shall return here at midnight, when we may be fairly certain that we will not be interrupted--and you will aid me at the excavations."

The last sentence was rapped out in a tone that sent a red surge of blood-lust through my brain. Ortali turned and began examining the cairn as he spoke, and almost involuntarily my hand reached out stealthily and closed on a wicked bit of jagged stone that had become detached from one of the boulders. In that instant I was a potential murderer if ever one walked the earth. One blow, quick, silent and savage, and I would be free forever from a slavery bitter as my Celtic ancestors knew beneath the heels of the Vikings.

As if sensing my thoughts, Ortali wheeled to face me.. I quickly slipped the stone into my pocket, not knowing whether he noted the action. But he must have seen the red killing instinct burning in my eyes, for again he recoiled and again his hand sought the hidden revolver.

But he only said: "I've changed my mind. We will not uncover the cairn tonight. Tomorrow night, perhaps. We may be spied upon. Just now I am going back to the hotel."

I made no-reply, but turned my back upon him and stalked moodily away in the direction of the shore. He started up the slope of the headland beyond which lay the city, and when I turned to look at him, he was just crossing the ridge, etched, clearly against the hazy sky. If hate could kill, he would have dropped dead. I saw him in a red-tinged haze, and the pulses in my temples throbbed like hammers.

I turned back toward the shore, and stopped suddenly. Engrossed with my own dark thoughts, I had approachedwithin a few feet of a woman before seeing her. She was tall and strongly made, with a strong stern face, deeply lined and weather-worn as the hills. She was dressed in a manner strange to me, but I thought little of it, knowing the curious styles of clothing worn by certain backward types of our people.

"What would you be doing at the cairn?" she asked in a deep, powerfui voice. I looked at her in surprise; she spoke in Gaelic, which was not strange of itself, but the Gaelic she used I had supposed was extinct as a spoken language: it was the Gaelic of scholars, pure, and with adistinctly archaic flavour. A woman from some secluded` hill country, I thought, where the people still spoke the unadulterated tongue of their ancestors.

"We were speculating on its mystery," I answered in the same tongue, hesitantly, however, for though skilled in the more modern form taught in the schools, to match her use of the language was a strain on my knowledge of it. She shook her head slowly." I like not the dark mart who was with you," she said sombrely. "Who are you?"

"I'm an American, though born and raised here," I answered. "My name is James O'Brien."

A strange light gleamed in her cold eyes.

"O'Brien--You are of my clan. I was born an O'Brien. I married a man of the MacDonnals, but my heart was ever with the folk of my blood."

"You live hereabouts?" I queried, my mind on her unusual accent.

"Aye, I lived here upon a time," she answered, "but I have been far away for a long time. All is changed-changed. I would not have returned, but I was drawn back by a call you would not understand. Tell me, would you open the cairn?"

I started and gazed at her closely, deciding that she had somehow overheard our conversation.

"It is not mine to say," I answered bitterly. "Ortalimy companion--he will doubtless open it and I am constrained to aid him. Of my own will I would not molest it."

Her cold eyes bored into my soul.

"Fools rush blind to their doom," she said sombrely. "What does this man know of the mysteries of this ancient land? Deeds have been done here whereof the world re-echoed. Yonder, in the long ago, when Tomar's Wood rose dark and rustling against the plain of Contarf, and the Danish walls of Dublin loomed south of the river Liffey, the ravens fed on the slain and the setting sun lighted lakes of crimson. There King Brian, your ancestor and mine, broke the spears of the North. From all lands they came, and from the isles of the sea; they came in gleaming mail and their horned helmets cast long shadows across the land. Their dragon-prows thronged the waves and the sound of their oars was as the beat of a storm.

"On yonder plain the heroes fell like ripe wheat before the reaper. There fell Jarl Sigurd of the Orkneys, and Brodir of Man, last of the sea kings, and all their chiefs. There fell, too, Prince Murrough and his son, Turlogh, and many chieftains of the Gael, and King Brian Boru himself, Erin's mightiest monarch."

"True!" My imagination was always fired by the epic tales of the land of my birth. "Blood of mine was spilled here, and, though I have passed the best part of my life in a far land, there are ties of blood to bind my soul to this shore."

She nodded slowly, and from beneath her robes drew forth something that sparkled dully in the setting sun.

"Take this," she said. "As a token of blood tie, I give it to you. I feel the weird of strange and monstrous happenings but this will keep you safe from evil and the people of the night. Beyond reckoning of man, it is holy."

I took it, wonderingly. It was a crucifix of curiously, worked gold, set with tiny jewels. The workmanship wasextremely achaic and unmistakably Celtic. And vaguely within me stirred a memory of a long-lost relic described by forgotten monks in dim manuscripts.

"Great heavens!" I exclaimed. "This is--this must be--this can be nothing less than the lost crucifix of Saint Brandon the Blessed!"

"Aye." She inclined her grim head. "Saint Brandon's cross, fashioned by the hands of the holy man in long ago, before the Norse barbarians made Erin a red hell--in the days when a golden peace and holiness ruled the land."

"But, woman!" I exclaimed wildly. "I cannot accept this as a gift from you! You cannot know its value! Its intrinsic worth alone is equal to a fortune; as a relic it is priceless--"

"Enough!" Her deep voice struck me suddenly silent. "Have done with such talk, which is sacrilege. The cross of Saint Brandon is beyond price. It was never stained with gold; only as a free gift has it ever changed hands. I give it to you to shield you against the powers of evil. Say no more."

"But it has been lost for three hundred years!" I exclaimed. "How--I--here . . ."

"A holy man gav a it to me long ago," she answered. "I hid it in my bosom--long it lay in my bosom. But now I give it to you; I have come from a far country to give it to you, for there are monstrous happening's in the wind, and it is sword and shield against the people of the night. An ancient evil stirs in its prison, which blind bands of folly may break open; but stronger than my evil is the cross of Saint Brandon, which has gathered power and strength through the long, long ages since thatforgotten evil fell to the earth."

"But who are you?" I exclaimed.

"I am Meve MacDonnal," she answered.

Then, turning without a word, she strode away in the deepening twilight while I stood bewildered and watched her cross the headland and pass from sight, turning inland as she topped the ridge. Then I, too, shaking myself like a man waking from a dream, went slowly up the slope and across the headland. When I crossed the ridge it was as if I had passed out of one world into another: behind me lay the wilderness and desolation of a wierd medieval age; before me pulsed the lights and the roar of modern Dublin. Only one archaic touch was lent to the scene before me: some distance inland loomed the straggling and broken lines of an ancient graveyard, long deserted and grown up in weeds, barely discernible in the dusk. As I looked I saw a tall figure moving ghostily among the crumbling tombs, and I shook my head bewilderedly. Surely Meve MacDonnal was touched with madness, living in the past, like one seeking to stir to flame the ashes of dead yesterday. I set out toward where, in the near distance, began the straggling window--gleams that grew into the swarming ocean of lights that was Dublin.

Back at the suburban hotel where Ortali and I had our rooms, I did not speak to him of the cross the woman had given me. In that, at least, he should not share: I intended keeping it until she requested its return, which I felt sure she, would do. Now as I recalled her appearance, the strangeness of her costume returned to me, with one item which had impressed itself on my subconscious mind at the time, but which I had not consciously realized. Meve MacDonnal had been wearing sandals of a type not worn in Ireland for centuries. Well, it was perhaps natural that with her retrospective nature she should imitate the apparel of the past ages which seemed to claim all her thoughts.

I turned the cross reverently in my hands. There was no doubt that it was the very cross for which antiquarians had searched so long in vain, and at last in despair had denied the existence of. The priestly scholar, Michael O'Rourke, in a treatise written about 1690, described the relic at length, chronicled its history exhaustively, and maintained that it was last heard of in the possession of Bishop Liam O'Brien, who, dying in 1955, gave it into the keeping of a kinswoman; but who this woman was, it was never known, and O'Rourke maintained that she kept her possession of the cross a secret, and that it was laid away with her in her tomb.

At another time my elation at discovering the relic would have been extreme, but, at the time, my mind was too filled with hate and -smouldering fury. Replacing the cross in my pocket, I fell moodily to reviewing my connections with Ortali, connections which puzzled my friends, but which were simple enough.

Some years before I had been connected with a certain large university in a humble way. One of the professors with whom I worked-a man named Reynolds-was of intolerably overbearing disposition toward those whom he considered his inferiors. I was a poverty-ridden student striving for life in a system which makes the very existence of a scholar precarious. I bore Professor Reynolds' abuse as load as I could, but one day we clashed.

The reason does not matter; it was trivial enough in itself. Because I dared reply to his insults, Reynolds struck me and I knocked him senseless.

That very day he caused my dismissal from the university. Facing not only an abrupt termination of my work and studies, but actual starvation, I was reduced to desperation, and I went to Reynolds' study late that night intending to thrash him within an inch of his life. I found him alone in his study, but the moment I entered, he sprang up and rushed at me like a wild beast, with a dagger he used for a paperweight. I did not strike him; I did not even touch him. As I stepped aside to avoid his rush; a small rug slipped beneath his charging feet: He fell headlong, and, to my horror, in his fall the dagger in his hand was driven into his heart. He died instantly. I was at once aware of my position, I was known to have quarreled; and even exchanged blows with the man. I had every reason to hate him. If I were found in the study with the dead man, no jury in the world would believe that I had not murdered him. I hurriedly left by the way I had come, thinking that I had been unobserved. But Ortali, the dead man's secretary, had seen me. Returning from a dance, he had observed me entering the premises, and, following me, had seen the whole affair through the window. But this I did not know until later.

The body was found by the professor's housekeeper, and naturally there was a great stir. Suspicion pointed to me, but lack of evidence kept me from being indicted, and this same lack of evidence brought about a verdict of suicide. All this time Ortali had kept quiet. Now he came to me and disclosed what he knew. He knew, of course, that I had not killed Reynolds, but he could prove that I was in the study when the professor met his death, and I knew Ortali was capable of carrying out his threat of swearing that he had seen me murder Reynolds in cold blood. And thus began a systematic blackmail.

I venture to say that a stranger blackmail was never levied. I had no money then; Ortali was gambling on my future, for he was assured of my abilities. He advanced me money, and, by clever wire-pulling, got me an appointment in a large college. Then he sat back to reap the benefits of his scheming, and he reaped full fold of the seed he sowed. In my line I became eminently successful. I soon commanded an enormous salary in my regular work, and I received rich prizes and awards for researches of various difficult natures, and of these Ortali took the lion's share--in money at least. I seemed to have the Midas touch. Yet of the wine of my success I tasted only the dregs.

I scarcely had a cent to my name. The money that had flowed through my hands had gone to enrich my slaver, unknown to the world. A man of remarkable gifts, he, could have gone to the heights in any line, but for a queer streak in him, which, coupled with an inordinately avaricious nature, made him a parasite, a blood-sucking leech.

This trip to Dublin had been in the nature of a vacation for me. I was worn out with study and labor. But he had somehow heard of Grimmin's Cairn, as it was called, and, like a vulture that scents dead flesh, he conceived himself on the track of hidden gold. A golden wine cup would have been, to him, sufficient reward for the labour of tearing into the pile, and reason enough for desecrating or even destroying the ancient landmark. He was a swine whose only god was gold.

Well, I thought grimly, as I disrobed the bed, all things end, both good and bad. Such a life as I had lived was unbearable. Ortali had dangled the gallows before my eyes until it had lost its terrors. I had staggered beneath the load I carried because of my love for my work. But all human endurance has its limits. My hands turned to iron as I thought of Ortali, working beside me at midnight at the lonely cairn. One stroke, with such a stone as I had caught up that day, and my agony would be ended. That life and hopes and career and ambition would be ended as well, could not be helped. Ah, what a sorry, sorry end to all my high dreams! When a rope and the long drop through the black trap should cut short an honorable career and a useful life! And all because of a human vampire who feared his rotten lust on my soul, and drove me to murder and ruin.

But I knew my fate was written in the iron books of doom. Sooner or later I would turn on Ortali and kill him, be the consequences what they might. And I reached the end of my road. Continual torture had rendered me, I believe, partly insane. I knew that at Grimmin's Cairn, when we toiled at midnight, Ortali's life would end beneath my hands, and my own life be cast away.

Something fell out of my pocket and I picked it up. It was the piece of sharp stone I had caught up off the cairn. Looking at it moodily, I wondered what strange hands had touched it in old times, and what grim secret it helped to hide on the bare headland of Grimmin. I switched out the light and lay in the darkness, the stone still in my hand, forgotten, occupied with my own dark broodings. And I glided gradually into deep slumber.

At first I was aware that I was dreaming, as people often are. All was dim and vague, and connected in some strange way, I realized, with the bit of stone still grasped in my sleeping hand. Gigantic, chaotic scenes and landscapes and events shifted before me, like clouds that rolled and tumbled before a gale. Slowly these settled and crystallized into one distinct landscape, familiar and yet wildly strange. I saw a broad bare plain, fringed by the grey sea on one side, and a dark, rustling forest on the other; this plain was cut by a winding river, and beyond this river I saw a city--such a city as my waking eyes had never seen: bare, stark, massive, with the grim architecture of an earlier, wilder age. On the plain I saw, as in a mist, a mighty battle. Serried ranks rolled backward and forward, steel flashed like a sunlit sea, and men fell like ripe wheat beneath the blades. I saw men in wolfskins, wild and shock-headed, wielding dripping axes, and tall men in horned helmets, and glittering mail, whose eyes were cold and blue as the sea. And I saw myself.

Yes, in my dream I saw and recognized, in a semidetached way, myself. I was tall and rangily powerful; I was shockheaded and naked but for a wolf-hide girt about my loins. I ran among the ranks yelling and smiting with a red ax, and blood ran down my flanks from wounds I scarcely felt. My eyes were cold blue and my shaggy hair and beard were red.

Now for an instant I was cognizant of my dual personality, aware that I was at once the wild man who ran and smote with the gory ax, and the man who slumbered and dreamed across the centuries. But this sensation quickly faded. I was no longer aware of any personality other than that of the barbarian who ran and smote. James O'Brien had no existence; I was Red Cumal, kern of Brian Boru, and my ax was dripping with the blood of my foes.

The roar of conflict was dying away, though here and there struggling clumps of warriors still dotted the plain. Down along the river, half-naked tribesmen, waist-deep in reddening water, tore and slashed with helmeted warriors whose mail could not save them from the stroke of the Dalcassian ax. Across the river a bloody, disorderly horde was staggering through the gates of Dublin.

The sun was sinking low toward the horizon. All day I had fought beside the chiefs. I had seen Jarl Sigurd fall beneath Prince Murrough's sword. I had seen Murrough himself die in the moment of victory, by the hand of a grim mailed giant whose name none knew. I had seen, in the flight of the enemy, Brodir and King Brian fall together at the door of the great king's tent.

Aye, it had been a feasting of ravens, a red flood of slaughter, and I knew that no more would the dragonprowed fleets sweep from the blue North with torch and destruction. Far and wide the Vikings lay in their glittering mail, as the ripe wheat lies after the reaping. Among them lay thousands of bodies clad in the wolf hides of the tribes, but the dead of the Northern people far outnumbered the dead of Erin. I was weary and sick of the stench of raw blood. I had glutted my soul with slaughter; now I sought plunder. And I found it--on the corpse of a richly-clad Norse chief which lay close to the seashore. I tore off the silver-scaled corselet, the horned helmet. They fitted as if made for me, and I swaggered among the dead, calling on my wild comrades to admire my appearance, though the harness felt strange to me, for the Gaels scorned armour and fought half-naked.

In my search for loot I had wandered far out on the plain, away from the river, but still the mail-clad bodies lay thickly strewn, for the bursting of the ranks had scattered fugitives and pursuers all over the countryside, from the dark waving Wood of Tomar, to the river and the seashore. And on the seaward slope of Drumna's headland, out of sight of the city and the plain of Clontarf, I came suddenly upon a dying warrior. He was tall and massive, clad in grey mail. He lay partly in the folds of a great dark cloak, and his sword lay broken near his mighty right hand. His horned helmet had fallen from his head and his elf-locks blew in the wind that swept out of the west.

Where one eye should have been was an empty socket, arid the other eye glittered cold and grim as the North Sea, though it was glazing with approach of death. Blood oozed from a rent in his corselet. I approached him warily, a strange cold fear, that I could not understand, gripping me. Ax ready to dash out his brains, I bent over him, and recognized him as the chief who had slain Prince Murrough, and who had mown down the warriors of the Gael like a harvest.. Wherever he had fought, the Norsemen had prevailed, but in all other parts of the field, the Gaels had been irresistible.

And now he spoke to me in Norse and I understood, for had I not toiled as slave among the sea people for long bitter years?

"The Christians have overcome," he gasped in a voice whose timbre, though low-pitched, sent a curious shiver of fear through me; there was in it an undertone as of icy waves sweeping along a Northern shore, as of freezing winds whispering among the pine trees. "Doom and shadows stalk on Asgaard and hero has fallen Ragnarok. I could not be in all parts of the field at once, and now I am wounded unto death. A spear-a spear with a cross carved in the blade; no other weapon could wound me."

I realized that the chief, seeing mistily my red beard and the Norse armour I wore, supposed me to be one of his own race. But crawling horror surged darkly in the depths of my soul.

"White Christ, thou hast not yet conquered," he muttered deliriously. "Lift me up, man, and let me speak to you."

Now for some reason I complied, and, as I lifted him to a sitting posture, I shuddered and my flesh crawled at the feel of him, for his flesh was like ivory--smoother and harder than is natural for human flesh, and colder than even a dying man should be.

"I die as men die;" he muttered. "Fool, to assume the attributes of mankind, even though it was to aid the people who deify me. The gods are immortal, but flesh can perish, even when it clothes a god. Haste and bring a sprig of the magic plant-even holly-and lay it on my bosom. Aye, though it be no larger than a dagger point, it will free me from this fleshy prison I put on when I came to war with men with their own weapons. And I will shake off this flesh and stalk once more among the thundering clouds. Woe, then, to all men who bend not the knee to me! Haste; I will await your coming."

His lion-like head fell back, and feeling shudderingly under his corselet, I could distinguish no heartbeat. He was dead, as men die, but I knew that locked in that semblance of a human body, there but slumbered the spirit of a fiend of the frost and darkness.

Aye, I knew him: Odin, the Grey Man, the One-eyed, the god of the North who had taken the form of a warrior to fight for his people. Assuming the form of a human, he was subject to many of the limitations of humanity. All men knew this of the gods, who often walked the earth in the guise of men. Odin, clothed in human semblance, could he wounded by certain weapons, and even slain, but a touch of the mysterious holly, would rouse him in grisly resurrection. This task he had set me, not knowing me for an enemy; in human form he could only use human faculties, and these had been impaired by onstriding death.

My hair stood up and my flesh crawled. I tore from my body the Norse armour, and fought a wild panic that prompted me to run blind and screaming with terror across-the plain. Nauseated with fear, I gathered boulders and heaped them for a rude couch, and on it, shaking with horror, I lifted the body of the Norse god. And as the sun set and the stars came silently out, I was working with fierce energy, piling huge rocks above the corpse. Other tribesmen came up and I told them of what I was sealing up--I hoped forever. And they, shivering with horror, fell to aiding me. No sprig of magic holly should be laid on Odin's terrible bosom. Beneath these rude stones the Northern demon should slumber until the thunder of Judgment Day, forgotten by the world which had once cried out beneath his iron heel. Yet not wholly forgotten, for, as we laboured, one of my comrades said: "This shall be no longer Drumna's Headland, but the Headland of the Grey Man."

That phrase established a connection between my dream-self and my sleeping-self. I started up from sleep exclaiming: "Grey Man's Headland!"

I looked about dazedly, the furnishings of the room, faintly lighted by the starlight in the windows, seeming strange and unfamiliar until I slowly oriented myself with time and space.

"Grey Man's Headland," I repeated, "Grey Man-Greymin-Grimmin-Grimmin's Headland! Great God, the thing under the cairn!"

Shaken, I sprang up, and realized that I still gripped the piece of stone from the cairn. It is well known that inanimate objects retain psychic associations. A round stone from the plain of Jericho has been placed in the land of a hypnotized medium, and she has at once reconstructed in her mind the battle and siege of the city, and the shattering fall of the walls. I did not doubt that this bit of stone had acted as a magnet to drag my modern mind through the mists of the centuries into a life I had known before.

I was more shaken than I can describe, for the whole fantastic affair fitted in too well with certain formless vague sensations concerning the cairn which had already lingered at the back of my mind, to be dismissed as an unusually vivid dream. I felt the need of a glass of wine, and remembered that Ortali always had wine in his room. I hurriedly donned my clothes, opened my door, crossed the corridor and was about to, knock at Ortali's door, when I noticed that it was partly open, as if someone had neglected to close it carefully. I entered, switching on a light. The room was empty.

I realized what had occurred. Ortali mistrusted me; he feared to risk himself alone with me in a lonely spot at midnight. He had postponed the visit to the cairn merely to trick me, to give himself a chance to slip away alone.

My hatred for Ortali was for the moment completely submerged by a wild panic of horror at the thought of what the opening of the cairn might result in. For I did not doubt the authenticity of my dream. It was no dream; it was a fragmentary bit of memory, in which I had relived that other life of mine. Grey Man's Headland--Grimmin's Headland, and under those rough stones that grisly corpse in its semblance of humanity. I could not hope that, imbued with the imperishable essence of an elemental spirit, that corpse had crumbled to dust in the ages.

Of my race out of the city and across those semidesolate reaches, I remember little. The night was a cloak of horror through which peered red stars like the gloating eyes of uncanny beasts, and my footfalls echoed hollowly so that repeatedly I thought some monster loped at my heels.

The straggling lights fell away behind me and I entered the region of mystery and horror. No wonder that progress had passed to the right and to the left of this spot, leaving it untouched, a blind back-eddy given over to goblin-dreams and nightmare memories. Well that so few suspected its very existence.

Dimly I saw the headland, but fear gripped me and held me aloof. I had a. vague, incoherent idea of finding the ancient woman; Meve MacDonnal. She was grown old in the mysteries and traditions of the mysterious land. She could aid me, if indeed the blind fool Ortali loosed on the world the forgotten demon men once worshipped in the North.

A figure loomed suddenly in the starlight and I caromed against him, almost upsetting him. A stammering voice in a thick brogue protested with the petulance of intoxication. It was a burly longshoreman returning to his: cottage, no doubt, from some late revel in a tavern. I seized him and shook him, my eyes glaring wildly in the starlight.

"I am looking for Meve MacDonnal! Do you know her? Tell me, you fool! Do you know old Meve MacDonnal?"

It was as if my words sobered him as suddenly as a dash of icy water in his face. In the starlight I saw his face glimmer whitely and a catch of fear was at his throat. He sought to cross himself with an uncertain hand.

"Meve MacDonnal! Are ye mad? What would ye be doin' with her?"

"Tell me!" I shrieked, shaking him savagely. "Where is Meve MacDonnal--"

"There!" he gasped, pointing with a shaking hand, where dimly in the night something loomed against the shadows. "In the name of the holy saints, begone, by ye madman or devil, and rave an honest man alone! There, there ye'll find Meve MacDonnal--where they laid her, full three hundred years ago!"

Half heeding his words, I flung him aside with a fierce exclamation, and, as I raced across the weed-grown plain, I heard the sound of his lumbering flight. Half blind with panic, I came to the low structure the man had pointed out. And floundering deep in weeds, my feet sinking into the musty mould, I realized with a shock that I was in the ancient graveyard on the inland side of Grimmin's Headland, into which I had seen Meve MacDonnal disappear the evening before. I was close by the door of the largest tomb, and with an eerie premonition I leaned close, seeking to make out the deeply carven inscription. And partly by the dim light of the stars and partly by the touch of my tracing fingers, I made out the words and figures, in the half-forgotten Gaelic of three centuries ago: Meve MacDonnal-1556-1640.

With a cry of horror, I recoiled and, snatching out the crucifix she had given me, made to hurl it into the darkness--but it was as if an invisible hand caught my wrist. Madness and insanity--but I could not doubt: Meve MacDonnal had come to me from the tomb wherein she had rested for three hundred years to give me, the ancient, ancient relic entrusted to her so long ago by her priestly kin. The memory of her words came to me, and the memory of Ortali and the Grey Man. From a lesser horror I turned squarely to a greater, and ran swiftly toward the headland which loomed dimly against the stars toward the sea.

As I crossed the ridge I saw, in the starlight, the cairn, and the figure that toiled gnome-like above it. Ortali, with his accustomed, almost superhuman energy, had dislodged many of the boulders; and as I approached, shaking with horrified anticipation, I saw him tear aside the last layer, and I heard his savage cry of triumph that froze me in my trace some yards behind him, looking down from the slope. An unholy radiance rose from the cairn, and I saw, in the north, the aurora came up suddenly with terrible beauty, paling the starlight. All about the cairn pulsed a weird light, turning the rough stones to a cold shimmering silver, and in this glow I saw Ortali, all heedless, cast aside his pick and lean gloatingly over the aperture he had made-and I saw there the helmeted head, reposing on the couch of stones where I, Red Cumal, had placed it so long ago. I saw the inhuman terror and beauty of that awesome carven face, in which was neither human weakness, pity nor mercy. I saw the soul-freezing glitter of the one eye, which stared wide open in a fearful semblance of life. All up and down the tall mailed figure shimmered and sparkled cold darts arid gleams of icy light; like the northern lights that blazed in the shuddering skies. Aye, the Grey Man lay as I had left him more than nine hundred years before, without trace of rust or rot or decay.

And now as Ortali leaned forward to examine his find, a gasping cry broke from his lips--for the sprig of holly, worn in his lapel in defiance of "Nordic superstition," slipped from its place, and in the weird glow I plainly saw it fall upon the mighty mailed breast of the figure, where it blazed suddenly with a brightness too dazzling for human eyes. My cry was echoed by Ortali. The figure moved; the mighty limbs flexed, tumbling the shining stones aside. A new gleam lighted the terrible eye, and a tide of life flooded and animated the carven features.

Out of the cairn he rose, and the northern lights played terribly about him. And the Grey Man changed ad altered in horrific transmutation. The human features faded like a fading mask; the armour fell from his body and crumbled to dust as it fell; and the fiendish spirit ice and fof rost and darkness that the sons of the North deified as Odin, stood nakedly and terribly, in the stars. About his grisly head played lightnings and the shuddering gleams of the aurora. His towering anthropomorphic form was dark as shadow and gleaming as ice; his horrible crest reared colossally against the vaulting arch of the sky.

Ortali cowered, screaming wordlessly, as the taloned, malformed hands reached for him. In the shadowy, indescribable features of the Thing, there was no tinge of gratitude toward the man who had released it--only a demoniac gloating and a demoniac hate for all the sons of men. I saw the shadowy arms shoot out and strike. I heard Ortali scream once--a single, unbearable screech that broke short at the shrillest pitch. A single instant a blinding blue glare burst about him, lighting his convulsed features and his upward-rolling eyes; then his body was dashed earthward as by an electric shock, so savagely that I distinctly heard the splintering of his bones. But Ortali was dead before he touched the ground--dead, shrivelled and blackened, exactly like a man blasted by a thunderbolt, to which cause, indeed, men later ascribed his death.

The slavering monster that had slain him lumbered now toward me, shadowy, tentacle-like arms outspread, the pale starlight making a luminous pool of his great inhuman eye, his frightful talons dripping with I know not what elemental forces to blast the bodies and souls of men.

But I flinched not, and in that instant I feared him not, neither the horror of his countenance nor the threat of his thunderbolt dooms. For in a blinding white flame had come to me the realization of why Meve MacDonnal had come from her tomb to bring me the ancient cross which had lain in her bosom for three hundred years, gathering unto itself unseen forces of good and light, which war forever against the shapes of lunacy and shadow.

As I plucked from my garments the ancient cross, I felt the play of gigantic unseen forces in the air about me. I was but a pawn in the game--merely the hand that held the relic of holiness, that was the symbol of the powers opposed forever against the fiends of darkness. As I held it high, from it shot a single shaft of white light, unbearably pure, unbearably white, as if all the awesome forces of Light were combined in the symbol and loosed in one concentrated arrow of wrath against the monster of darkness. And with a hideous shriek the demon reeled back, shrivelling before my eyes. Then, with a great rush of vulture-like wings, he soared into the stars, dwindling dwindling among the play of the flaming fires and the lights of the haunted skies, fleeing back into the dark limbo which gave him birth, God only knows how many grisly eons ago.

THE END

Contents

THE FEARSOME TOUCH OF DEATH

By Robert E. Howard

As long as midnight cloaks the earth
With shadows grim and stark,
God save us from the Judas kiss
Of a dead man in the dark.

Old Adam Farrel lay dead in the house wherein he had lived alone for the last twenty years. A silent, churlish recluse, in his life he had known no friends, and only two men had watched his passing.

Dr. Stein rose and glanced out the window into the gathering dusk.

"You think you can spend the night here, then?" he asked his companion.

This man, Falred by name, assented.

"Yes, certainly. I guess it's up to me."

"Rather a useless and primitive custom, sitting up with the dead," commented the doctor, preparing to depart, "but I suppose in common decency we will have to bow to precedence. Maybe I can find someone who'll come over here and help you with your vigil."

Falred shrugged his shoulders. "I doubt it. Farrel wasn't liked--wasn't known by many people. I scarcely knew him myself, but I don't mind sitting up with the corpse."

Dr. Stein was removing his rubber gloves and Falred watched the process with an interest that almost amounted to fascination. A slight, involuntary shudder shook him at the memory of touching these gloves--slick, cold, clammy things, like the touch of death.

"You may get lonely tonight, if I don't find anyone," the doctor remarked as he opened the door. "Not superstitious, are you?"

Falred laughed. "Scarcely. To tell the truth, from what I hear of Farrel's disposition, I'd rather be watching his corpse than have been his guest in life."

The door closed and Falred took up his vigil. He seated himself in the only chair the room boasted, glanced casually at the formless, sheeted bulk on the bed opposite him, and began to read by the light of the dim lamp which stood on the rough table.

Outside, the darkness gathered swiftly, and finally Falred laid down his magazine to rest his eyes. He looked again at the shape which had, in life, been the form of Adam Farrel, wondering what quirk in the human nature made the sight of a corpse not so unpleasant, but such an object of fear to man. Unthinking ignorance, seeing in dead things a reminder of death to come, he decided lazily, and began idly contemplating as to what life had held for this grim and crabbed old man, who had neither relatives nor friends, and who had seldom left the house wherein he had died. The usual tales of miser-hoarded wealth had accumulated, but Falred felt so little interest in the whole matter that it was not even necessary for him to overcome any temptation to prey about the house for possible hidden treasure.

He returned to his reading with a shrug. The task was more boresome than he had thought for. After a while he was aware that every time he looked up from his magazine and his eyes fell upon the bed with its grim occupant, he started involuntarily as if he had, for an instant, forgotten the presence of the dead man and was unpleasantly reminded of the fact. The start was slight and instinctive, but he felt almost angered at himself. He realized, for the first time, the utter and deadening silence which enwrapped the house--a silence apparently shared by the night, for no sound came through the window. Adam Farrel lived as far apart from his neighbors as possible, and there was no other house within hearing distance.

Falred shook himself as if to rid his mind of unsavory speculations, and went back to his reading. A sudden vagrant gust of wind whipped through the window, in which the light in the lamp flickered and went out suddenly. Falred, cursing softly, groped in the darkness for matches, burning his fingers on the lamp chimney. He struck a match, relighted the lamp, and glancing over at the bed, got a horrible mental jolt. Adam Farrel's face stared blindly at him, the dead eyes wide and blank, framed in the gnarled gray features. Even as Falred instinctively shuddered, his reason explained the apparent phenomenon: the sheet that covered the corpse had been carelessly thrown across the face and the sudden puff of wind had disarranged and flung it aside.

Yet there was something grisly about the thing, something fearsomely suggestive--as if, in the cloaking dark, a dead hand had flung aside the sheet, just as if the corpse were about to rise....

Falred, an imaginative man, shrugged his shoulders at these ghastly thoughts and crossed the room to replace the sheet. The dead eyes seemed to stare malevolently, with an evilness that transcended the dead man's churlishness in life. The workings of a vivid imagination, Falred knew, and he re-covered the gray face, shrinking as his hand chanced to touch the cold flesh--slick and clammy, the touch of death. He shuddered with the natural revulsion of the living for the dead, and went back to his chair and magazine.

At last, growing sleepy, he lay down upon a couch which, by some strange whim of the original owner, formed part of the room's scant furnishings, and composed himself for slumber. He decided to leave the light burning, telling himself that it was in accordance with the usual custom of leaving lights burning for the dead; for he was not willing to admit to himself that already he was conscious of a dislike for lying in the darkness with the corpse. He dozed, awoke with a start and looked at the sheeted form of the bed. Silence reigned over the house, and outside it was very dark.

The hour was approaching midnight, with its accompanying eerie domination over the human mind. Falred glanced again at the bed where the body lay and found the sight of the sheeted object most repellent. A fantastic idea had birth in his mind, and grew, that beneath the sheet, the mere lifeless body had become a strange, monstrous thing, a hideous, conscious being, that watched him with eyes which burned through the fabric of the cloth. This thought--a mere fantasy, of course--he explained to himself by the legends of vampires, undead ghosts and such like--the fearsome attributes with which the living have cloaked the dead for countless ages, since primitive man first recognized in death something horrid and apart from life. Man feared death, thought Falred, and some of this fear of death took hold on the dead so that they, too, were feared. And the sight of the dead engendered grisly thoughts, gave rise to dim fears of hereditary memory, lurking back in the dark corners of the brain.

At any rate, that silent, hidden thing was getting on his nerves. He thought of uncovering the face, on the principle that familiarity breeds contempt. The sight of the features, calm and still in death, would banish, he thought, all such wild conjectures as were haunting him in spite of himself. But the thought of those dead eyes staring in the lamplight was intolerable; so at last he blew out the light and lay down. This fear had been stealing upon him so insidiously and gradually that he had not been aware of its growth.

With the extinguishing of the light, however, and the blotting out of the sight of the corpse, things assumed their true character and proportions, and Falred fell asleep almost instantly, on his lips a faint smile for his previous folly.

He awakened suddenly. How long he had been asleep he did not know. He sat up, his pulse pounding frantically, the cold sweat beading his forehead. He knew instantly where he was, remembered the other occupant of the room. But what had awakened him? A dream--yes, now he remembered--a hideous dream in which the dead man had risen from the bed and stalked stiffly across the room with eyes of fire and a horrid leer frozen on his gray lips. Falred had seemed to lie motionless, helpless; then as the corpses reached a gnarled and horrible hand, he had awakened.

He strove to pierce the gloom, but the room was all blackness and all without was so dark that no gleam of light came through the window. He reached a shaking hand toward the lamp, then recoiled as if from a hidden serpent. Sitting here in the dark with a fiendish corpse was bad enough, but he dared not light the lamp, for fear that his reason would be snuffed out like a candle at what he might see. Horror, stark and unreasoning, had full possession of his soul; he no longer questioned the instinctive fears that rose in him. All those legends he had heard came back to him and brought a belief in them. Death was a hideous thing, a brain-shattering horror, imbuing lifeless men with a horrid malevolence. Adam Farrel in his life had been simply a churlish but harmless man; now he was a terror, a monster, a fiend lurking in the shadows of fear, ready to leap on mankind with talons dipped deep in death and insanity.

Falred sat there, his blood freezing, and fought out his silent battle. Faint glimmerings of reason had begun to touch his fright when a soft, stealthy sound again froze him. He did not recognize it as the whisper of the night wind across the windowsill. His frenzied fancy knew it only as the tread of death and horror. He sprang from the couch, then stood undecided. Escape was in his mind but he was too dazed to even try to formulate a plan of escape. Even his sense of direction was gone. Fear had so stultified his mind that he was not able to think consciously. The blackness spread in long waves about him and its darkness and void entered into his brain. His motions, such as they were, were instinctive. He seemed shackled with mighty chains and his limbs responded sluggishly, like an imbecile's.

A terrible horror grew up in him and reared its grisly shape, that the dead man was behind him, was stealing upon him from the rear. He no longer thought of lighting the lamp; he no longer thought of anything. Fear filled his whole being; there was room for nothing else.

He backed slowly away in the darkness, hands behind him, instinctively feeling the way. With a terrific effort he partly shook the clinging mists of horror from him, and, the cold sweat clammy upon his body, strove to orient himself. He could see nothing, but the bed was across the room, in front of him. He was backing away from it. There was where the dead man was lying, according to all rules of nature; if the thing were, as he felt, behind him, then the old tales were true: death did implant in lifeless bodies an unearthly animation, and dead men did roam the shadows to work their ghastly and evil will upon the sons of men. Then--great God!--what was man but a wailing infant, lost in the night and beset by frightful things from the black abysses and the terrible unknown voids of space and time? These conclusions he did not reach by any reasoning process; they leaped full-grown into his terror-dazed brain. He worked his way slowly backward, groping, clinging to the thought that the dead man must be in front of him.

Then his back-flung hands encountered something--something slick, cold and clammy--like the touch of death. A scream shook the echoes, followed by the crash of a falling body.

The next morning they who came to the house of death found two corpses in the room. Adam Farrel's sheeted body lay motionless upon the bed, and across the room lay the body of Falred, beneath the shelf where Dr. Stein had absent-mindedly left his gloves--rubber gloves, slick and clammy to the touch of a hand groping in the dark--a hand of one fleeing his own fear--rubber gloves, slick and clammy and cold, like the touch of death.

THE END

Contents

THE HAUNTER OF THE RING

By Robert E. Howard

As I entered John Kirowan's study I was too much engrossed in my own thoughts to notice, at first, the haggard appearance of his visitor, a big, handsome young fellow well known to me.

"Hello, Kirowan," I greeted. "Hello, Gordon. Haven't seen you for quite a while. How's Evelyn?" And before he could answer, still on the crest of the enthusiasm which had brought me there, I exclaimed: "Look here, you fellows, I've got something that will make you stare! I got it from that robber Ahmed Mektub, and I paid high for it, but it's worth it. Look!" From under my coat I drew the jewel-hilted Afghan dagger which had fascinated me as a collector of rare weapons.

Kirowan, familiar with my passion, showed only polite interest, but the effect on Gordon was shocking.

With a strangled cry he sprang up and backward, knocking the chair clattering to the floor. Fists clenched and countenance livid he faced me, crying: "Keep back! Get away from me, or-"

I was frozen in my tracks.

"What in the-" I began bewilderedly, when Gordon, with another amazing change of attitude, dropped into a chair and sank his head in his hands. I saw his heavy shoulders quiver. I stared helplessly from him to Kirowan, who seemed equally dumbfounded.

"Is he drunk?" I asked.

Kirowan shook his head, and filling a brandy glass, offered it to the man. Gordon looked up with haggard eyes, seized the drink and gulped it down like a man half famished. Then he straightened up and looked at us shamefacedly.

"I'm sorry I went off my handle, O'Donnel" he said. "It was the unexpected shock of you drawing that knife."

"Well," I retorted, with some disgust, "I suppose you thought I was going to stab you with it!'

"Yes, I did!" Then, at the utterly blank expression on my face, he added: "Oh, I didn't actually think that; at least, I didn't reach that conclusion by any process of reasoning. It was just the blind primitive instinct of a hunted man, against whom anyone's hand may be turned."

His strange words and the despairing way he said them sent a queer shiver of nameless apprehension down my spine.

"What are you talking about?" I demanded uneasily. "Hunted? For what? You never committed a crime in your life."

"Not in this life, perhaps," he muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"What if retribution for a black crime committed in a previous life were hounding me?" he muttered.

"That's nonsense," I snorted.

"Oh, is it?" he exclaimed, stung. "Did you ever hear of my great-grandfather, Sir Richard Gordon of Argyle?"

"Sure; but what's that got to do with--"

"You've seen his portrait: doesn't it resemble me?"

"Well, yes," I admitted, "except that your expression is frank and wholesome whereas his is crafty and cruel."

"He murdered his wife," answered Gordon. "Suppose the theory of reincarnation were true? Why shouldn't a man suffer in one life for a crime committed in another?"

"You mean you think you are the reincarnation of your great-grandfather? Of all the fantastic--well, since he killed his wife, I suppose you'll be expecting Evelyn to murder you!" This last was delivered in searing sarcasm, as I thought of the sweet, gentle girl Gordon had married. His answer stunned me.

"My wife," he said slowly, "has tried to kill me three times in the past week."

There was no reply to that. I glanced helplessly at John Kirowan. He sat in his customary position, chin resting on his strong, slim hands; his white face was immobile, but his dark eyes gleamed with interest. In the silence I heard a clock ticking like a death-watch.

"Tell us the full story, Gordon," suggested Kirowan, and his calm, even voice was like a knife that cut a strangling, relieving the unreal tension.

"You know we've been married less than a year," Gordon began, plunging into the tale as though he were bursting for utterance; his words stumbled and tripped over one another. "All couples have spats, of course, but we've never had any real quarrels. Evelyn is the bestnatured girl in the world."

"The first thing out of the ordinary occurred about a week ago. We had driven up in the mountains, left the car, and were wandering around picking wild flowers. At last we came to a steep slope, some thirty feet in height, and Evelyn called my attention to the flowers which grew thickly at the foot. I was looking over the edge and wondering if I could climb down without tearing my clothes to ribbons, when I felt a violent shove from behind that toppled me over.

"If it had been a sheer cliff, I'd have broken my neck. As it was, I went tumbling down, rolling and sliding, and brought up at the bottom scratched and bruised, with my garments in rags. I looked up and saw Evelyn staring down, apparently frightened half out of her wits."

"Oh Jim!" she cried. "Are you hurt? How came you to fall?"

"It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her that there was such a thing as carrying a joke too far, but these words checked me. I decided that she must have stumbled against me unintentionally, and actually didn't know it was she who precipitated me down the slope."

"So I laughed it off, and went home. She made a great fuss over me, insisted on swabbing my scratches with iodine, and lectured me for my carelessness! I hadn't the heart to tell her it was her fault."

"But four days later, the next thing happened. I was walking along our driveway, when I saw her coming up it in the automobile. I stepped out on the grass to let her by, as there isn't any curb along the driveway. She was smiling as she approached me, and slowed down the car, as if to speak to me. Then, just before she reached me, a most horrible change came over

her expression. Without warning the car leaped at me like a living thing as she drove her foot down on the accelerator. Only a frantic leap backward saved me from being ground under the wheels. The car shot across the lawn and crashed into a tree. I ran to it and found Evelyn dazed and hysterical, but unhurt. She babbled of losing control of the machine."

"I carried her into the house and sent for Doctor Donnelly. He found nothing seriously wrong with her, and attributed her dazed condition to fright and shock. Within half an hour she regained her normal senses, but she's refused to touch the wheel since. Strange to say, she seemed less frightened on her own account than on mine. She seemed vaguely to know that she'd nearly run me down, and grew hysterical again when she spoke of it. Yet she seemed to take it for granted that I knew the machine had got out of her control. But I distinctly saw her wrench the wheel around, and I know she deliberately tried to hit me--why, God alone knows."

"Still I refused to let my mind follow the channel it was getting into. Evelyn had never given any evidence of any psychological weakness or 'nerves'; she's always been a level-headed girl, wholesome and natural. But I began to think she was subject to crazy impulses. Most of us have felt the impulse to leap from tall buildings. And sometimes a person feels a blind, childish and utterly reasonless urge to harm someone. We pick up a pistol, and the thought suddenly enters our mind how easy it would be to send our friend, who sits smiling and unaware, into eternity with a touch of the trigger. Of course we don't do it, but the impulse is there. So I thought perhaps some lack of mental discipline made Evelyn susceptible to these unguided impulses, and unable to control them."

"Nonsense," I broke in. "I've known her since she was a baby. If she has any such trait, she's developed it since she married you."

It was an unfortunate remark. Gordon caught it up with a despairing gleam in his eyes. "That's just it--since she married me! It's a curse--a black, ghastly curse, crawling like a serpent out of the past! I tell you, I was Richard Gordon and she--she was Lady Elizabeth, his murdered wife!" His voice sank to a blood-freezing whisper.

I shuddered; it is an awful thing to look upon the ruin of a keen clean brain, and such I was certain that I surveyed in James Gordon. Why or how, or by what grisly chance it had come about I could not say, but I was certain the man was mad.

"You spoke of three attempts." It was John Kirowan's voice again, calm and stable amid the gathering webs of horror and unreality.

"Look here!" Gordon lifted, his arm, drew back the sleeve and displayed a bandage, the cryptic significance of which was intolerable.

"I came into the bathroom this morning looking for my razor," he said. "I found Evelyn just on the point of using my best shaving implement for some feminine purposeto cut out a pattern, or something. Like many women she can't seem to realize the difference between a razor and a butcher-knife or a pair of shears.

"I was a bit irritated, and I said: 'Evelyn, how many times have I told you not to use my razors for such things? Bring it here; I'll give you my pocket-knife.'"

'I-I-I'm sorry, Jim,' she said. 'I didn't know it would hurt the razor. Here it is.'

"She was advancing, holding the open razor toward me. I reached for it--then something warned me. It was the same look in her eyes, just as I had seen it the day she nearly ran over me. That was all that saved my life, for I instinctively threw up my hand just as she slashed at my throat with all her power. The blade gashed my arm as you see, before I caught her wrist. For an instant she fought me like a wild thing; her slender body was taut as steel beneath my hands. Then she went limp and the look in her eyes was replaced by a strange dazed expression. The razor slipped out of her fingers."

"I let go of her and she stood swaying as if about to faint. I went to the lavatory-my wound was bleeding in a beastly fashion-and the next thing I heard her cry out, and she was hovering over me."

"Jim!" she cried. "How did you cut yourself so terribly?"

Gordon shook his head and sighed heavily. "I guess I was a bit out of my head. My self-control snapped.

'"Don't keep up this pretense, Evelyn,' I said. 'God knows what's got into you, but you know as well as I that you've tried to kill me three times in the past week.'

"She recoiled as if I'd struck her, catching at her breast and staring at me as if at a ghost. She didn't say a word-and just what I said I don't remember. But when I finished I left her standing there white and still as a marble statue. I got my arm bandaged at a drug store, and then came over here, not knowing what else to do.

"Kirowan-O'Donnel-it's damnable! Either my wife is subject to fits of insanity-" He choked on the word. "No, I can't believe it. Ordinarily her eyes are too clear and level-too utterly sane. But every time she has an opportunity to harm me, she seems to become a temporary maniac."

He beat his fists together in his impotence and agony.

"But it isn't insanity! I used to work in a psychopathic ward, and I've seen every form of mental unbalance. My wife is not insane!"

"Then what-" I began, but he turned haggard eyes on me.

"Only one alternative remains," he answered. "It is the old curse-from the days when I walked the earth with a heart as black as hell's darkest pits, and did evil in the sight of man and of God. She knows, in fleeting snatches of memory. People have seen before-have glimpsed forbidden things in momentary liftings of the veil, which bars life from life. She was Elizabeth Douglas, the illfated bride of Richard Gordon, whom he murdered in jealous frenzy, and the vengeance is hers. I shall die by her hands, as it was meant to be. And she-" he bowed his head in his hands.

"Just a moment." It was Kirowan again. "You have mentioned a strange look in your wife's eyes. What sort of a look? Was it of maniacal frenzy?"

Gordon shook his head. "It was an utter blankness. All the life and intelligence simply vanished, leaving her eyes dark wells of emptiness."

Kirowan nodded, and asked a seemingly irrelevant question. "Have you any enemies?"

"Not that I know of."

"You forget Joseph Roelocke," I said. "I can't imagine that elegant sophisticate going to the trouble of doing you actual harm, but I have an idea that if he could discomfort you without any physical effort on his part, he'd do it with a right good will."

Kirowan turned on me an eye that had suddenly become piercing.

"And who is this Joseph Roelocke?"

"A young exquisite who came into Evelyn's life and nearly rushed her off her feet for a while. But in the end she came back to her first love-Gordon here. Roelocke took it pretty hard. For all his suaveness there's a streak of violence and passion in the man that might have cropped out but for his infernal indolence and blase indifference."

"Oh, there's nothing to be said against Roelocke," interrupted Gordon impatiently. "He must know that Evelyn never really loved him. He merely fascinated her temporarily with his romantic Latin air."

"Not exactly Latin, Jim," I protested. "Roelocke does look foreign, but it isn't Latin. It's almost Oriental."

"Well, what has Roelocke to do with this matter?" Gordon snarled with the irascibility of frayed nerves. "He's been as friendly as a man could be since Evelyn and I were married. In fact, only a week ago he sent her a ring which he said was a peace-offering and a belated wedding gift; said that after all, her jilting him was a greater misfortune for her than it was for him-the conceited jackass!"

"A ring?" Kirowan had suddenly come to life; it was as if something hard and steely had been sounded in him. "What sort of a ring?"

"Oh, a fantastic thing--copper, made like a scaly snake coiled three times, with its tail in its mouth and yellow jewels for eyes. I gather he picked it up somewhere in Hungary."

"He has traveled a great deal in Hungary?"

Gordon looked surprized at this questioning but answered: "Why, apparently the man's traveled everywhere. I put him down as the pampered son of a millionaire. He never did any work, so far as I know."

"He's a great student," I put in. "I've been up to his apartment several times, and I never saw such a collection of books-"

Gordon leaped to his feet with an oath, "Are we all crazy?" he cried. "I came up here hoping to get some help--and you fellows fall to talking of Joseph Roelocke. I'll go to Doctor Donnelly-"

"Wait!" Kirowan stretched out a detaining hand. "If you don't mind, we'll go over to your house. I'd like to talk to your wife."

Gordon dumbly acquiesced. Harried and haunted by grisly forebodings, he knew not which way to turn, and welcomed anything that promised aid.

We drove over in his car, and scarcely a word was spoken on the way. Gordon was sunk in moody ruminations, and Kirowan had withdrawn himself into some strange aloof domain of thought beyond my ken. He sat like a statue, his dark vital eyes staring into space, not blankly, but as one who looks with understanding into some far realm.

Though I counted the man as my best friend, I knew but little of his past. He had come into my life as abruptly and unannounced as Joseph Roelocke had come into the life of Evelyn Ash. I had met him at the Wanderer's Club, which is composed of the drift of the world, travelers, eccentrics, and all manner of men whose paths lie outside the beaten tracks of life. I had been attracted to him, and intrigued by his strange powers and deep knowledge. I vaguely knew that he was the black sheep younger son of a titled Irish family, and that he had walked many strange ways. Gordon's mention of Hungary struck a chord in my memory; one phase of his life Kirowan had once let drop fragmentarily. I only knew that he had once suffered a bitter grief and a savage wrong, and that it had been in Hungary. But the nature of the episode I did not know.

At Gordon's house Evelyn met us calmly, showing inner agitation only by the over-restraint of her manner. I saw the beseeching look she stole at her husband. She was a slender, soft-spoken girl, whose dark eyes were always vibrant and alight with emotion. That child try to murder her adored husband? The idea was monstrous. Again I was convinced that James Gordon himself was deranged.

Following Kirowan's lead, we made a pretense of small talk, as if we had casually dropped in, but I felt that Evelyn was not deceived. Our conversation rang false and hollow, and presently Kirowan said: "Mrs. Gordon, that is a remarkable ring you are wearing. Do you mind if I look at it?"

"I'll have to give you my hand," she laughed. "I've been trying to get it off today, and it won't come off."

She held out her slim white hand for Kirowan's inspection, and his face was immobile as he looked at the metal snake that coiled about her slim finger. He did not touch it. I myself was aware of an unaccountable repulsion. There was something almost obscene about that dull copperish reptile wound about the girl's white finger.

"It's evil-looking, isn't it?" She involuntarily shivered. "At first I liked it, but now I can hardly bear to look at it. If I can get it off I intend to return it to Joseph--Mr. Roelocke."

Kirowan was about to make some reply, when the doorbell rang. Gordon jumped as if shot, and Evelyn rose quickly.

"I'll answer it, Jim-I know who it is."

She returned an instant later with two more mutual friends, those inseparable cronies, Doctor Donnelly, whose burly body, jovial manner and booming voice were combined with as keen a brain as any in the profession, and Bill Bain, elderly, lean, wiry, acidly witty. Both were old friends of the Ash family. Doctor Donnelly had ushered Evelyn into the world, and Bain was always Uncle Bill to her.

"Howdy, Jim! Howdy, Mr. Kirowan!" roared Donnelly. "Hey, O'Donnel, have you got any firearms with you? Last time your nearly blew my head off showing me an old flintlock pistol that wasn't supposed to be loaded!"

"Doctor Donnelly!"

We all turned. Evelyn was standing beside a wide table, holding it as if for support. Her face was white. Our badinage ceased instantly. A sudden tension was in the air.

"Doctor Donnelly," she repeated, holding her voice steady by an effort, "I sent for you and Uncle Bill-for the same reason for which I know Jim has brought Mr. Kirowan and Michael. There is a matter Jim and I can no longer deal with alone. There is something between ussomething black and ghastly and terrible."

"What are you talking about, girl?" All the levity was gone from Donnelly's great voice.

"My husband-" She choked, then went blindly on: "My husband has accused me of trying to murder him."

The silence that fell was broken by Bain's sudden and energetic rise. His eyes blazed and his fists quivered.

"You young pup!" he shouted at Gordon. "I'll knock the living daylights-"

"Sit down, Bill!" Donnelly's huge hand crushed his smaller companion back into his chair. "No use goin' off half cocked. Go ahead, honey."

"We need help. We can not carry this thing alone." A shadow crossed her comely face. "This morning Jim's arm was badly cut. He said I did it. I don't know. I was handing him the razor. Then I must have fainted. At least, everything faded away. When I came to myself he was washing his arm in the lavatory-and-and he accused me of trying to kill him."

"Why, the young fool!" barked the belligerent Bain. "Hasn't he sense enough to know that if you did cut him, it was an accident?"

"Shut up, won't you?" snorted Donnelly. "Honey, did you say you fainted? That isn't like you."

"I've been having fainting spells," she answered. "The first time was when we were in the mountains and Jim fell down a cliff. We were standing on the edge--then everything went black, and when my sight cleared, he was rolling down the slope." She shuddered at the recollection.

"Then when I lost control of the car and it crashed into the tree. You remember--Jim called you over."

Doctor Donnelly nodded his head ponderously.

"I don't remember you ever having fainting spells before."

"But Jim says I pushed him over the cliff!" she cried hysterically. "He says I tried to run him down in the car! He says I purposely slashed him with the razor!"

Doctor Donnelly turned perplexedly, toward the wretched Gordon.

"How about it, son?"

"God help me," Gordon burst out in agony; "it's true!"

"Why, you lying hound!" It was Bain who gave tongue, leaping again to his feet. "If you want a divorce, why don't you get it in a decent way, instead of resorting to these despicable tactics-"

"Damn you!" roared Gordon, lunging up, and losing control of himself completely. "If you say that I'll tear your jugular out!"

Evelyn screamed; Donnelly grabbed Bain ponderously and banged him back into his chair with no overly gentle touch, and Kirowan laid a hand lightly on Gordon's shoulder. The man seemed to crumple into himself. He sank back into his chair and held out his hands gropingly toward his wife.

"Evelyn," he said, his voice thick with laboring emotion, "you know I love you. I feel like a dog. But God help me, it's true. If we go on this way, I'll be a dead man, and you--"

"Don't say it!" she screamed. "I know you wouldn't lie to me, Jim. If you say I tried to kill you, I know I did. But I swear, Jim, I didn't do it consciously. Oh, I must be going mad! That's why my dreams have been so wild and terrifying lately-"

"Of what have you dreamed, Mrs. Gordon?" asked Kirowan gently.

She pressed her hands to her temples and stared dully at him, as if only half comprehending.

"A black thing," she muttered. "A horrible faceless black thing that mows and mumbles and paws over me with apish hands. I dream of it every night. And in the daytime I try to kill the only man I ever loved. I'm going mad! Maybe I'm already crazy and don't know it."

"Calm yourself, honey." To Doctor Donnelly, with all his science, it was only another case of feminine hysteria. His matter-of-fact voice seemed to soothe her, and she sighed and drew a weary hand through her damp locks.

"We'll talk this all over, and everything's goin' to be okay," he said, drawing a thick cigar from his vest pocket. "Gimme a match, honey."

She began mechanically to feel about the table, and just as mechanically Gordon said: "There are matches in the drawer, Evelyn."

She opened the drawer and began groping in it, when suddenly, as if struck by recollection and intuition, Cordon sprang up, white-faced, and shouted: "No, no! Don't open that drawer-don't--"

Even as he voiced that urgent cry, she stiffened, as if at the feel of something in the drawer. Her change of expression held us all frozen, even Kirowan. The vital intelligence vanished from her eyes like a blown-out flame, and into them came the look Gordon had described as blank. The term was descriptive. Her beautiful eyes were dark wells of emptiness, as if the soul had been withdrawn from behind them.

Her hand came out of the drawer holding a pistol, and she fired point-blank. Gordon reeled with a groan and went down, blood starting from his head. For a flashing instant she looked down stupidly at the smoking gun in her hand, like one suddenly waking from a nightmare. Then her wild scream of agony smote our ears.

"Oh God, I've killed him! Jim! Jim!"

She reached him before any of us, throwing herself on her knees and cradling his bloody head in her arms, while she sobbed in an unbearable passion of horror and anguish. The emptiness was gone from her eyes; they were alive and dilated with grief and terror.

I was making toward my prostrate friend with Donnelly and Bain, but Kirowan caught my arm. His face was no longer immobile; his eyes glittered with a controlled savagery.

"Leave him to them!" he snarled. "We are hunters, not healers! Lead me to the house of Joseph Roelocke!"

I did not question him. We drove there in Gordon's car.

I had the wheel, and something about the grim face of my companion caused me to hurl the machine recklessly through the traffic. I had the sensation of being part of a tragic drama which was hurtling with headlong speed toward a terrible climax.

I wrenched the car to a grinding halt at the curb before the building where Roelocke lived in a bizarre apartment high above the city. The very elevator that shot us skyward seemed imbued with something of Kirowan's driving urge for haste. I pointed out Roelocke's door, and he cast it open without knocking and shouldered his way in. I was close at his heels.

Roelocke, in a dressing-gown of Chinese silk worked with dragons, was lounging on a divan, puffing quickly at a cigarette. He sat up, overturning a wine-glass which stood with a half-filled bottle at his elbow.

Before Kirowan could speak, I burst out with our news. "James Gordon has been shot!"

He sprang to his feet. "Shot? When? When did she kill him?"

"She?" I glared in bewilderment. "How did you know-"

With a steely hand Kirowan thrust me aside, and as the men faced each other, I saw recognition flare up in Roelocke's face. They made a strong contrast: Kirowan, tall, pale with some white-hot passion; Roelocke, slim, darkly handsome, with the saracenic arch of his slim brows above his black eyes. I realized that whatever else occurred, it lay between those two men. They were not strangers; I could sense like a tangible thing the hate that lay between them.

"John Kirowan!" softly whispered Roelocke.

"You remember me, Yosef Vrolok!" Only an iron control kept Kirowan's voice steady. The other merely stared at him without speaking.

"Years ago," said Kirowan more deliberately, "when we delved in the dark mysteries together in Budapest, I saw whither you were drifting. I drew back; I would not descend to the foul depths of forbidden occultism and diabolism to which you sank. And because I would not, you despised me, and you robbed me of the only woman I ever loved; you turned her against me by means of your vile arts, and then you degraded and debauched her, sank her into your own foul slime. I had killed you with my hands then, Yosef Vrolok-vampire by nature as well as by name that you are-but your arts protected you from physical vengeance. But you have trapped yourself at last!"

Kirowan's voice rose in fierce exultation. All his cultured restraint had been swept away from him, leaving a primitive, elemental man, raging and gloating over a hated foe.

"You sought the destruction of James Gordon and his wife, because she unwittingly escaped your snare; you--"

Roelocke shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "You are mad. I have not seen the Gordons for weeks. Why blame me for their family troubles?"

Kirowan snarled. "Liar as always. What did you say just now when O'Donnel told you Gordon had been shot? 'When did she kill him?' You were expecting to hear that the girl had killed her husband. Your psychic powers had told you that a climax was close at hand. You were nervously awaiting news of the success of your devilish scheme.

"But I did not need a slip of your tongue to recognize your handiwork. I knew as soon as I saw the ring on Evelyn Gordon's finger; the ring she could not remove; the ancient and accursed ring of Thoth-amon, handed down by foul cults of sorcerers since the days of forgotten Stygia, I knew that ring was yours, and I knew by what ghastly rites you came to possess it. And I knew its power. Once she put it on her finger, in her innocence and ignorance, she was in your power. By your black magic you summoned the black elemental spirit, the haunter of the ring, out of the gulfs of Night and the ages. Here in your accursed chamber you performed unspeakable rituals to drive Evelyn Gordon's soul from her body, and to cause that body to be possessed by that godless sprite from outside the human universe.

"She was too clean and wholesome, her love for her husband too strong, for the fiend to gain complete and permanent possession of her body; only for brief instants could it drive her own spirit into the void and animate her form. But that was enough for your purpose. But you have brought ruin upon yourself by your vengeance!"

Kirowan's voice rose to a feline screech.

"What was the price demanded by the fiend you drew from the Pits? Ha, you blench! Yosef Vrolok is not the only man to have learned forbidden secrets! After I left Hungary, a broken man, I took up again the study of the black arts, to trap you, you cringing serpent! I explored the ruins of Zimbabwe, the lost mountains of inner Mongolia, and the forgotten jungle islands of the southern seas. I learned what sickened my soul so that I forswore occultism for everbut I learned of the black spirit that deals death by the hand of a beloved one, and is controlled by a master of magic.

"But, Yosef Vrolok, you are not an adept! You have not the power to control the fiend you have invoked. And you have sold your soul!"

The Hungarian tore at his collar as if it were a strangling noose. His face had changed, as if a mask had dropped away; he looked much older.

"You lie!" he panted. "I did not promise him my soul-"

"I do not lie!" Kirowan's shriek was shocking in its wild exultation. "I know the price a man must pay for calling forth the nameless shape that roams the gulfs of Darkness. Look! There in the corner behind you! A nameless, sightless thing is laughing-is mocking you! It has fulfilled its bargain, and it has come for you, Yosef Vrolok!"

"No! No!" shrieked Vrolok, tearing his limp collar away from his sweating throat. His composure had crumpled, and his demoralization was sickening to see. "I tell you it was not my soul--I promised it a soul, but not my soul--he must take the soul of the girl, or of James Gordon."

"Fool!" roared Kirowan. "Do you think he could take the souls of innocence? That he would not know they were beyond his reach? The girl and the youth he could kill; their souls were not his to take or yours to give. But your black soul is not beyond his reach, and he will have his wage. Look! He is materializing behind you! He is growing out of thin air!"

Was it the hypnosis inspired by Kirowan's burning words that caused me to shudder and grow cold, to feel an icy chill that was not of earth pervade the room? Was it a trick of light and shadow that seemed to produce the effect of a black anthropomorphic shadow on the wall behind the Hungarian? No, by heaven! It grew, it swelled-Vrolok had not turned. He stared at Kirowan with eyes starting from his head, hair standing stiffly on his scalp, sweat dripping from his livid face.

Kirowan's cry started shudders down my spine.

"Look behind you, fool! I see him! He has come! He is here! His grisly mouth gapes in awful laughter! His misshapen paws reach for you!"

And then at last Vrolok wheeled, with an awful shriek, throwing his arms above his head in a gesture of wild despair. And for one brain-shattering instant he was blotted out by a great black shadow--Kirowan grasped my arm and we fled from that accursed chamber, blind with horror.

The same paper which bore a brief item telling of James Gordon having suffered a slight scalp-wound by the accidental discharge of a pistol in his home, headlined the sudden death of Joseph Roelocke, wealthy and eccentric clubman, in his sumptuous apartments-apparently from heart-failure.

I read it at breakfast, while I drank cup after cup of black coffee, from a hand that was not too steady, even after the lapse of a night. Across the table from me Kirowan likewise seemed to lack appetite. He brooded, as if he roamed again through bygone years.

"Gordon's fantastic theory of reincarnation was wild enough," I said at last. "But the actual facts were still more incredible. Tell me, Kirowan, was that last scene the result of hypnosis? Was it the power of your words that made me seem to see a black horror grow out of the air and rip Yosef Vrolok's soul from his living body?"

He shook his head. "No human hypnotism would strike that black-hearted devil dead on the floor. No; there are beings outside the ken of common humanity, foul shapes of transcosmic evil. Such a one it was with which Vrolok dealt."

"But how could it claim his soul?" I persisted. "If indeed such an awful bargain had been struck, it had not fulfilled its part, for James Gordon was not dead, but merely knocked senseless."

"Vrolok did not know it," answered Kirowan. "He thought that Gordon was dead, and I convinced him that he himself had been trapped, and was doomed. In his demoralization he fell easy prey to the thing he called forth. It, of course, was always watching for a moment of weakness on his part. The powers of Darkness never deal fairly with human beings; he who traffics with them is always cheated in the end."

"It's a mad nightmare," I muttered. "But it seems to me, then, that you as much as anything else brought about Vrolok's death."

"It is gratifying to think so," Kirowan answered. "Evelyn Gordon is safe now; and it is a small repayment for what he did to another girl, years ago, and in a far country."

THE END

Contents

THE HYENA

By Robert E. Howard

From the time when I first saw Senecoza, the fetish-man, I distrusted him, and from vague distrust the idea eventually grew into hatred.

I was but newly come to the East Coast, new to African ways, somewhat inclined to follow my impulses, and possessed of a large amount of curiosity.

Because I came from Virginia, race instinct and prejudice were strong in me, and doubtless the feeling of inferiority which Senecoza constantly inspired in me had a great deal to do with my antipathy for him.

He was surprisingly tall, and leanly built. Six inches above six feet he stood, and so muscular was his spare frame that he weighed a good two hundred pounds. His weight seemed incredible when one looked at his lanky build, but he was all muscle--a lean, black giant. His features were not pure Negro. They more resembled Berber than Bantu, with the high, bulging forehead, thin nose and thin, straight lips. But his hair was as kinky as a Bushman's and his color was blacker even than the Masai. In fact, his glossy hide had a different hue from those of the native tribesmen, and I believe that he was of a different tribe.

It was seldom that we of the ranch saw him. Then without warning he would be among us, or we would see him striding through the shoulder-high grass of the veldt, sometimes alone, sometimes followed at a respectful distance by several of the wilder Masai, who bunched up at a distance from the buildings, grasping their spears nervously and eyeing everyone suspiciously. He would make his greetings with a courtly grace; his manner was deferentially courteous, but somehow it "rubbed me the wrong way," so to speak. I always had a vague feeling that the black was mocking us. He would stand before us, a naked bronze giant; make trade for a few simple articles, such as a copper kettle, beads or a trade musket; repeat words of some chief, and take his departure.

I did not like him. And being young and impetuous, I spoke my opinion to Ludtvik Strolvaus, a very distant relative, tenth cousin or suchlike, on whose trading-post ranch I was staying.

But Ludtvik chuckled in his blond beard and said that the fetish-man was all right.

"A power he is among the natives, true. They all fear him. But a friend he is to the whites. Ja."

Ludtvik was long a resident on the East Coast; he knew natives and he knew the fat Australian cattle he raised, but he had little imagination.

The ranch buildings were in the midst of a stockade, on a kind of slope, overlooking countless miles on miles of the finest grazing land in Africa. The stockade was large, well suited for defense. Most of the thousand cattle could be driven inside in case of an uprising of the Masai. Ludtvik was inordinately proud of his cattle.

"One thousand now," he would tell me, his round face beaming, "one thousand now. But later, ah! Ten thousand and another ten thousand. This is a good beginning, but only a beginning. Ja."

I must confess that I got little thrill out of the cattle. Natives herded and corralled them; all Ludtvik and I had to do was to ride about and give orders. That was the work he liked best, and I left it mostly to him.

My chief sport was in riding away across the veldt, alone or attended by a gun-bearer, with a rifle. Not that I ever bagged much game. In the first place I was an execrable marksman; I could hardly have hit an elephant at close range. In the second place, it seemed to me a shame to shoot so many things. A bush-antelope would bound up in front of me and race away, and I would sit watching him, admiring the slim, lithe figure, thrilled with the graceful beauty of the creature, my rifle lying idle across my saddle horn.

The native boy who served as my gun-bearer began to suspect that I was deliberately refraining from shooting, and he began in a covert way to throw sneering hints about my womanishness. I was young and valued even the opinion of a native; which is very foolish. His remarks stung my pride, and one day I hauled him off his horse and pounded him until he yelled for mercy. Thereafter my doings were not questioned.

But still I felt inferior when in the presence of the fetish-man. I could not get the other natives to talk about him. All I could get out of them was a scared rolling of the eyeballs, gesticulation indicative of fear, and vague information that the fetish-man dwelt among the tribes some distance in the interior. General opinion seemed to be that Senecoza was a good man to let alone.

One incident made the mystery about the fetish-man take on, it seemed, a rather sinister form.

In the mysterious way that news travels in Africa, and which white men so seldom hear of, we learned that Senecoza and a minor chief had had a falling out of some kind. It was vague and seemed to have no especial basis of fact. But shortly afterward that chief was found half-devoured by hyenas. That, in itself, was not unusual, but the fright with which the natives heard the news was. The chief was nothing to them; in fact he was something of a villain, but his killing seemed to inspire them with a fright that was little short of homicidal. When the black reaches a certain stage of fear, he is as dangerous as a cornered panther. The next time Senecoza called, they rose and fled en masse and did not return until he had taken his departure.

Between the fear of the blacks, the tearing to pieces of the chief by the hyenas, and the fetish-man, I seemed to sense vaguely a connection of some kind. But I could not grasp the intangible thought.

Not long thereafter, that thought was intensified by another incident. I had ridden far out on the veldt, accompanied by my servant. As we paused to rest our horses close to a kopje, I saw, upon the top, a hyena eyeing us. Rather surprised, for the beasts are not in the habit of thus boldly approaching man in the daytime, I raised my rifle and was taking a steady aim, for I always hated the things, when my servant caught my arm.

"No shoot, bwana! No shoot!" he exclaimed hastily, jabbering a great deal in his own language, with which I was not familiar.

"What's up?" I asked impatiently.

He kept on jabbering and pulling my arm, until I gathered that the hyena was a fetish-beast of some kind.

"Oh, all right," I conceded, lowering my rifle just as the hyena turned and sauntered out of sight.

Something about the lank, repulsive beast and his shambling yet gracefully lithe walk struck my sense of humor with a ludicrous comparison.

Laughing, I pointed toward the beast and said, "That fellow looks like a hyena-imitation of Senecoza, the fetish-man." My simple statement seemed to throw the native into a more abject fear than ever.

He turned his pony and dashed off in the general direction of the ranch, looking back at me with a scared face.

I followed, annoyed. And as I rode I pondered. Hyenas, a fetish-man, a chief torn to pieces, a countryside of natives in fear; what was the connection? I puzzled and puzzled, but I was new to Africa; I was young and impatient, and presently with a shrug of annoyance I discarded the whole problem.

The next time Senecoza came to the ranch, he managed to stop directly in front of me. For a fleeting instant his glittering eyes looked into mine. And in spite of myself, I shuddered and stepped back, involuntarily, feeling much as a man feels who looks unaware into the eyes of a serpent. There was nothing tangible, nothing on which I could base a quarrel, but there was a distinct threat. Before my Nordic pugnacity could reassert itself, he was gone. I said nothing. But I knew that Senecoza hated me for some reason and that he plotted my killing. Why, I did not know.

As for me, my distrust grew into bewildered rage, which in turn became hate.

And then Ellen Farel came to the ranch. Why she should choose a trading-ranch in East Africa for a place to rest from the society life of New York, I do not know. Africa is no place for a woman. That is what Ludtvik, also a cousin of hers, told her, but he was overjoyed to see her. As for me, girls never interested me much; usually I felt like a fool in their presence and was glad to be out. But there were few whites in the vicinity and I tired of the company of Ludtvik.

Ellen was standing on the wide veranda when I first saw her, a slim, pretty young thing, with rosy cheeks and hair like gold and large gray eyes. She was surprisingly winsome in her costume of riding-breeches, puttees, jacket and light helmet.

I felt extremely awkward, dusty and stupid as I sat on my wiry African pony and stared at her.

She saw a stocky youth of medium height, with sandy hair, eyes in which a kind of gray predominated; an ordinary, unhandsome youth, clad in dusty riding-clothes and a cartridge belt on one side of which was slung an ancient Colt of big caliber, and on the other a long, wicked hunting-knife.

I dismounted, and she came forward, hand outstretched.

"I'm Ellen," she said, "and I know you're Steve. Cousin Ludtvik has been telling me about you."

I shook hands, surprised at the thrill the mere touch of her hand gave me.

She was enthusiastic about the ranch. She was enthusiastic about everything. Seldom have I seen anyone who had more vigor and vim, more enjoyment of everything done. She fairly scintillated with mirth and gaiety.

Ludtvik gave her the best horse on the place, and we rode much about the ranch and over the veldt.

The blacks interested her much. They were afraid of her, not being used to white women. She would have been off her horse and playing with the pickaninnies if I had let her. She couldn't understand why she should treat the black people as dust beneath her feet. We had long arguments about it. I could not convince her, so I told her bluntly that she didn't know anything about it and she must do as I told her.

She pouted her pretty lips and called me a tyrant, and then was off over the veldt like an antelope, laughing at me over her shoulder, her hair blowing free in the breeze.

Tyrant! I was her slave from the first. Somehow the idea of becoming a lover never enter my mind. It was not the fact that she was several years older than I, or that she had a sweetheart (several of them, I think) back in New York. Simply, I worshipped her; her presence intoxicated me, and I could think of no more enjoyable existence than serving her as a devoted slave.

I was mending a saddle one day when she came running in.

"Oh, Steve!" she called; "there's the most romantic-looking savage! Come quick and tell me what his name is."

She led me out of the veranda.

"There he is," she said, naively pointing. Arms folded, haughty head thrown back, stood Senecoza.

Ludtvik who was talking to him, paid no attention to the girl until he had completed his business with the fetish-man; and then, turning, he took her arm and they went into the house together.

Again I was face to face with the savage; but this time he was not looking at me. With a rage amounting almost to madness, I saw that he was gazing after the girl. There was an expression in his serpentlike eyes--

On the instant my gun was out and leveled. My hand shook like a leaf with the intensity of my fury. Surely I must shoot Senecoza down like the snake he was, shoot him down and riddle him, shoot him into a shredded heap!

The fleeting expression left his eyes and they were fixed on me. Detached they seemed, inhuman in their sardonic calm. And I could not pull the trigger.

For a moment we stood, and then he turned and strode away, a magnificent figure, while I glared after him and snarled with helpless fury.

I sat down on the veranda. What a man of mystery was that savage! What strange power did he possess? Was I right, I wondered, in interpreting the fleeting expression as he gazed after the girl? It seemed to me, in my youth and folly, incredible that a black man, no matter what his rank, should look at a white woman as he did. Most astonishing of all, why could I not shoot him down?

I started as a hand touched my arm.

"What are thinking about, Steve?" asked Ellen, laughing. Then before I could say anything, "Wasn't that chief, or whatever he was, a fine specimen of a savage? He invited us to come to his kraal; is that what you call it? It's away off in the veldt somewhere, and we're going."

"No!" I exclaimed violently, springing up.

"Why Steve," she gasped recoiling, "how rude! He's a perfect gentleman, isn't he, Cousin Ludtvik?"

"Ja," nodded Ludtvik, placidly, "we go to his kraal sometime soon, maybe. A strong chief, that savage. His chief has perhaps good trade."

"No!" I repeated furiously. "I'll go if somebody has to! Ellen's not going near that beast!"

"Well, that's nice!" remarked Ellen, somewhat indignantly. "I guess you're my boss, mister man?"

With all her sweetness, she had a mind of her own. In spite of all I could do, they arranged to go to the fetish-man's village the next day.

That night the girl came out to me, where I sat on the veranda in the moonlight, and she sat down on the arm of my chair.

"You're not angry at me, are you, Steve?" she said, wistfully, putting her arm around my shoulders. "Not mad, are you?"

Mad? Yes, maddened by the touch of her soft body--such mad devotion as a slave feels. I wanted to grovel in the dust at her feet and kiss her dainty shoes. Will women never learn the effect they have on men?

I took her hand hesitantly and pressed it to my lips. I think she must have sensed some of my devotion.

"Dear Steve," she murmured, and the words were like a caress, "come, let's walk in the moonlight."

We walked outside the stockade. I should have known better, for I had no weapon but the big Turkish dagger I carried and used for a hunting-knife, but she wished to.

"Tell me about this Senecoza," she asked, and I welcomed the opportunity. And then I thought: what could I tell her? That hyenas had eaten a small chief of the Masai? That the natives feared the fetish-man? That he had looked at her?

And then the girl screamed as out of the tall grass leaped a vague shape, half-seen in the moonlight.

I felt a heavy, hairy form crash against my shoulders; keen fangs ripped my upflung arm. I went to the earth, fighting with frenzied horror. My jacket was slit to ribbons and the fangs were at my throat before I found and drew my knife and stabbed, blindly and savagely. I felt my blade rip into my foe, and then, like a shadow, it was gone. I staggered to my feet, somewhat shaken. The girl caught and steadied me.

"What was it?" she gasped, leading me toward the stockade.

"A hyena," I answered. "I could tell by the scent. But I never heard of one attacking like that."

She shuddered. Later on, after my torn arm had been bandaged, she came close to me and said in a wondrously subdued voice, "Steve, I've decided not to go to the village, if you don't want me to."

After the wounds on my arm had become scars Ellen and I resumed our rides, as might be expected. One day we had wandered rather far out on the veldt, and she challenged me to a race. Her horse easily distanced mine, and she stopped and waited for me, laughing.

She had stopped on a sort of kopje, and she pointed to a clump of trees some distance away.

"Trees!" she said gleefully. "Let's ride down there. There are so few trees on the veldt."

And she dashed away. I followed some instinctive caution, loosening my pistol in its holster, and, drawing my knife, I thrust it down in my boot so that it was entirely concealed.

We were perhaps halfway to the trees when from the tall grass about us leaped Senecoza and some twenty warriors.

One seized the girl's bridle and the others rushed me. The one who caught at Ellen went down with a bullet between his eyes, and another crumpled at my second shot. Then a thrown war-club hurled me from the saddle, half-senseless, and as the blacks closed in on me I saw Ellen's horse, driven frantic by the prick of a carelessly handled spear, scream and rear, scattering the blacks who held her, and dash away at headlong speed, the bit in her teeth.

I saw Senecoza leap on my horse and give chase, flinging a savage command over his shoulder; and both vanished over the kopje.

The warriors bound me hand and foot and carried me into the trees. A hut stood among them--a native hut of thatch and bark. Somehow the sight of it set me shuddering. It seemed to lurk, repellent and indescribably malevolent amongst the trees; to hint of horrid and obscene rites; of voodoo.

I know not why it is, but the sight of a native hut, alone and hidden, far from a village or tribe, always has to me a suggestion of nameless horror. Perhaps that is because only a black who is crazed or one who is so criminal that he has been exiled by his tribe will dwell that way.

In front of the hut they threw me down.

"When Senecoza returns with the girl," said they, "you will enter." And they laughed like fiends. Then, leaving one black to see that I did not escape, they left.

The black who remained kicked me viciously; he was a bestial-looking Negro, armed with a trade-musket.

"They go to kill white men, fool!" he mocked me. "They go to the ranches and trading-posts, first to that fool of an Englishman." Meaning Smith, the owner of a neighboring ranch.

And he went on giving details. Senecoza had made the plot, he boasted. They would chase all the white men to the coast.

"Senecoza is more than a man," he boasted. "You shall see, white man," lowering his voice and glancing about him, from beneath his low, beetling brows; "you shall see the magic of Senecoza." And he grinned, disclosing teeth filed to points.

"Cannibal!" I ejaculated, involuntarily. "A Masai?"

"No," he answered. "A man of Senecoza."

"Who will kill no white men," I jeered.

He scowled savagely. "I will kill you, white man."

"You dare not."

"That is true," he admitted, and added angrily, "Senecoza will kill you himself."

And meantime Ellen was riding like mad, gaining on the fetish-man, but unable to ride toward the ranch, for he had gotten between and was forcing her steadily out upon the veldt.

The black unfastened my bonds. His line of reasoning was easy to see; absurdly easy. He could not kill a prisoner of the fetish-man, but he could kill him to prevent his escape. And he was maddened with the blood-lust. Stepping back, he half-raised his trade-musket, watching me as a snake watches a rabbit.

It must have been about that time, as she afterward told me, that Ellen's horse stumbled and threw her. Before she could rise, the black had leaped from his horse and seized her in his arms. She screamed and fought, but he gripped her, held her helpless and laughed at her. Tearing her jacket to pieces, he bound her arms and legs, remounted and started back, carrying the half-fainting girl in front of him.

Back in front of the hut I rose slowly. I rubbed my arms where the ropes had been, moved a little closer to the black, stretched, stooped and rubbed my legs; then with a catlike bound I was on him, my knife flashing from my boot. The trade-musket crashed and the charge whizzed above my head as I knocked up the barrel and closed with him. Hand to hand, I would have been no match for the black giant; but I had the knife. Clinched close together we were too close for him to use the trade-musket for a club. He wasted time trying to do that, and with a desperate effort I threw him off his balance and drove the dagger to the hilt in his black chest.

I wrenched it out again; I had no other weapon, for I could find no more ammunition for the trade-musket.

I had no idea which way Ellen had fled. I assumed she had gone toward the ranch, and in that direction I took my way. Smith must be warned. The warriors were far ahead of me. Even then they might be creeping up about the unsuspecting ranch.

I had not covered a fourth of the distance, when a drumming of hoofs behind me caused me to turn my head. Ellen's horse was thundering toward me, riderless. I caught her as she raced past me, and managed to stop her. The story was plain. The girl had either reached a place of safety and had turned the horse loose, or what was much more likely, had been captured, the horse escaping and fleeing toward the ranch, as a horse will do. I gripped the saddle, torn with indecision. Finally I leaped on the horse and sent her flying toward Smith's ranch. It was not many miles; Smith must not be massacred by those black devils, and I must find a gun if I escaped to rescue the girl from Senecoza.

A half-mile from Smith's I overtook the raiders and went through them like drifting smoke. The workers at Smith's place were startled by a wild-riding horseman charging headlong into the stockade, shouting, "Masai! Masai! A raid, you fools!" snatching a gun and flying out again.

So when the savages arrived they found everybody ready for them, and they got such a warm reception that after one attempt they turned tail and fled back across the veldt.

And I was riding as I never rode before. The mare was almost exhausted, but I pushed her mercilessly. On, on!

I aimed for the only place I knew likely. The hut among the trees. I assumed that the fetish-man would return there.

And long before the hut came into sight, a horseman dashed from the grass, going at right angles to my course, and our horses, colliding, sent both tired animals to the ground.

"Steve!" It was a cry of joy mingled with fear. Ellen lay, tied hand and foot, gazing up at me wildly as I regained my feet.

Senecoza came with a rush, his long knife flashing in the sunlight. Back and forth we fought--slash, ward and parry, my ferocity and agility matching his savagery and skill.

A terrific lunge which he aimed at me, I caught on my point, laying his arm open, and then with a quick engage and wrench, disarmed him. But before I could use my advantage, he sprang away into the grass and vanished.

I caught up the girl, slashing her bonds, and she clung to me, poor child, until I lifted her and carried her toward the horses. But we were not yet through with Senecoza. He must have had a rifle cached away somewhere in the bush, for the first I knew of him was when a bullet spat within a foot above my head.

I caught at the bridles, and then I saw that the mare had done all she could, temporarily. She was exhausted. I swung Ellen up on the horse.

"Ride for our ranch," I ordered her. "The raiders are out, but you can get through. Ride low and ride fast!"

"But you, Steve!"

"Go, go!" I ordered, swinging her horse around and starting it. She dashed away, looking at me wistfully over her shoulder. Then I snatched the rifle and a handful of cartridges I had gotten at Smith's, and took to the bush. And through the hot African day, Senecoza and I played a game of hide-and-seek. Crawling, slipping in and out of the scanty veldt-bushes, crouching in the tall grass, we traded shots back and forth. A movement of the grass, a snapping twig, the rasp of grass-blades, and a bullet came questing, another answering it.

I had but a few cartridges and I fired carefully, but presently I pushed my one remaining cartridge into the rifle--a big, six-bore, single-barrel breech-loader, for I had not had time to pick when I snatched it up.

I crouched in my covert and watched for the black to betray himself by a careless movement. Not a sound, not a whisper among the grasses. Away off over the veldt a hyena sounded his fiendish laugh and another answered, closer at hand. The cold sweat broke out on my brow.

What was that? A drumming of many horses' hoofs! Raiders returning? I ventured a look and could have shouted for joy. At least twenty men were sweeping toward me, white men and ranch-boys, and ahead of them all rode Ellen! They were still some distance away. I darted behind a tall bush and rose, waving my hand to attract their attention.

They shouted and pointed to something beyond me. I whirled and saw, some thirty yards away, a huge hyena slinking toward me, rapidly. I glanced carefully across the veldt. Somewhere out there, hidden by the billowing grasses, lurked Senecoza. A shot would betray to him my position--and I had but one cartridge. The rescue party was still out of range.

I looked again at the hyena. He was still rushing toward me. There was no doubt as to his intentions. His eyes glittered like a fiend's from Hell, and a scar on his shoulder showed him to be the same beast that had once before attacked me. Then a kind of horror took hold of me, and resting the old elephant rifle over my elbow, I sent my last bullet crashing through the bestial thing. With a scream that seemed to have a horribly human note in it, the hyena turned and fled back into the bush, reeling as it ran.

And the rescue party swept up around me.

A fusillade of bullets crashed through the bush from which Senecoza had sent his last shot. There was no reply.

"Ve hunt ter snake down," quoth Cousin Ludtvik, his Boer accent increasing with his excitement. And we scattered through the veldt in a skirmish line, combing every inch of it warily.

Not a trace of the fetish-man did we find. A rifle we found, empty, with empty shells scattered about, and (which was very strange) hyena tracks leading away from the rifle.

I felt the short hairs of my neck bristle with intangible horror. We looked at each other, and said not a word, as with a tacit agreement we took up the trail of the hyena.

We followed it as it wound in and out in the shoulder-high grass, showing how it had slipped up on me, stalking me as a tiger stalks its victim. We struck the trail the thing had made, returning to the bush after I had shot it. Splashes of blood marked the way it had taken. We followed.

"It leads toward the fetish-hut," muttered an Englishman. "Here, sirs, is a damnable mystery."

And Cousin Ludtvik ordered Ellen to stay back, leaving two men with her.

We followed the trail over the kopje and into the clump of trees. Straight to the door of the hut it led. We circled the hut cautiously, but no tracks led away. It was inside the hut. Rifles ready, we forced the rude door.

No tracks led away from the hut and no tracks led to it except the tracks of the hyena. Yet there was no hyena within that hut; and on the dirt floor, a bullet through his black breast, lay Senecoza, the fetish-man.

Contents

THE FIRE OF ASSHURBANIPAL

By Robert E. Howard

YAR Am squinted carefully down the blue barrel of his Lee-Enfield, called devoutly on Allah and sent a bullet through the brain of a flying rider.

"Allaho akbar!"

The big Afghan shouted in glee, waving his weapon above his head, "God is great! By Allah, sahib, I have sent another one of the dogs to Hell!"

His companion peered cautiously over the rim of the sand-pit they had scooped with their hands. He was a lean and wiry American, Steve Clarney by name.

"Good work, old horse," said this person. "Four left. Look--they're drawing off."

The white-robed horsemen were indeed reining away, clustering together just out of accurate rifle-range, as if in council. There had been seven when they had first swooped down on the comrades, but the fire from the two rifles in the sand-pit had been deadly.

"Look, sahib--they abandon the fray!"

Yar Ali stood up boldly and shouted taunts at the departing riders, one of whom whirled and sent a bullet that kicked up sand thirty feet in front of the pit.

"They shoot like the sons of dogs," said Yar Ali in complacent self-esteem. "By Allah, did you see that rogue plunge from his saddle as my lead went home? Up, sahib; let us run after them and cut them down!"

Paying no attention to this outrageous proposal--for he knew it was but one of the gestures Afghan nature continually demands--Steve rose, dusted off his breeches and gazing after the riders, now white specks far out on the desert, said musingly: "Those fellows ride as if they had some set purpose in mind--not a bit like men running from a licking."

"Aye," agreed Yar Ali promptly and seeing nothing inconsistent with his present attitude and recent bloodthirsty suggestion, "they ride after more of their kind--they are hawks who give up their prey not quickly. We had best move our position quickly, Steve sahib. They will come back--maybe in a few hours, maybe in a few days--it all depends on how far away lies the oasis of their tribe. But they will be back. We have guns and lives--they want both. And behold."

The Afghan levered out the empty shell and slipped a single cartridge into the breech of his rifle.

"My last bullet, sahib."

Steve nodded. "I've got three left."

The raiders whom their bullets had knocked from the saddle had been looted by their own comrades. No use searching the bodies which lay in the sand for ammunition. Steve lifted his canteen and shook it. Not much water remained. He knew that Yar Ali had only a little more than he, though the big Afridi, bred in a barren land, had used and needed less water than did the American; although the latter, judged from a white man's standards, was hard and tough as a wolf. As Steve unscrewed the canteen cap and drank very sparingly, he mentally reviewed the chain of events that had led them to their present position.

Wanderers, soldiers of fortune, thrown together by chance and attracted to each other by mutual admiration, he and Yar Ali had wandered from India up through Turkistan and down through Persia, an oddly assorted but highly capable pair. Driven by the restless urge of inherent wanderlust, their avowed purpose--which they swore to and sometimes believed themselves--was the accumulation of some vague and undiscovered treasure, some pot of gold at the foot of some yet unborn rainbow.

Then in ancient Shiraz they had heard of the Fire of Asshurbanipal. From the lips of an ancient Persian trader, who only half believed what he repeated to them, they heard the tale that he in turn had heard from the babbling lips of delirium, in his distant youth. He had been a member of a caravan, fifty years before, which, wandering far on the southern shore of the Persian Gulf trading for pearls, had followed the tale of a rare pearl far into the desert.

The pearl, rumored found by a diver and stolen by a shaykh of the interior, they did not find, but they did pick up a Turk who was dying of starvation, thirst and a bullet wound in the thigh. As, he died in delirium, he babbled a wild tale of a silent dead city of black stone set in the drifting sands of the desert far to the westward, and of a flaming gem clutched in the bony fingers of a skeleton on an ancient throne.

He had not dared bring it away with him, because of an overpowering brooding horror that haunted the place, and thirst had driven him into the desert again, where Bedouins had pursued and wounded him. Yet he had escaped, riding hard until his horse fell under him. He died without telling how he had reached the mythical city in the first place, but the old trader thought he must have come from the northwest--a deserter from the Turkish army, making a desperate attempt to reach the Gulf.

The men of the caravan had made no attempt to plunge still further into the desert in search of the city; for, said the old trader, they believed it to be the ancient, ancient City of Evil spoken of in the Necronomicon of the mad Arab Alhazred--the city of the dead on which an ancient curse rested. Legends named it vaguely: the Arabs called it Beled-el-Djinn, the City of Devils, and the Turks, Karashehr, the Black City. And the gem was that ancient and accursed jewel belonging to a king of long ago, whom the Grecians called Sardanapalus and the Semitic peoples Asshurbanipal.

Steve had been fascinated by the tale. Admitting to himself that it was doubtless one of the ten thousand cock-and-bull myths booted about the East, still there was a possibility that he and Yar Ali had stumbled onto a trace of that pot of rainbow gold for which they searched. And Yar Ali had heard hints before of a silent city of the sands; tales had followed the eastbound caravans over the high Persian uplands and across the sands of Turkistan, into the mountain country and beyond--vague tales; whispers of a black city of the djinn, deep in the hazes of a haunted desert.

So, following the trail of the legend, the companions had come from Shiraz to a village on the Arabian shore of the Persian Gulf, and there had heard more from an old man who had been a pearl-diver in his youth. The loquacity of age was on him and he told tales repeated to him by wandering tribesmen who had them in turn from the wild nomads of the deep interior; and again Steve and Yar Ah heard of the still black city with giant beasts carved of stone, and the skeleton sultan who held the blazing gem.

And so, mentally swearing at himself for a fool, Steve had made the plunge, and Yar Ali, secure in the knowledge that all things lay on the lap of Allah, had come with him. Their scanty supply of money had been just sufficient to provide riding-camels and provisions for a bold flying invasion of the unknown. Their only chart had been the vague rumors that placed the supposed location of Kara-Shehr.

There had been days of hard travel, pushing the beasts and conserving water and food. Then, deep in the desert they invaded, they had encountered a blinding sand-wind in which they had lost the camels. After that came long miles of staggering through the sands, battered by a flaming sun, subsisting on rapidly dwindling water from their canteens, and food Yar Ali had in a pouch. No thought of finding the mythical city now. They pushed on blindly, in hope of stumbling upon a spring; they knew that behind them no oases lay within a distance they could hope to cover on foot. It was a desperate chance, but their only one.

Then white-clad hawks had swooped down on them, out of the haze of the skyline, and from a shallow and hastily scooped trench the adventurers had exchanged shots with the wild riders who circled them at top speed. The bullets of the Bedouins had skipped through their makeshift fortifications, knocking dust into their eyes and flicking bits of cloth from their garments, but by good chance neither had been hit.

Their one bit of luck, reflected Clarney, as he cursed himself for a fool. What a mad venture it had been, anyway! To think that two men could so dare the desert and live, much less wrest from its abysmal bosom the secrets of the ages! And that crazy tale of a skeleton hand gripping a flaming jewel in a dead city--bosh! What utter rot! He must have been crazy himself to credit it, the American decided with the clarity of view that suffering and danger bring.

"Well, old horse," said Steve, lifting his rifle, "let's get going. It's a toss-up if we die of thirst or get sniped off by the desert-brothers. Anyway, we're doin' no good here."

"God gives," agreed Yar Ali cheerfully. "The sun sinks westward. Soon the coolness of night will be upon us. Perhaps we shall find water yet, sahib. Look, the terrain changes to the south."

Clarney shaded his eyes against the dying sun. Beyond a level, barren expanse of several miles width, the land did indeed become more broken; aborted hills were in evidence. The American slung his rifle over his arm and sighed.

"Heave ahead; we're food for the buzzards anyhow."

The sun sank and the moon rose, flooding the desert with weird silver light. Drifted sand glimmered in long ripples, as if a sea had suddenly been frozen into immobility. Steve, parched fiercely by a thirst he dared not fully quench, cursed beneath his breath. The desert was beautiful beneath the moon, with the beauty of a cold marble lorelei to lure men to destruction. What a mad quest! his weary brain reiterated; the Fire of Asshurbanipal retreated into the mazes of unreality with each dragging step. The desert became not merely a material wasteland, but the gray mists of the lost eons, in whose depths dreamed sunken things.

Clarney stumbled and swore; was he failing already? Yar Ali swung along with the easy, tireless stride of the mountain man, and Steve set his teeth, nerving himself to greater effort. They were entering the broken country at last, and the going became harder. Shallow gullies and narrow ravines knifed the earth with wavering patterns. Most of them were nearly filled with sand, and there was no trace of water.

"This country was once oasis country," commented Yar Ali. "Allah knows how many centuries ago the sand took it, as the sand has taken so many cities in TurkiStan."

They swung on like dead men in a gray land of death.

The moon grew red and sinister as she sank, and shadowy darkness settled over the desert before they had reached a point where they could see what lay beyond the broken belt. Even the big Afghan's feet began to drag, and Steve kept himself erect only by a savage effort of will. At last they toiled up a sort of ridge, on the southern side of which the land sloped downward.

"We rest," declared Steve. "There's no water in this hellish country. No use in goin' on for ever. My legs are stiff as gun-barrels. I couldn't take another step to save my neck. Here's a kind of stunted cliff, about as high as a man's shoulder, facing south. We'll sleep in the lee of it.

"And shall we not keep watch, Steve sahib?"

"We don't," answered Steve. "If the Arabs cut our throats while we're asleep, so much the better. We're goners anyhow."

With which optimistic observation Clarney lay down stiffly in the deep sand. But Yar Ali stood, leaning forward, straining his eyes into the elusive darkness that turned the star-flecked horizons to murky wells of shadow.

"Something lies on the skyline to the south," he muttered uneasily. "A hill? I cannot tell, or even be sure that I see anything at all."

"You're seeing mirages already," said Steve irritably. "Lie down and sleep."

And so saying Steve slumbered.

The sun in his eyes awoke him. He sat up, yawning, and his first sensation was that of thirst. He lifted his canteen and wet his lips. One drink left. Yar Ali still slept. Steve's eves wandered over the southern horizon and he started. He kicked the recumbent Afghan.

"Hey, wake up, Ali. I reckon you weren't seeing things after all. There's your hill--and a queer-lookin' one, too."

The Afridi woke as a wild thing wakes, instantly and completely, his hand leaping to his long knife as he glared about for enemies. His gaze followed Steve's pointing fingers and his eves widened.

"By Allah and by Allah!" he swore. "We have come into a land of djinn! That is no hill--it is a city of stone in the midst of the sands!"

Steve bounded to his feet like a steel spring released. As he gazed with bated breath, a fierce shout escaped his lips. At his feet the slope of the ridge ran down into a wide and level expanse of sand that stretched away southward. And far away, across those sands, to his straining sight the 'hill' slowly took shape, like a mirage growing from the drifting sands.

He saw great uneven walls, massive battlements; all about crawled the sands like a living, sensate thing, drifted high about the walls, softening the rugged outlines. No wonder that at first glance the whole had appeared like a hill.

"Kara-Shehr!" Clarney exclaimed fiercely. "Beled-el-Djinn! The city of the dead! It wasn't a pipe-dream after all! We've found it--by Heaven, we've found it! Come on! Let's go!"

Yar Ali shook his head uncertainly and muttered something about evil djinn under his breath, but he followed. The sight of the ruins had swept from Steve his thirst and hunger, and the fatigue that a few hours' sleep had not fully overcome. He trudged on swiftly, oblivious to the rising heat, his eyes gleaming with the lust of the explorer. It was not altogether greed for the fabled gem that had prompted Steve Clarney to risk his life in that grim wilderness; deep in his soul lurked the age-old heritage of the white man, the urge to seek out the hidden places of the world, and that urge had been stirred to the depths by the ancient tales.

Now as they crossed the level wastes that separated the broken land from the city, they saw the shattered walls take clearer form and shape, as if they grew out of the morning sky. The city seemed built of huge blocks of black stone, but how high the walls had been there was no telling because of the sand that drifted high about their base; in many places they had fallen away and the sand hid the fragments entirely.

The sun reached her zenith and thirst intruded itself in spite of zeal and enthusiasm, but Steve fiercely mastered his suffering. His lips were parched and swollen, but he would not take that last drink until he had reached the ruined city. Yar Ali wet his lips from his own canteen and tried to share the remainder with his friend. Steve shook his head and plodded on.

In the ferocious heat of the desert afternoon they reached the ruin, and passing through a wide breach in the crumbling wall, gazed on the dead city. Sand choked the ancient streets and lent fantastic form to huge fallen and half-hidden columns. So crumbled into decay and so covered with sand was the whole that the explorers could make out little of the original plan of the city; now it was but a waste of drifted sand and crumbling stone over which brooded, like an invisible cloud, an aura of unspeakable antiquity.

But directly in front of them ran a broad avenue, the outline of which not even the ravaging sands and winds of time had been able to efface. On either side of the wide way were ranged huge columns, not unusually tall, even allowing for the sand that hid their bases, but incredibly massive. On the top of each column stood a figure carved from solid stone--great, somber images, half human, half bestial, partaking of the brooding brutishness of the whole city. Steve cried out in amazement.

"The winged bulls of Nineveh. The bulls with men's heads! By the saints, Ali, the old tales are true! The Assyrians did build this city! The whole tale's true! They must have come here when the Babylonians destroyed Assyriawhy, this scene's a dead ringer for pictures I've seen--reconstructed scenes of old Nineveh! And look!"

He pointed down the broad street to the great building which reared at the other end, a colossal, brooding edifice whose columns and walls of solid black stone blocks defied the winds and sands of time. The drifting, obliterating sea washed about its foundations, overflowing into its doorways, but it would require a thousand years to inundate the whole structure.

"An abode of devils!" muttered Yar Ali, uneasily.

"The temple of Baal!" exclaimed Steve. "Come on!--I was afraid we'd find all the palaces and temples hidden by the sand and have to dig for the gem."

"Little good it will do us," muttered Yar Ali. "Here we die."

"I reckon so." Steve unscrewed the cap of his canteen. "Let's take our last drink. Anyway, we're safe from the Arabs. They'd never dare come here, with their superstitions. We'll drink and then we'll die, I reckon, but first we'll find the jewel. When I pass out, I want to have it in my hand. Maybe a few centuries later some lucky son-of-a-gun will find our skeletons--and the gem. Here's to him, whoever he is!"

With which grim jest Clarney drained his canteen and Yar Ali followed suit. They had played their last ace; the rest lay on the lap of Allah.

They strode up the broad way, and Yar Ali, utterly fearless in the face of human foci, glanced nervously to tight and left, half expecting to see a horned and fantastic face leering at him from behind a column. Steve felt the somber antiquity of the place, and almost found himself fearing a rush of bronze war chariots down the forgotten streets, or to hear the sudden menacing flare of bronze trumpets. The silence in dead cities was so much more intense, he reflected, than that on the open desert.

They came to the portals of the great temple. Rows of immense columns flanked the wide doorway, which was ankle-deep in sand, and from which sagged massive bronze frameworks that had once braced mighty doors, whose polished woodwork had rotted away centuries ago. They passed into a mighty hall of misty twilight whose shadowy stone roof was upheld by columns like the trunks of forest trees. The whole effect of the architecture was one of awesome magnitude and sullen, breathtaking splendor, like a temple built by somber giants for the abode of dark gods.

Yar--Ali walked fearfully, as if he expected to awake sleeping gods, and Steve, without the Afridi's superstitions, yet felt the gloomy majesty of the place lay somber hands on his soul.

No trace of a footprint showed in the deep dust on the floor; half a century had passed since the affrighted and devilridden Turk had fled these silent halls. As for the Bedouins, it was easy to see why those superstitious sons of the desert shunned this haunted city--and haunted it was, not by actual ghosts, perhaps, but by the shadows of lost splendors.

As they trod the sands of the hall, which seemed endless, Steve pondered many questions: How did these fugitives from the wrath of frenzied rebels build this city? How did they pass through the country of their foes--for Babylonia lay between Assyria and the Arabian desert. Yet there had been no other place for them to go; westward lay Syria and the sea, and north and east swarmed the 'dangerous Medes', those fierce Aryans whose aid had stiffened the arm of Babylon to smite her foe to the dust.

Possibly, thought Steve, Kara-Shehr--whatever its name had been in those dim days--had been built as an outpost border city before the fall of the Assyrian empire, whither survivals of that overthrow fled. At any rate it was possible that Kara-Shehr had outlasted Nineveh by some centuries--a strange, hermit city, no doubt, cut off from the rest of the world.

Surely, as Yar Ali had said, this was once fertile country, watered by oases; and doubtless in the broken country they had passed over the night before, there had been quarries that furnished the stone for the building of the city.

Then what caused its downfall? Did the encroachment of the sands and the filling up of the springs cause the people to abandon it, or was Kara-Shehr a city of silence before the sands crept over the walls? Did the downfall come from within or without? Did civil war blot out the inhabitants, or were they slaughtered by some powerful foe from the desert? Clarney shook his head in baffled chagrin. The answers to those questions were lost in the maze of forgotten ages.

"Allaho akbar!" They had traversed the great shadowy hall and at its further end they came upon a hideous black stone altar, behind which loomed an ancient god, bestial and horrific. Steve shrugged his shoulders as he recognized the monstrous aspect of the image--aye, that was Baal, on which black altar in other ages many a screaming, writhing, naked victim had offered up its naked soul. The idol embodied in its utter, abysmal and sullen bestiality the whole soul of this demoniac city. Surely, thought Steve, the builders of Nineveh and Kara-Shehr were cast in another mold from the people of today. Their art and culture were too ponderous, too grimly barren of the lighter aspects of humanity, to be wholly human, as modern man understands humanity.

Their architecture was repellent; of high skill, yet so massive, sullen and brutish in effect as to be almost beyond the comprehension of moderns.

The adventurers passed through a narrow door which opened in the end of the hall close to the idol, and came into a series of wide, dim, dusty chambers connected by column-flanked corridors. Along these they strode in the gray ghostly light, and came at last to a wide stair, whose massive stone steps led upward and vanished in the gloom. Here Yar Ali halted.

"We have dared much, sahib," he muttered. "Is it wise to dare more?"

Steve, aquiver with eagerness, yet understood the Afghan's mind. "You mean we shouldn't go up those stairs?"

"They have an evil look. To what chambers of silence and horror may they lead? When djinn haunt deserted buildings, they lurk in the upper chambers. At any moment a demon may bite off our heads."

"We're dead men anyhow," grunted Steve. "But I tell you--you go on back through the hall and watch for the Arabs while I go upstairs."

"Watch for a wind on the horizon," responded the Afghan gloomily, shifting his rifle and loosening his long knife in its scabbard. "No Bedouin comes here. Lead on, sahib. Thou'rt mad after the manner of all Franks,--but I would not leave thee to face the djinn alone."

So the companions mounted the massive stairs, their feet sinking deep into the accumulated dust of centuries at each step. Up and up they went, to an incredible height until the depths below merged into a vague gloom.

"We walk blind to our doom, sahib," muttered Yar Ali. "Allah il allah--and Muhammad is his Prophet! Nevertheless, I feel the presence of slumbering Evil and never again shall I hear the wind blowing up the Khyber Pass."

Steve made no reply. He did not like the breathless silence that brooded over the ancient temple, nor the grisly gray light that filtered from some hidden source.

Now above them the gloom lightened somewhat and they emerged into a vast circular chamber, grayly illumined by light that filtered in through the high, pierced ceiling. But another radiance lent itself to the illumination. A cry burst from Steve's lips, echoed by Yar Ali.

Standing on the top step of the broad stone stair, they looked directly across the broad chamber, with its dustcovered heavy tile floor and bare black stone walls. From about the center of the chamber, massive steps led up to a stone dais, and on this dais stood a marble throne. About this throne glowed and shimmered an uncanny light, and the awestruck adventurers gasped as they saw its source. On the throne slumped a human skeleton, an almost shapeless mass of moldering bones. A fleshless hand sagged outstretched upon the broad marble throne-arm, and in its grisly clasp there pulsed and throbbed like a living thing, a great crimson stone.

The Fire of Asshurbanipal! Even after they had found the lost city Steve had not really allowed himself to believe that they would find the gem, or that it even existed in reality. Yet he could not doubt the evidence of his eyes, dazzled by that evil, incredible glow. With a fierce shout he sprang across the chamber and up the steps. Yar Ali was at his heels, but when Steve would have seized the gem, the Afghan laid a hand on his arm.

"Wait!" exclaimed the big Muhammadan. "Touch it not yet, sahib! A curse lies on ancient things--and surely this is a thing triply accursed! Else why has it lain here untouched in a country of thieves for so many centuries? It is not well to disturb the possessions of the dead."

"Bosh!" snorted the American. "Superstitions! The Bedouins were scared by the tales that have come down to 'em from their ancestors. Being desert-dwellers they mistrust cities anyway, and no doubt this one had an evil reputation in its lifetime. And nobody except Bedouins have seen this place before, except that Turk, who was probably half demented with suffering.

"These bones may be those of the king mentioned in the legend--the dry desert air preserves such things indefinitely--but I doubt it. Maybe Assyrian--most likely Arab--some beggar that got the gem and then died on that throne for some reason or other."

The Afghan scarcely heard him. He was gazing in fearful fascination at the great stone, as a hypnotized bird stares into a serpent's eye.

"Look at it, sahib!" he whispered. "What is it? No such gem as this was ever cut by mortal hands! Look how it throbs and pulses like the heart of a cobra!"

Steve was looking, and he was aware of a strange undefined feeling of uneasiness. Well versed in the knowledge of precious stones, he had never seen a stone like this. At first glance he had supposed it to be a monster ruby, as told in the legends. Now he was not sure, and he had a nervous feeling that Yar Ali was right, that this was no natural, normal gem: He could not classify the style in which it was cut, and such was the power of its lurid radiance that he found it difficult to gaze at it closely for any length of time. The whole setting was not one calculated to soothe restless nerves. The deep dust on the floor suggested an unwholesome antiquity; the gray light evoked a sense of unreality, and the heavy black walls towered grimly, hinting at hidden things.

"Let's take the stone, and go!" muttered Steve, an unaccustomed panicky dread rising in his bosom.

"Wait!" Yar Ali's eyes were blazing, and he gazed, not at the gem, but at the sullen stone walls. "We are flies in the lair of the spider! Sahib, as Allah lives, it is more than the ghosts of old fears that lurk over this city of horror! I feel the presence of peril, as I have felt it before--as I felt it in a jungle cavern where a python lurked unseen in the darkness--as I felt it in the temple of Thuggee where the hidden stranglers of Siva crouched to spring upon us--as I feel it now, tenfold!"

Steve's hair prickled. He knew that Yar Ali was a grim veteran, not to be stampeded by silly fear or senseless panic; he well remembered the incidents referred to by the Afghan, as he remembered other occasions upon which Yar Ali's Oriental telepathic instinct had warned him of danger before that danger was seen or heard.

"What is it, Yar Ali?" he whispered.

The Afghan shook his head, his eyes filled with a weird mysterious light as he listened to the dim occult promptings of his subconsciousness.

"I know not; I know it is close to us, and that it is very ancient and very evil. I think--" Suddenly he halted and wheeled, the eery light vanishing from his eyes to be replaced by a glare of wolf-like fear and suspicion.

"Hark, sahib!" he snapped. "Ghosts or dead men mount the stair!"

Steve stiffened as the stealthy pad of soft sandals on stone reached his ear.

"By Judas, Ali!" he rapped; "something's out there--"

The ancient walls re-echoed to a chorus of wild yells as a horde of savage figures flooded the chamber. For one dazed insane instant Steve believed wildly that they were being attacked by re-embodied warriors of a vanished age; then the spiteful crack of a bullet past his ear and the acrid smell of powder told him that their foes were material enough. Clarney cursed; in their fancied security--they had been caught like rats in a trap by the pursuing Arabs.

Even as the American threw up his rifle, Yar Ali fired point-blank from the hip with deadly effect, hurled his empty rifle into the horde and went down the steps like a hurricane, his three-foot Khyber knife shimmering in his hairy hand. Into his gusto for battle went real relief that his foes were human. A bullet ripped the turban from his head, but an Arab went down with a split skull beneath the hillman's first, shearing stroke.

A tall Bedouin clapped his gun-muzzle to the Afghan's side, but before he could pull the trigger, Clarney's bullet scattered his brains. The very number of the attackers hindered their onslaught on the big Afridi, whose tigerish quickness made shooting as dangerous to themselves as to him. The bulk of them swarmed about him, striking with scimitar and rifle-stock while others charged up the steps after Steve. At that range there was no missing; the American simply thrust his rifle muzzle into a bearded face and blasted it into a ghastly ruin. The others came on, screaming like panthers.

And now as he prepared to expend his last cartridge, Clarney saw two things in one flashing instant--a wild warrior who, with froth on his beard and a heavy scimitar uplifted, was almost upon him, and another who knelt on the floor drawing a careful bead on the plunging Yar Ali. Steve made an instant choice and fired over the shoulder of the charging swordsman, killing the rifleman--and voluntarily offering his own life for his friend's; for the scimitar was swinging at his own head. But even as the Arab swung, grunting with the force of the blow, his sandaled foot slipped on the marble steps and the curved blade, veering erratically from its arc, clashed on Steve's rifle-barrel. In an instant the American clubbed his rifle, and as the Bedouin recovered his balance and again heaved up the scimitar, Clarney struck with all his rangy power, and stock and skull shattered together.

Then a heavy ball smacked into his shoulder, sickening him with the shock.

As he staggered dizzily, a Bedouin whipped a turbancloth about his feet and jerked viciously. Clarney pitched headlong down the steps, to strike with stunning force. A gun-stock in a brown hand went up to dash out his brains, but an imperious command halted the blow.

"Slay him not, but bind him hand and foot."

As Steve struggled dazedly against many gripping hands, it seemed to him that somewhere he had heard that imperious voice before.

The American's downfall had occurred in a matter of seconds. Even as Steve's second shot had cracked, Yar Ali had half severed a raider's arm and himself received a numbing blow from a rifle-stock on his left shoulder. His sheepskin coat, worn despite the desert heat, saved his hide from half a dozen slashing knives. A rifle was discharged so close to his face that the powder burnt him fiercely, bringing a bloodthirsty yell from the maddened Afghan. As Yar Ali swung up his dripping blade the rifleman, ashy-faced, lifted his rifle above his head in both hands to parry the downward blow, whereat the Afridi, with a yelp of ferocious exultation, shifted as a junglecat strikes and plunged his long knife into the Arab's belly. But at that instant a rifle-stock, swung with all the hearty ill-will its wielder could evoke, crashed against the giant's head, laying open the scalp and dashing him to his knees.

With the dogged and silent ferocity of his breed, Yar Ali staggered blindly up again, slashing at foes he could scarcely see, but a storm of blows battered him down again, nor did his attackers cease beating him until he lay still. They would have finished him in short order then, but for another peremptory order from their chief; whereupon they bound the senseless knife-man and flung him down alongside Steve, who was fully conscious and aware of the savage hurt of the bullet in his shoulder.

He glared up at the tall Arab who stood looking down at him.

"Well, sahib," said this one--and Steve saw he was no Bedouin--"do you not remember me?"

Steve scowled; a bullet-wound is no aid to concentration.

"You look familiar--by Judas!--you are! Nureddin El Mekru!"

"I am honored! The sahib remembers!" Nureddin salaamed mockingly. "And you remember, no doubt, the occasion on which you made me a present of--this!"

The dark eyes shadowed with bitter menace and the shaykh indicated a thin white scar on the angle of his jaw.

"I remember," snarled Clarney, whom pain and anger did not tend to make docile. "It was in Somaliland, years ago. You were in the slave-trade then. A wretch of a nigger escaped from you and took refuge with me. You walked into my camp one night in your high-handed way, started a row and in the ensuing scrap you got a butcher-knife across your face. I wish I'd cut your lousy throat."

"You had your chance," answered the Arab. "Now the tables are turned."

"I thought your stamping-ground lay west," growled Clarney; "Yemen and the Somali country."

"I quit the slave-trade long ago," answered the shaykh. "It is an outworn game. I led a band of thieves in Yemen for a time; then again I was forced to change my location. I came here with a few faithful followers, and by Allah, those wild men nearly slit my throat at first. But I overcame their suspicions, and now I lead more men than have followed me in years.

"They whom you fought off yesterday were my men--scouts I had sent out ahead. My oasis lies far to the west. We have ridden for many days, for I was on my way to this very city. When my scouts rode in and told me of two wanderers, I did not alter my course, for I had business first in Beled-el-Djinn. We rode into the city from the west and saw your tracks in the sand. We followed there, and you were blind buffalo who heard not our coming."

Steve snarled. "You wouldn't have caught us so easy, only we thought no Bedouin would dare come into Kara-Shehr."

Nureddin nodded. "But I am no Bedouin. I have traveled far and seen many lands and many races, and I have read many books. I know that fear is smoke, that the dead are dead, and that djinn and ghosts and curses are mists that the wind blows away. It was because of the tales of the red stone that I came into this forsaken desert. But it has taken months to persuade my men to ride with me here.

"But--I am here! And your presence is a delightful surprize. Doubtless you have guessed why I had you taken alive; I have more elaborate entertainment planned for you and that Pathan swine. Now--I take the Fire of Asshurbanipal and we will go."

He turned toward the dais, and one of his men, a bearded one-eyed giant, exclaimed, "Hold, my lord! Ancient evil reigned here before. the days of Muhammad! The djinn howl through these halls when the winds blow, and men have seen ghosts dancing on the walls beneath the moon. No man of mortals has dared this black city for a thousand years--save one, half a century ago, who fled shrieking.

"You have come here from Yemen; you do not know the ancient curse on this foul city, and this evil stone, which pulses like the red heart of Satan! We have followed you here against our judgment, because you have proven yourself a strong man, and have said you hold a charm against all evil beings. You said you but wished to look on this mysterious gem, but now we see it is your intention to take it for yourself. Do not offend the djinn!"

"Nay, Nureddin, do not offend the djinn!" chorused the other Bedouins. The shaykh's own hard-bitten ruffians, standing in a compact group somewhat apart from the Bedouins, said nothing; hardened to crimes and deeds of impiety, they were less affected by the superstitions of the desert men, to whom the dread tale of the accursed city had been repeated for centuries. Steve, even while hating Nureddin with concentrated venom, realized the magnetic power of the man, the innate leadership that had enabled him to overcome thus far the fears and traditions of ages.

"The curse is laid on infidels who invade the city," answered Nureddin, "not on the Faithful. See, in this chamber have we overcome our kafar foes!"

A white-bearded desert hawk shook his head.

"The curse is more ancient than Muhammad, and recks not of race or creed. Evil men reared this black city in the dawn of the Beginnings of Days. They oppressed our ancestors of the black tents, and warred among themselves; aye, the black walls of this foul city were stained with blood, and echoed to the shouts of unholy revel and the whispers of dark intrigues.

"Thus came the stone to the city: there dwelt a magician at the court of Asshurbanipal, and the black wisdom of ages was not denied to him. To gain honor and power for himself, he dared the horrors of a nameless vast cavern in a dark, untraveled land, and from those fiendhaunted depths he brought that blazing gem, which is carved of the frozen flames of Hell! By reason of his fearful power in black magic, he put a spell on the demon which guarded the ancient gem, and so stole away the stone. And the demon slept in the cavern unknowing.

"So this magician--Xuthltan by name--dwelt in the court of the sultan Asshurbanipal and did magic and forecast events by scanning the lurid deeps of the stone, into which no eyes but his could look unblinded. And men called the stone the Fire of Asshurbanipal, in honor of the king.

"But evil came upon the kingdom and men cried out that it was the curse of the djinn, and the sultan in great fear bade Xuthltan take the gem and cast it into the cavern from which he had taken it, lest worse ill befall them.

"Yet it was not the magician's will to give up the gem wherein he read strange secrets of pre-Adamite days, and he fled to the rebel city of Kara-Shehr, where soon civil war broke out and men strove with one another to possess the gem. Then the king who ruled the city, coveting the stone, seized the magician and put him to death by torture, and in this very room he watched him die; with the gem in his hand the king sat upon the throne--even as he has sat upon the throne--even as he has sat throughout the centuries--even as now he sits!"

The Arab's finger stabbed at the moldering bones on the marble throne, and the wild desert men blenched; even Nureddin's own scoundrels recoiled, catching their breath, but the shaykh showed no sign of perturbation.

"As Xuthltan died," continued the old Bedouin, "he cursed the stone whose magic had not saved him, and he shrieked aloud the fearful words which undid the spell he had put upon the demon in the cavern, and set the monster free. And crying out on the forgotten gods, Cthulhu and Koth and Yog-Sothoth, and all the pre-Adamite Dwellers in the black cities under the sea and the caverns of the earth, he called upon them--to take back that which was theirs, and with his dying breath pronounced doom on the false king, and that doom was that the king should sit on his throne holding in his hand the Fire of Asshurbanipal until the thunder of Judgment Day.

"Thereat the great stone cried out as a live thing cries, and the king and his soldiers saw a black cloud spinning up from the floor, and out of the cloud blew a fetid wind, and out of the wind came a grisly shape which stretched forth fearsome paws and laid them on the king, who shriveled and died at their touch. And the soldiers fled screaming, and all the people of the city ran forth wailing into the desert, where they perished or gained through the wastes to the far oasis towns. Kara-Shehr lay silent and deserted, the haunt of the lizard and the jackal. And when some of the desert people ventured into the city they found the king dead on his throne, clutching the blazing gem, but they dared not lay hand upon it, for they knew the demon lurked near to guard it through all the ages as he lurks near even as we stand here."

The warriors shuddered involuntarily and glanced about, and Nureddin said, "Why did he not come forth when the Franks entered the chamber? Is he deaf, that the sound of the combat has not awakened him?"

"We have not touched the gem," answered the old Bedouin, "nor had the Franks molested it. Men have looked on it and lived; but no mortal may touch it and survive."

Nureddin started to speak, gazed at the stubborn, uneasy faces and realized the futility of argument. His attitude changed abruptly.

"I am master here," he snapped, dropping a hand to his holster. "I have not sweat and bled for this gem to be balked at the last by groundless fears! Stand back, all! Let any man cross me at the peril of his head!"

He faced them, his eyes blazing, and they fell back, cowed by the force of his ruthless personality. He strode boldly up the marble steps, and the Arabs caught their breath, recoiling toward the door; Yar Ali, conscious at last, groaned dismally. God! thought Steve, what a barbaric scene!--bound captives on the dust-heaped floor, wild warriors clustered about, gripping their weapons, the raw acrid scent of blood and burnt powder still fouling the air, corpses strewn in a horrid welter of blood, brains and entrails--and on the dais, the hawk-faced shaykh, oblivious to all except the evil crimson glow in the skeleton fingers that rested on the marble throne.

A tense silence gripped all as Nureddin stretched forth his hand slowly, as if hypnotized by the throbbing crimson light. And in Steve's subconsciousness there shuddered a dim echo, as of something vast and loathsome waking suddenly from an age-long slumber. The American's eyes moved instinctively toward the grim cyclopean walls. The jewel's glow had altered strangely; it burned a deeper, darker red, angry and menacing.

"Heart of all evil," murmured the shaykh, "how many princes died for thee in the Beginnings of Happenings? Surely the blood of kings throbs in thee. The sultans and the princesses and the generals who wore thee, they are dust and are forgotten, but thou blazest with majesty undimmed, fire of the world--"

Nureddin seized the stone. A shuddery wail broke from the Arabs, cut through by a sharp inhuman cry. To Steve it seemed, horribly, that the great jewel had cried out like a living thing! The stone slipped from the shaykh's hand. Nureddin might have dropped it; to Steve it looked as though it leaped convulsively, as a live thing might leap. It rolled from the dais, bounding from step to step, with Nureddin springing after it, cursing as his clutching hand missed it. It struck the floor, veered sharply, and despite the deep dust, rolled like a revolving ball of fire toward the back wall. Nureddin was close upon it--it struck the wall--the shaykh's hand reached for it.

A scream of mortal fear ripped the tense silence. Without warning the solid wall had opened. Out of the black wall that gaped there, a tentacle shot and gripped the shaykh's body as a python girdles its victim, and jerked him headlong into the darkness. And then the wall showed blank and solid once more; only from within sounded a hideous, high-pitched, muffled screaming that chilled the blood of the listeners. Howling wordlessly, the Arabs stampeded, jammed in a battling, screeching mass in the doorway, tore through and raced madly down the wide stairs.

Steve and Yar Ali, lying helplessly, heard the frenzied clamor of their flight fade away into the distance, and gazed in dumb horror at the grim wall. The shrieks had faded into a more horrific silence. Holding their breath, they heard suddenly a sound that froze the blood in their veins--the soft sliding of metal or stone in a groove. At the same time the hidden door began to open, and Steve caught a glimmer in the blackness that might have been the glitter of monstrous eyes. He closed his own eyes; he dared not look upon whatever horror slunk from that hideous black well. He knew that there are strains the human brain cannot stand, and every primitive instinct in his soul cried out to him that this thing was nightmare and lunacy. He sensed that Yar Ali likewise closed his eyes, and the two lay like dead men.

Clarney heard no sound, but he sensed the presence of a horrific evil too grisly for human comprehension--of an Invader from Outer Gulfs and far black reaches of cosmic being. A deadly cold pervaded the chamber, and Steve felt the glare of inhuman eyes sear through his closed lids and freeze his consciousness. If he looked, if he opened his eyes, he knew stark black madness would be his instant lot.

He felt a soul-shakingly foul breath against his face and knew that the monster was bending close above him, but he lay like a man frozen in a nightmare. He clung to one thought: neither he nor Yar Ali had touched the jewel this horror guarded.

Then he no longer smelled the foul odor, the coldness in the air grew appreciably less, and he heard again the secret door slide in its groove. The fiend was returning to its hiding-place. Not all the legions of Hell could have prevented Steve's eyes from opening a trifle. He had only a glimpse as the hidden door slid to--and that one glimpse was enough to drive all consciousness from his brain. Steve Clarney, iron-nerved adventurer, fainted for the only time in his checkered life.

How long he lay there Steve never knew, but it could not have been long, for he was roused by Yar Ali's whisper, "Lie still, sahib, a little shifting of my body and I can reach thy cords with my teeth."

Steve felt the Afghan's powerful teeth at work on his bonds, and as he lay with his face jammed into the thick dust, and his wounded shoulder began to throb agonizingly--he had forgotten it until now--he began to gather the wandering threads of his consciousness, and it all came back to him. How much, he wondered dazedly, had been the nightmares of delirium, born from suffering and the thirst that caked his throat? The fight with the Arabs had been real--the bonds and the wounds showed that--but the grisly doom of the shaykh--the thing that had crept out of the black entrance in the wall--surely that had been a figment of delirium. Nureddin had fallen into a well or pit of some sort--Stave felt his hands were free and he rose to a sitting posture, fumbling for a pocket-knife the Arabs had overlooked. He did not look up or about the chamber as he slashed the cords that bound his ankles, and then freed Yar Ali, working awkwardly because his left arm was stiff and useless.

"Where are the Bedouins?" he asked, as the Afghan rose, lifting him to his feet.

"Allah, sahib," whispered Yar Ali, "are you mad? Have you forgotten? Let us go quickly before the djinn returns!"

"It was a nightmare," muttered Steve. "Look--the jewel is back on the throne--" His voice died out. Again that red glow throbbed about the ancient throne, reflecting from the moldering skull; again in the outstretched finger-bones pulsed the Fire of Asshurbanipal. But at the foot of the throne lay another object that had not been there before--the severed head of Nureddin el Mekru stared sightlessly up at the gray light filtering through the stone ceiling. The bloodless lips were drawn back from the teeth in a ghastly grin, the staring eyes mirrored an intolerable horror. In the thick dust of the floor three spoors showed--one of the shaykh's where he had followed the red jewel as it rolled to the wall, and above it two other sets of tracks, coming to the throne and returning to the wall--vast, shapeless tracks, as of splayed feet, taloned and gigantic, neither human nor animal.

"My God!" choked Steve. "It was true--and the Thing--the Thing I saw--"

Steve remembered the flight from that chamber as a rushing nightmare, in which he and his companion hurtled headlong down an endless stair that was a gray well of fear, raced blindly through dusty silent chambers, past the glowering idol in the mighty hall and into the blazing light of the desert sun, where they fell slavering, fighting for breath.

Again Steve was roused by the Afridi's voice: "Sahib, sahib, in the Name of Allah the Compassionate, our luck has turned!"

Steve looked at his companion as a man might look in a trance: The big Afghan's garments were in tatters, and blood-soaked. He was stained with dust and caked with blood, and his voice was a croak. But his eyes were alight with hope and he pointed with a trembling finger.

"In the shade of yon ruined wall!" he croaked, striving to moisten his blackened lips. "Allah il allah! The horses of the men we killed! With canteens and food-pouches at the saddle-horns! Those dogs fled without halting for the steeds of their comrades!"

New life surged up into Steve's bosom and he rose, staggering.

"Out of here," he mumbled. "Out of here, quick!"

Like dying men they stumbled to the horses, tore them loose and climbed fumblingly into the saddles.

"We'll lead the spare mounts," croaked Steve, and Yar Ali nodded emphatic agreement.

"Belike we shall need them ere we sight the coast."

Though their tortured nerves screamed for the water that swung in canteens at the saddle-horns, they turned the mounts aside and, swaying in the saddle, rode like flying corpses down the long sandy street of Kara-Shehr, between the ruined palaces and the crumbling columns, crossed the fallen wall and swept out into the desert. Not once did either glance back toward that black pile of ancient horror, nor did either speak until the ruins faded into the hazy distance. Then and only then did they draw rein and ease their thirst.

"Allah il allah!" said Yar Ali piously. "Those dogs have beaten me until it is as though every bone in my body were broken. Dismount, I beg thee, sahib, and let me probe for that accursed bullet, and dress thy shoulder to the best of my meager ability."

While this was going on, Yar Ali spoke, avoiding his friend's eye, "You said, sahib, you said something about--about seeing? What saw ye, in Allah's name?"

A strong shudder shook the American's steely fray "You didn't look when--when the--the Thing put back the jewel in the skeleton's hand and left Nureddin's head on the dais?"

"By Allah, not I!" swore Yar Ali. "My eyes were as closed as if they had been welded together by the molten irons of Satan!"

Steve made no reply until the comrades had once more swung into the saddle and started on their long trek for the coast, which, with spare horses, food, water and weapons, they had a good chance to reach.

"I looked," the American said somberly. "I wish I had not; I know I'll dream about it for the rest of my life. I had only a glance; I couldn't describe it as a man describes an earthly thing. God help me, it wasn't earthly or sane either. Mankind isn't the first owner of the earth; there were Beings here before his coming--and now, survivals of hideously ancient epochs. Maybe spheres of alien dimensions press unseen on this material universe today. Sorcerers have called up sleeping devils before now and controlled them with magic. It is not unreasonable to suppose an Assyrian magician could invoke an elemental demon out of the earth to avenge him and guard something that must have come out of Hell in the first place."

"I'll try to tell you what I glimpsed; then we'll never speak of it again. It was gigantic and black and shadowy; it was a hulking monstrosity that walked upright like a man, but it was like a toad, too, and it was winged and tentacled. I saw only its back; if I'd seen the front of it--its face--I'd have undoubtedly lost my mind. The old Arab was right; God help us, it was the monster that Xuthltan called up out of the dark blind caverns of the earth to guard the Fire of Asshurbanipal!"

Contents

SOLOMON KANE

By Robert E. Howard

Chapter 1.

The Coming of Solomon

The moonlight shimmered hazily, making silvery mists of illusion among the shadowy trees. A faint breeze whispered down the valley, bearing a shadow that was not of the moon-mist. A faint scent of smoke was apparent.

The man whose long, swinging strides, unhurried yet unswerving, had carried him for many a mile since sunrise, stopped suddenly. A movement in the trees had caught his attention, and he moved silently toward the shadows, a hand resting lightly on the hilt of his long, slim rapier.

Warily he advanced, his eyes striving to pierce the darkness that brooded under the trees. This was a wild and menacing country; death might be lurking under those trees. Then his hand fell away from the hilt and he leaned forward. Death indeed was there, but not in such shape as might cause him fear.

"The fires of Hades!" he murmured. "A girl! What has harmed you, child? Be not afraid of me."

The girl looked up at him, her face like a dim white rose in the dark.

"You--who are--you?" her words came in gasps.

"Naught but a wanderer, a landless man, but a friend to all in need." The gentle voice sounded somehow incongruous, coming from the man.

The girl sought to prop herself up on her elbow, and instantly he knelt and raised her to a sitting position, her head resting against his shoulder. His hand touched her breast and came away red and wet.

"Tell me." His voice was soft, soothing, as one speaks to a babe.

"Le Loup," she gasped, her voice swiftly growing weaker. "He and his men--descended upon our village--a mile up the valley. They robbed--slew--burned--"

"That, then, was the smoke I scented," muttered the man. "Go on, child."

"I ran. He, the Wolf, pursued me--and--caught me--" The words died away in a shuddering silence.

"I understand, child. Then--?"

"Then--he--he--stabbed me--with his dagger--oh, blessed saints!-- mercy--"

Suddenly the slim form went limp. The man eased her to the earth, and touched her brow lightly.

"Dead!" he muttered.

Slowly he rose, mechanically wiping his hands upon his cloak. A dark scowl had settled on his somber brow. Yet he made no wild, reckless vow, swore no oath by saints or devils.

"Men shall die for this," he said coldly.

Chapter 2.

The Lair of the Wolf

"You are a fool!" The words came in a cold snarl that curdled the hearer's blood.

He who had just been named a fool lowered his eyes sullenly without answer.

"You and all the others I lead!" The speaker leaned forward, his fist pounding emphasis on the rude table between them. He was a tall, rangy-built man, supple as a leopard and with a lean, cruel, predatory face. His eyes danced and glittered with a kind of reckless mockery.

The fellow spoken to replied sullenly, "This Solomon Kane is a demon from Hell, I tell you."

"Faugh! Dolt! He is a man--who will die from a pistol ball or a sword thrust."

"So thought Jean, Juan and La Costa," answered the other grimly. "Where are they? Ask the mountain wolves that tore the flesh from their dead bones. Where does this Kane hide? We have searched the mountains and the valleys for leagues, and we have found no trace. I tell you, Le Loup, he comes up from Hell. I knew no good would come from hanging that friar a moon ago."

The Wolf strummed impatiently upon the table. His keen face, despite lines of wild living and dissipation, was the face of a thinker. The superstitions of his followers affected him not at all.

"Faugh! I say again. The fellow has found some cavern or secret vale of which we do not know where he hides in the day."

"And at night he sallies forth and slays us," gloomily commented the other. "He hunts us down as a wolf hunts deer--by God, Le Loup, you name yourself Wolf but I think you have met at last a fiercer and more crafty wolf than yourself! The first we know of this man is when we find Jean, the most desperate bandit unhung, nailed to a tree with his own dagger through his breast, and the letters S.L.K. carved upon his dead cheeks. Then the Spaniard Juan is struck down, and after we find him he lives long enough to tell us that the slayer is an Englishman, Solomon Kane, who has sworn to destroy our entire band! What then? La Costa, a swordsman second only to yourself, goes forth swearing to meet this Kane. By the demons of perdition, it seems he met him! For we found his sword-pierced corpse upon a cliff. What now? Are we all to fall before this English fiend?"

"True, our best men have been done to death by him," mused the bandit chief. "Soon the rest return from that little trip to the hermit's; then we shall see. Kane can not hide forever. Then--ha, what was that?"

The two turned swiftly as a shadow fell across the table. Into the entrance of the cave that formed the bandit lair, a man staggered. His eyes were wide and staring; he reeled on buckling legs, and a dark red stain dyed his tunic. He came a few tottering steps forward, then pitched across the table, sliding off onto the floor.

"Hell's devils!" cursed the Wolf, hauling him upright and propping him in a chair. "Where are the rest, curse you?"

"Dead! All dead!"

"How? Satan's curses on you, speak!" The Wolf shook the man savagely, the other bandit gazing on in wide-eyed horror.

"We reached the hermit's hut just as the moon rose," the man muttered. "I stayed outside--to watch--the others went in--to torture the hermit--to make him reveal--the hiding-place--of his gold."

"Yes, yes! Then what?" The Wolf was raging with impatience.

"Then the world turned red--the hut went up in a roar and a red rain flooded the valley--through it I saw--the hermit and a tall man clad all in black--coming from the trees--"

"Solomon Kane!" gasped the bandit. "I knew it! I--"

"Silence, fool!" snarled the chief. "Go on!"

"I fled--Kane pursued--wounded me--but I outran--him--got--here-- first--"

The man slumped forward on the table.

"Saints and devils!" raged the Wolf. "What does he look like, this Kane?"

"Like--Satan--"

The voice trailed off in silence. The dead man slid from the table to lie in a red heap upon the floor.

"Like Satan!" babbled the other bandit. "I told you! 'Tis the Horned One himself! I tell you--"

He ceased as a frightened face peered in at the cave entrance.

"Kane?"

"Aye." The Wolf was too much at sea to lie. "Keep close watch, La Mon; in a moment the Rat and I will join you."

The face withdrew and Le Loup turned to the other.

"This ends the band," said he. "You, I, and that thief La Mon are all that are left. What would you suggest?"

The Rat's pallid lips barely formed the word: "Flight!"

"You are right. Let us take the gems and gold from the chests and flee, using the secret passageway."

"And La Mon?"

"He can watch until we are ready to flee. Then--why divide the treasure three ways?"

A faint smile touched the Rat's malevolent features. Then a sudden thought smote him.

"He," indicating the corpse on the floor, "said, 'I got here first.' Does that mean Kane was pursuing him here?" And as the Wolf nodded impatiently the other turned to the chests with chattering haste.

The flickering candle on the rough table lighted up a strange and wild scene. The light, uncertain and dancing, gleamed redly in the slowly widening lake of blood in which the dead man lay; it danced upon the heaps of gems and coins emptied hastily upon the floor from the brass-bound chests that ranged the walls; and it glittered in the eyes of the Wolf with the same gleam which sparkled from his sheathed dagger.

The chests were empty, their treasure lying in a shimmering mass upon the bloodstained floor. The Wolf stopped and listened. Outside was silence. There was no moon, and Le Loup's keen imagination pictured the dark slayer, Solomon Kane, gliding through the blackness, a shadow among shadows. He grinned crookedly; this time the Englishman would be foiled.

"There is a chest yet unopened," said he, pointing.

The Rat, with a muttered exclamation of surprize, bent over the chest indicated. With a single, catlike motion, the Wolf sprang upon him, sheathing his dagger to the hilt in the Rat's back, between the shoulders. The Rat sagged to the floor without a sound.

"Why divide the treasure two ways?" murmured Le Loup, wiping his blade upon the dead man's doublet. "Now for La Mon."

He stepped toward the door; then stopped and shrank back.

At first he thought that it was the shadow of a man who stood in the entrance; then he saw that it was a man himself, though so dark and still he stood that a fantastic semblance of shadow was lent him by the guttering candle.

A tall man, as tall as Le Loup he was, clad in black from head to foot, in plain, close-fitting garments that somehow suited the somber face. Long arms and broad shoulders betokened the swordsman, as plainly as the long rapier in his hand. The features of the man were saturnine and gloomy. A kind of dark pallor lent him a ghostly appearance in the uncertain light, an effect heightened by the satanic darkness of his lowering brows. Eyes, large, deep-set and unblinking, fixed their gaze upon the bandit, and looking into them, Le Loup was unable to decide what color they were. Strangely, the mephistophelean trend of the lower features was offset by a high, broad forehead, though this was partly hidden by a featherless hat.

That forehead marked the dreamer, the idealist, the introvert, just as the eyes and the thin, straight nose betrayed the fanatic. An observer would have been struck by the eyes of the two men who stood there, facing each other. Eyes of both betokened untold deeps of power, but there the resemblance ceased.

The eyes of the bandit were hard, almost opaque, with a curious scintillant shallowness that reflected a thousand changing lights and gleams, like some strange gem; there was mockery in those eyes, cruelty and recklessness.

The eyes of the man in black, on the other hand, deep-set and staring from under prominent brows, were cold but deep; gazing into them, one had the impression of looking into countless fathoms of ice.

Now the eyes clashed, and the Wolf, who was used to being feared, felt a strange coolness on his spine. The sensation was new to him--a new thrill to one who lived for thrills, and he laughed suddenly.

"You are Solomon Kane, I suppose?" he asked, managing to make his question sound politely incurious.

"I am Solomon Kane." The voice was resonant and powerful. "Are you prepared to meet your God?"

"Why, Monsieur," Le Loup answered, bowing, "I assure you I am as ready as I ever will be. I might ask Monsieur the same question."

"No doubt I stated my inquiry wrongly," Kane said grimly. "I will change it: Are you prepared to meet your master, the Devil?"

"As to that, Monsieur"--Le Loup examined his finger nails with elaborate unconcern--"I must say that I can at present render a most satisfactory account to his Horned Excellency, though really I have no intention of so doing--for a while at least."

Le Loup did not wonder as to the fate of La Mon; Kane's presence in the cave was sufficient answer that did not need the trace of blood on his rapier to verify it.

"What I wish to know, Monsieur," said the bandit, "is why in the Devil's name have you harassed my band as you have, and how did you destroy that last set of fools?"

"Your last question is easily answered, sir," Kane replied. "I myself had the tale spread that the hermit possessed a store of gold, knowing that would draw your scum as carrion draws vultures. For days and nights I have watched the hut, and tonight, when I saw your villains coming, I warned the hermit, and together we went among the trees back of the hut. Then, when the rogues were inside, I struck flint and steel to the train I had laid, and flame ran through the trees like a red snake until it reached the powder I had placed beneath the hut floor. Then the hut and thirteen sinners went to Hell in a great roar of flame and smoke. True, one escaped, but him I had slain in the forest had not I stumbled and fallen upon a broken root, which gave him time to elude me."

"Monsieur," said Le Loup with another low bow, "I grant you the admiration I must needs bestow on a brave and shrewd foeman. Yet tell me this: Why have you followed me as a wolf follows deer?"

"Some moons ago," said Kane, his frown becoming more menacing, "you and your fiends raided a small village down the valley. You know the details better than I. There was a girl there, a mere child, who, hoping to escape your lust, fled up the valley; but you, you jackal of Hell, you caught her and left her, violated and dying. I found her there, and above her dead form I made up my mind to hunt you down and kill you."

"H'm," mused the Wolf. "Yes, I remember the wench. Mon Dieu, so the softer sentiments enter into the affair! Monsieur, I had not thought you an amorous man; be not jealous, good fellow, there are many more wenches."

"Le Loup, take care!" Kane exclaimed, a terrible menace in his voice, "I have never yet done a man to death by torture, but by God, sir, you tempt me!"

The tone, and more especially the unexpected oath, coming as it did from Kane, slightly sobered Le Loup; his eyes narrowed and his hand moved toward his rapier. The air was tense for an instant; then the Wolf relaxed elaborately.

"Who was the girl?" he asked idly. "Your wife?"

"I never saw her before," answered Kane.

"Nom d'un nom!" swore the bandit. "What sort of a man are you, Monsieur, who takes up a feud of this sort merely to avenge a wench unknown to you?"

"That, sir, is my own affair; it is sufficient that I do so."

Kane could not have explained, even to himself, nor did he ever seek an explanation within himself. A true fanatic, his promptings were reasons enough for his actions.

"You are right, Monsieur." Le Loup was sparring now for time; casually he edged backward inch by inch, with such consummate acting skill that he aroused no suspicion even in the hawk who watched him. "Monsieur," said he, "possibly you will say that you are merely a noble cavalier, wandering about like a true Galahad, protecting the weaker; but you and I know different. There on the floor is the equivalent to an emperor's ransom. Let us divide it peaceably; then if you like not my company, why--nom d'un nom!--we can go our separate ways."

Kane leaned forward, a terrible brooding threat growing in his cold eyes. He seemed like a great condor about to launch himself upon his victim.

"Sir, do you assume me to be as great a villain as yourself?"

Suddenly Le Loup threw back his head, his eyes dancing and leaping with a wild mockery and a kind of insane recklessness. His shout of laughter sent the echoes flying.

"Gods of Hell! No, you fool, I do not class you with myself! Mon Dieu, Monsieur Kane, you have a task indeed if you intend to avenge all the wenches who have known my favors!"

"Shades of death! Shall I waste time in parleying with this base scoundrel!" Kane snarled in a voice suddenly blood-thirsting, and his lean frame flashed forward like a bent bow suddenly released.

At the same instant Le Loup with a wild laugh bounded backward with a movement as swift as Kane's. His timing was perfect; his back- flung hands struck the table and hurled it aside, plunging the cave into darkness as the candle toppled and went out.

Kane's rapier sang like an arrow in the dark as he thrust blindly and ferociously.

"Adieu, Monsieur Galahad!" The taunt came from somewhere in front of him, but Kane, plunging toward the sound with the savage fury of baffled wrath, caromed against a blank wall that did not yield to his blow. From somewhere seemed to come an echo of a mocking laugh.

Kane whirled, eyes fixed on the dimly outlined entrance, thinking his foe would try to slip past him and out of the cave; but no form bulked there, and when his groping hands found the candle and lighted it, the cave was empty, save for himself and the dead men on the floor.

Chapter 3.

The Chant of the Drums

Across the dusky waters the whisper came: boom, boom, boom!--a sullen reiteration. Far away and more faintly sounded a whisper of different timbre: thrum, throom, thrum! Back and forth went the vibrations as the throbbing drums spoke to each other. What tales did they carry? What monstrous secrets whispered across the sullen, shadowy reaches of the unmapped jungle?

"This, you are sure, is the bay where the Spanish ship put in?"

"Yes, Senhor; the Negro swears this is the bay where the white man left the ship alone and went into the jungle."

Kane nodded grimly.

"Then put me ashore here, alone. Wait seven days; then if I have not returned and if you have no word of me, set sail wherever you will."

"Yes, Senhor."

The waves slapped lazily against the sides of the boat that carried Kane ashore. The village that he sought was on the river bank but set back from the bay shore, the jungle hiding it from sight of the ship.

Kane had adopted what seemed the most hazardous course, that of going ashore by night, for the reason that he knew, if the man he sought were in the village, he would never reach it by day. As it was, he was taking a most desperate chance in daring the nighttime jungle, but all his life he had been used to taking desperate chances. Now he gambled his life upon the slim chance of gaining the Negro village under cover of darkness and unknown to the villagers.

At the beach he left the boat with a few muttered commands, and as the rowers put back to the ship which lay anchored some distance out in the bay, he turned and engulfed himself in the blackness of the jungle. Sword in one hand, dagger in the other, he stole forward, seeking to keep pointed in the direction from which the drums still muttered and grumbled.

He went with the stealth and easy movement of a leopard, feeling his way cautiously, every nerve alert and straining, but the way was not easy. Vines tripped him and slapped him in the face, impeding his progress; he was forced to grope his way between the huge boles of towering trees, and all through the underbrush about him sounded vague and menacing rustlings and shadows of movement. Thrice his foot touched something that moved beneath it and writhed away, and once he glimpsed the baleful glimmer of feline eyes among the trees. They vanished, however, as he advanced.

Thrum, thrum, thrum, came the ceaseless monotone of the drums: war and death (they said); blood and lust; human sacrifice and human feast! The soul of Africa (said the drums); the spirit of the jungle; the chant of the gods of outer darkness, the gods that roar and gibber, the gods men knew when dawns were young, beast-eyed, gaping- mouthed, huge-bellied, bloody-handed, the Black Gods (sang the drums).

All this and more the drums roared and bellowed to Kane as he worked his way through the forest. Somewhere in his soul a responsive chord was smitten and answered. You too are of the night (sang the drums); there is the strength of darkness, the strength of the primitive in you; come back down the ages; let us teach you, let us teach you (chanted the drums).

Kane stepped out of the thick jungle and came upon a plainly defined trail. Beyond through the trees came the gleam of the village fires, flames glowing through the palisades. Kane walked down the trail swiftly.

He went silently and warily, sword extended in front of him, eyes straining to catch any hint of movement in the darkness ahead, for the trees loomed like sullen giants on each hand; sometimes their great branches intertwined above the trail and he could see only a slight way ahead of him.

Like a dark ghost he moved along the shadowed trail; alertly he stared and harkened; yet no warning came first to him, as a great, vague bulk rose up out of the shadows and struck him down, silently.

Chapter 4.

The Black God

Thrum, thrum, thrum! Somewhere, with deadening monotony, a cadence was repeated, over and over, bearing out the same theme: "Fool--fool-- fool!" Now it was far away, now he could stretch out his hand and almost reach it. Now it merged with the throbbing in his head until the two vibrations were as one: "Fool--fool--fool--fool--"

The fogs faded and vanished. Kane sought to raise his hand to his head, but found that he was bound hand and foot. He lay on the floor of a hut--alone? He twisted about to view the place. No, two eyes glimmered at him from the darkness. Now a form took shape, and Kane, still mazed, believed that he looked on the man who had struck him unconscious. Yet no; this man could never strike such a blow. He was lean, withered and wrinkled. The only thing that seemed alive about him were his eyes, and they seemed like the eyes of a snake.

The man squatted on the floor of the hut, near the doorway, naked save for a loin-cloth and the usual paraphernalia of bracelets, anklets and armlets. Weird fetishes of ivory, bone and hide, animal and human, adorned his arms and legs. Suddenly and unexpectedly he spoke in English.

"Ha, you wake, white man? Why you come here, eh?"

Kane asked the inevitable question, following the habit of the Caucasian.

"You speak my language--how is that?"

The black man grinned.

"I slave--long time, me boy. Me, N'Longa, ju-ju man, me, great fetish. No black man like me! You white man, you hunt brother?"

Kane snarled. "I! Brother! I seek a man, yes."

The Negro nodded. "Maybe so you find um, eh?"

"He dies!"

Again the Negro grinned. "Me pow'rful ju-ju man," he announced apropos of nothing. He bent closer. "White man you hunt, eyes like a leopard, eh? Yes? Ha! ha! ha! ha! Listen, white man: man-with-eyes-of- a-leopard, he and Chief Songa make pow'rful palaver; they blood brothers now. Say nothing, I help you; you help me, eh?"

"Why should you help me?" asked Kane suspiciously.

The ju-ju man bent closer and whispered, "White man Songa's right- hand man; Songa more pow'rful than N'Longa. White man mighty ju-ju! N'Longa's white brother kill man--with-eyes-of-a-leopard, be blood brother to N'Longa, N'Longa be more pow'rful than Songa; palaver set."

And like a dusky ghost he floated out of the hut so swiftly that Kane was not sure but that the whole affair was a dream.

Without, Kane could see the flare of fires. The drums were still booming, but close at hand the tones merged and mingled, and the impulse-producing vibrations were lost. All seemed a barbaric clamor without rhyme or reason, yet there was an undertone of mockery there, savage and gloating. "Lies," thought Kane, his mind still swimming, "jungle lies like jungle women that lure a man to his doom."

Two warriors entered the hut--black giants, hideous with paint and armed with crude spears. They lifted the white man and carried him out of the hut. They bore him across an open space, leaned him upright against a post and bound him there. About him, behind him and to the side, a great semicircle of black faces leered and faded in the firelight as the flames leaped and sank. There in front of him loomed a shape hideous and obscene--a black, formless thing, a grotesque parody of the human. Still, brooding, bloodstained, like the formless soul of Africa, the horror, the Black God.

And in front and to each side, upon roughly carven thrones of teakwood, sat two men. He who sat upon the right was a black man, huge, ungainly, a gigantic and unlovely mass of dusky flesh and muscles. Small, hoglike eyes blinked out over sin-marked cheeks; huge, flabby red lips pursed in fleshly haughtiness.

The other--

"Ah, Monsieur, we meet again." The speaker was far from being the debonair villain who had taunted Kane in the cavern among the mountains. His clothes were rags; there were more lines in his face; he had sunk lower in the years that had passed. Yet his eyes still gleamed and danced with their old recklessness and his voice held the same mocking timbre.

"The last time I heard that accursed voice," said Kane calmly, "was in a cave, in darkness, whence you fled like a hunted rat."

"Aye, under different conditions," answered Le Loup imperturbably. "What did you do after blundering about like an elephant in the dark?"

Kane hesitated, then: "I left the mountain--"

"By the front entrance? Yes? I might have known you were too stupid to find the secret door. Hoofs of the Devil, had you thrust against the chest with the golden lock, which stood against the wall, the door had opened to you and revealed the secret passageway through which I went."

"I traced you to the nearest port and there took ship and followed you to Italy, where I found you had gone."

"Aye, by the saints, you nearly cornered me in Florence. Ho! ho! ho! I was climbing through a back window while Monsieur Galahad was battering down the front door of the tavern. And had your horse not gone lame, you would have caught up with me on the road to Rome. Again, the ship on which I left Spain had barely put out to sea when Monsieur Galahad rides up to the wharfs. Why have you followed me like this? I do not understand."

"Because you are a rogue whom it is my destiny to kill," answered Kane coldly. He did not understand. All his life he had roamed about the world aiding the weak and fighting oppression, he neither knew nor questioned why. That was his obsession, his driving force of life. Cruelty and tyranny to the weak sent a red blaze of fury, fierce and lasting, through his soul. When the full flame of his hatred was wakened and loosed, there was no rest for him until his vengeance had been fulfilled to the uttermost. If he thought of it at all, he considered himself a fulfiller of God's judgment, a vessel of wrath to be emptied upon the souls of the unrighteous. Yet in the full sense of the word Solomon Kane was not wholly a Puritan, though he thought of himself as such.

Le Loup shrugged his shoulders. "I could understand had I wronged you personally. Mon Dieu! I, too, would follow an enemy across the world, but, though I would have joyfully slain and robbed you, I never heard of you until you declared war on me."

Kane was silent, his still fury overcoming him. Though he did not realize it, the Wolf was more than merely an enemy to him; the bandit symbolized, to Kane, all the things against which the Puritan had fought all his life: cruelty, outrage, oppression and tyranny.

Le Loup broke in on his vengeful meditations. "What did you do with the treasure, which--gods of Hades!--took me years to accumulate? Devil take it, I had time only to snatch a handful of coins and trinkets as I ran."

"I took such as I needed to hunt you down. The rest I gave to the villages which you had looted."

"Saints and the devil!" swore Le Loup. "Monsieur, you are the greatest fool I have yet met. To throw that vast treasure--by Satan, I rage to think of it in the hands of base peasants, vile villagers! Yet, ho! ho! ho! ho! ho! they will steal, and kill each other for it! That is human nature."

"Yes, damn you!" flamed Kane suddenly, showing that his conscience had not been at rest. "Doubtless they will, being fools. Yet what could I do? Had I left it there, people might have starved and gone naked for lack of it. More, it would have been found, and theft and slaughter would have followed anyway. You are to blame, for had this treasure been left with its rightful owners, no such trouble would have ensued."

The Wolf grinned without reply. Kane not being a profane man, his rare curses had double effect and always startled his hearers, no matter how vicious or hardened they might be.

It was Kane who spoke next. "Why have you fled from me across the world? You do not really fear me."

"No, you are right. Really I do not know; perhaps flight is a habit which is difficult to break. I made my mistake when I did not kill you that night in the mountains. I am sure I could kill you in a fair fight, yet I have never even, ere now, sought to ambush you. Somehow I have not had a liking to meet you, Monsieur--a whim of mine, a mere whim. Then--mon Dieu!--

mayhap I have enjoyed a new sensation--and I had thought that I had exhausted the thrills of life. And then, a man must either be the hunter or the hunted. Until now, Monsieur, I was the hunted, but I grew weary of the role--I thought I had thrown you off the trail."

"A Negro slave, brought from this vicinity, told a Portugal ship captain of a white man who landed from a Spanish ship and went into the jungle. I heard of it and hired the ship, paying the captain to bring me here."

"Monsieur, I admire you for your attempt, but you must admire me, too! Alone I came into this village, and alone among savages and cannibals I--with some slight knowledge of the language learned from a slave aboard ship--I gained the confidence of King Songa and supplanted that mummer, N'Longa. I am a braver man than you, Monsieur, for I had no ship to retreat to, and a ship is waiting for you."

"I admire your courage," said Kane, "but you are content to rule amongst cannibals--you the blackest soul of them all. I intend to return to my own people when I have slain you."

"Your confidence would be admirable were it not amusing. Ho, Gulka!"

A giant Negro stalked into the space between them. He was the hugest man that Kane had ever seen, though he moved with catlike ease and suppleness. His arms and legs were like trees, and the great, sinuous muscles rippled with each motion. His apelike head was set squarely between gigantic shoulders. His great, dusky hands were like the talons of an ape, and his brow slanted back from above bestial eyes. Flat nose and great, thick red lips completed this picture of primitive, lustful savagery.

"That is Gulka, the gorilla-slayer," said Le Loup. "He it was who lay in wait beside the trail and smote you down. You are like a wolf, yourself, Monsieur Kane, but since your ship hove in sight you have been watched by many eyes, and had you had all the powers of a leopard, you had not seen Gulka nor heard him. He hunts the most terrible and crafty of all beasts, in their native forests, far to the north, the beasts-who-walk-like-men--as that one, whom he slew some days since."

Kane, following Le Loup's fingers, made out a curious, manlike thing, dangling from a roof-pole of a hut. A jagged end thrust through the thing's body held it there. Kane could scarcely distinguish its characteristics by the firelight, but there was a weird, humanlike semblance about the hideous, hairy thing.

"A female gorilla that Gulka slew and brought to the village," said Le Loup.

The giant black slouched close to Kane and stared into the white man's eyes. Kane returned his gaze somberly, and presently the Negro's eyes dropped sullenly and he slouched back a few paces. The look in the Puritan's grim eyes had pierced the primitive hazes of the gorilla-slayer's soul, and for the first time in his life he felt fear. To throw this off, he tossed a challenging look about; then, with unexpected animalness, he struck his huge chest resoundingly, grinned cavernously and flexed his mighty arms. No one spoke. Primordial bestiality had the stage, and the more highly developed types looked on with various feelings of amusement, tolerance or contempt.

Gulka glanced furtively at Kane to see if the white man was watching him, then with a sudden beastly roar, plunged forward and dragged a man from the semicircle. While the trembling victim screeched for mercy, the giant hurled him upon the crude altar before the shadowy idol. A spear rose and flashed, and the screeching ceased. The Black God looked on, his monstrous features seeming to leer in the flickering firelight. He had drunk; was the Black God pleased with the draft--with the sacrifice?

Gulka stalked back, and stopping before Kane, flourished the bloody spear before the white man's face.

Le Loup laughed. Then suddenly N'Longa appeared. He came from nowhere in particular; suddenly he was standing there, beside the post to which Kane was bound. A lifetime of study of the art of illusion had given the ju-ju man a highly technical knowledge of appearing and disappearing--which after all, consisted only in timing the audience's attention.

He waved Gulka aside with a grand gesture, and the gorilla-man slunk back, apparently to get out of N'Longa's gaze--then with incredible swiftness he turned and struck the ju-ju man a terrific blow upon the side of the head with his open hand. N'Longa went down like a felled ox, and in an instant he had been seized and bound to a post close to Kane. An uncertain murmuring rose from the Negroes, which died out as King Songa stared angrily toward them.

Le Loup leaned back upon his throne and laughed uproariously.

"The trail ends here, Monsieur Galahad. That ancient fool thought I did not know of his plotting! I was hiding outside the hut and heard the interesting conversation you two had. Ha! ha! ha! ha! The Black God must drink, Monsieur, but I have persuaded Songa to have you two burnt; that will be much more enjoyable, though we shall have to forego the usual feast, I fear. For after the fires are lit about your feet the devil himself could not keep your carcasses from becoming charred frames of bone."

Songa shouted something imperiously, and blacks came bearing wood, which they piled about the feet of N'Longa and Kane. The ju-ju man had recovered consciousness, and he now shouted something in his native language. Again the murmuring arose among the shadowy throng. Songa snarled something in reply.

Kane gazed at the scene almost impersonally. Again, somewhere in his soul, dim primal deeps were stirring, age-old thought memories, veiled in the fogs of lost eons. He had been here before, thought Kane; he knew all this of old--the lurid flames beating back the sullen night, the bestial faces leering expectantly, and the god, the Black God, there in the shadows! Always the Black God, brooding back in the shadows. He had known the shouts, the frenzied chant of the worshipers, back there in the gray dawn of the world, the speech of the bellowing drums, the singing priests, the repellent, inflaming, all-pervading scent of freshly spilt blood. All this have I known, somewhere, sometime, thought Kane; now I am the main actor--

He became aware that someone was speaking to him through the roar of the drums; he had not realized that the drums had begun to boom again. The speaker was N'Longa:

"Me pow'rful ju-ju man! Watch now: I work mighty magic. Songa!" His voice rose in a screech that drowned out the wildly clamoring drums.

Songa grinned at the words N'Longa screamed at him. The chant of the drums now had dropped to a low, sinister monotone and Kane plainly heard Le Loup when he spoke:

"N'Longa says that he will now work that magic which it is death to speak, even. Never before has it been worked in the sight of living men; it is the nameless ju-ju magic. Watch closely, Monsieur; possibly we shall be further amused." The Wolf laughed lightly and sardonically.

A black man stooped, applying a torch to the wood about Kane's feet. Tiny jets of flame began to leap up and catch. Another bent to do the same with N'Longa, then hesitated. The ju-ju man sagged in his bonds; his head drooped upon his chest. He seemed dying.

Le Loup leaned forward, cursing, "Feet of the Devil! Is the scoundrel about to cheat us of our pleasure of seeing him writhe in the flames?"

The warrior gingerly touched the wizard and said something in his own language.

Le Loup laughed: "He died of fright. A great wizard, by the--"

His voice trailed off suddenly. The drums stopped as if the drummers had fallen dead simultaneously. Silence dropped like a fog upon the village and in the stillness Kane heard only the sharp crackle of the flames whose heat he was beginning to feel.

All eyes were turned upon the dead man upon the altar, for the corpse had begun to move!

First a twitching of a hand, then an aimless motion of an arm, a motion which gradually spread over the body and limbs. Slowly, with blind, uncertain gestures, the dead man turned upon his side, the trailing limbs found the earth. Then, horribly like something being born, like some frightful reptilian thing bursting the shell of non- existence, the corpse tottered and reared upright, standing on legs wide apart and stiffly braced, arms still making useless, infantile motions. Utter silence, save somewhere a man's quick breath sounded loud in the stillness.

Kane stared, for the first time in his life smitten speechless and thoughtless. To his Puritan mind this was Satan's hand manifested.

Le Loup sat on his throne, eyes wide and staring, hand still half- raised in the careless gesture he was making when frozen into silence by the unbelievable sight. Songa sat beside him, mouth and eyes wide open, fingers making curious jerky motions upon the carved arms of the throne.

Now the corpse was upright, swaying on stiltlike legs, body tilting far back until the sightless eyes seemed to stare straight into the red moon that was just rising over the black jungle. The thing tottered uncertainly in a wide, erratic half-circle, arms flung out grotesquely as if in balance, then swayed about to face the two thrones--and the Black God. A burning twig at Kane's feet cracked like the crash of a cannon in the tense silence. The horror thrust forth a black foot--it took a wavering step--another. Then with stiff, jerky and automatonlike steps, legs straddled far apart, the dead man came toward the two who sat in speechless horror to each side of the Black God.

"Ah-h-h!" from somewhere came the explosive sigh, from that shadowy semicircle where crouched the terror-fascinated worshipers. Straight on stalked the grim specter. Now it was within three strides of the thrones, and Le Loup, faced by fear for the first time in his bloody life, cringed back in his chair; while Songa, with a superhuman effort breaking the chains of horror that held him helpless, shattered the night with a wild scream and, springing to his feet, lifted a spear, shrieking and gibbering in wild menace. Then as the ghastly thing halted not its frightful advance, he hurled the spear with all the power of his great, black muscles, and the spear tore through the dead man's breast with a rending of flesh and bone. Not an instant halted the thing--for the dead die not--and Songa the king stood frozen, arms outstretched as if to fend off the terror.

An instant they stood so, leaping firelight and eery moonlight etching the scene forever in the minds of the beholders. The changeless staring eyes of the corpse looked full into the bulging eyes of Songa, where were reflected all the hells of horror. Then with a jerky motion the arms of the thing went out and up. The dead hands fell on Songa's shoulders. At the first touch, the king seemed to shrink and shrivel, and with a scream that was to haunt the dreams of every watcher through all the rest of time, Songa crumpled and fell, and the dead man reeled stiffly and fell with him. Motionless lay the two at the feet of the Black God, and to Kane's dazed mind it seemed that the idol's great, inhuman eyes were fixed upon them with terrible, still laughter.

At the instant of the king's fall, a great shout went up from the blacks, and Kane, with a clarity lent his subconscious mind by the depths of his hate, looked for Le Loup and saw him spring from his throne and vanish in the darkness. Then vision was blurred by a rush of black figures who swept into the space before the god. Feet knocked aside the blazing brands whose heat Kane had forgotten, and dusky hands freed him; others loosed the wizard's body and laid it upon the earth. Kane dimly understood that the blacks believed this thing to be the work of N'Longa, and that they connected the vengeance of the wizard with himself. He bent, laid a hand on the ju-ju man's shoulder. No doubt of it: he was dead, the flesh was already cold. He glanced at the other corpses. Songa was dead, too, and the thing that had slain him lay now without movement.

Kane started to rise, then halted. Was he dreaming, or did he really feel a sudden warmth in the dead flesh he touched? Mind reeling, he again bent over the wizard's body, and slowly he felt warmness steal over the limbs and the blood begin to flow sluggishly through the veins again.

Then N'Longa opened his eyes and stared up into Kane's, with the blank expression of a new-born babe. Kane watched, flesh crawling, and saw the knowing, reptilian glitter come back, saw the wizard's thick lips part in a wide grin. N'Longa sat up, and a strange chant arose from the Negroes.

Kane looked about. The blacks were all kneeling, swaying their bodies to and fro, and in their shouts Kane caught the word, "N'Longa!" repeated over and over in a kind of fearsomely ecstatic refrain of terror and worship. As the wizard rose, they all fell prostrate.

N'Longa nodded, as if in satisfaction.

"Great ju-ju--great fetish, me!" he announced to Kane. "You see? My ghost go out--kill Songa--come back to me! Great magic! Great fetish, me!"

Kane glanced at the Black God looming back in the shadows, at N'Longa, who now flung out his arms toward the idol as if in invocation.

I am everlasting (Kane thought the Black God said); I drink, no matter who rules; chiefs, slayers, wizards, they pass like the ghosts of dead men through the gray jungle; I stand, I rule; I am the soul of the jungle (said the Black God).

Suddenly Kane came back from the illusory mists in which he had been wandering. "The white man! Which way did he flee?"

N'Longa shouted something. A score of dusky hands pointed; from somewhere Kane's rapier was thrust out to him. The fogs faded and vanished; again he was the avenger, the scourge of the unrighteous; with the sudden volcanic speed of a tiger he snatched the sword and was gone.

Chapter 5.

The End of the Red Trail

Limbs and vines slapped against Kane's face. The oppressive steam of the tropic night rose like mist about him. The moon, now floating high above the jungle, limned the black shadows in its white glow and patterned the jungle floor in grotesque designs. Kane knew not if the man he sought was ahead of him, but broken limbs and trampled underbrush showed that some man had gone that way, some man who fled in haste, nor halted to pick his way. Kane followed these signs unswervingly. Believing in the justice of his vengeance, he did not doubt that the dim beings who rule men's destinies would finally bring him face to face with Le Loup.

Behind him the drums boomed and muttered. What a tale they had to tell this night of the triumph of N'Longa, the death of the black king, the overthrow of the white-man-with-eyes-like-a-leopard, and a more darksome tale, a tale to be whispered in low, muttering vibrations: the nameless ju-ju.

Was he dreaming? Kane wondered as he hurried on. Was all this part of some foul magic? He had seen a dead man rise and slay and die again; he had seen a man die and come to life again. Did N'Longa in truth send his ghost, his soul, his life essence forth into the void, dominating a corpse to do his will? Aye, N'Longa died a real death there, bound to the torture stake, and he who lay dead on the altar rose and did as N'Longa would have done had he been free. Then, the unseen force animating the dead man fading, N'Longa had lived again.

Yes, Kane thought, he must admit it as a fact. Somewhere in the darksome reaches of jungle and river, N'Longa had stumbled upon the Secret--the Secret of controlling life and death, of overcoming the shackles and limitations of the flesh. How had this dark wisdom, born in the black and blood-stained shadows of this grim land, been given to the wizard? What sacrifice had been so pleasing to the Black Gods, what ritual so monstrous, as to make them give up the knowledge of this magic? And what thoughtless, timeless journeys had N'Longa taken, when he chose to send his ego, his ghost, through the far, misty countries, reached only by death?

There is wisdom in the shadows (brooded the drums), wisdom and magic; go into the darkness for wisdom; ancient magic shuns the light; we remember the lost ages (whispered the drums), ere man became wise and foolish; we remember the beast gods--the serpent gods and the ape gods and the nameless, the Black Gods, they who drank blood and whose voices roared through the shadowy hills, who feasted and lusted. The secrets of life and of death are theirs; we remember, we remember (sang the drums).

Kane heard them as he hastened on. The tale they told to the feathered black warriors farther up the river, he could not translate; but they spoke to him in their own way, and that language was deeper, more basic.

The moon, high in the dark blue skies, lighted his way and gave him a clear vision as he came out at last into a glade and saw Le Loup standing there. The Wolf's naked blade was a long gleam of silver in the moon, and he stood with shoulders thrown back, the old, defiant smile still on his face.

"A long trail, Monsieur," said he. "It began in the mountains of France; it ends in an African jungle. I have wearied of the game at last, Monsieur--and you die. I had not fled from the village, even, save that--I admit it freely--that damnable witchcraft of N'Longa's shook my nerves. More, I saw that the whole tribe would turn against me."

Kane advanced warily, wondering what dim, forgotten tinge of chivalry in the bandit's soul had caused him thus to take his chance in the open. He half-suspected treachery, but his keen eyes could detect no shadow of movement in the jungle on either side of the glade.

"Monsieur, on guard!" Le Loup's voice was crisp. "Time that we ended this fool's dance about the world. Here we are alone."

The men were now within reach of each other, and Le Loup, in the midst of his sentence, suddenly plunged forward with the speed of light, thrusting viciously. A slower man had died there, but Kane parried and sent his own blade in a silver streak that slit Le Loup's tunic as the Wolf bounded backward. Le Loup admitted the failure of his trick with a wild laugh and came in with the breath-taking speed and fury of a tiger, his blade making a white fan of steel about him.

Rapier clashed on rapier as the two swordsmen fought. They were fire and ice opposed. Le Loup fought wildly but craftily, leaving no openings, taking advantage of every opportunity. He was a living flame, bounding back, leaping in, feinting, thrusting, warding, striking--laughing like a wild man, taunting and cursing.

Kane's skill was cold, calculating, scintillant. He made no waste movement, no motion not absolutely necessary. He seemed to devote more time and effort toward defense than did Le Loup, yet there was no hesitancy in his attack, and when he thrust, his blade shot out with the speed of a striking snake.

There was little to choose between the men as to height, strength and reach. Le Loup was the swifter by a scant, flashing margin, but Kane's skill reached a finer point of perfection. The Wolf's fencing was fiery, dynamic, like the blast from a furnace. Kane was more steady--less the instinctive, more the thinking fighter, though he, too, was a born slayer, with the coordination that only a natural fighter possessed.

Thrust, parry, a feint, a sudden whirl of blades--

"Ha!" the Wolf sent up a shout of ferocious laughter as the blood started from a cut on Kane's cheek. As if the sight drove him to further fury, he attacked like the beast men named him. Kane was forced back before that blood-lusting onslaught, but the Puritan's expression did not alter.

Minutes flew by; the clang and clash of steel did not diminish. Now they stood squarely in the center of the glade, Le Loup untouched, Kane's garments red with the blood that oozed from wounds on cheek, breast, arm and thigh. The Wolf grinned savagely and mockingly in the moonlight, but he had begun to doubt.

His breath came hissing fast and his arm began to weary; who was this man of steel and ice who never seemed to weaken? Le Loup knew that the wounds he had inflicted on Kane were not deep, but even so, the steady flow of blood should have sapped some of the man's strength and speed by this time. But if Kane felt the ebb of his powers, it did not show. His brooding countenance did not change in expression, and he pressed the fight with as much cold fury as at the beginning.

Le Loup felt his might fading, and with one last desperate effort he rallied all his fury and strength into a single plunge. A sudden, unexpected attack too wild and swift for the eye to follow, a dynamic burst of speed and fury no man could have withstood, and Solomon Kane reeled for the first time as he felt cold steel tear through his body. He reeled back, and Le Loup, with a wild shout, plunged after him, his reddened sword free, a gasping taunt on his lips.

Kane's sword, backed by the force of desperation, met Le Loup's in midair; met, held and wrenched. The Wolf's yell of triumph died on his lips as his sword flew singing from his hand.

For a fleeting instant he stopped short, arms flung wide as a crucifix, and Kane heard his wild, mocking laughter peal forth for the last time, as the Englishman's rapier made a silver line in the moonlight.

Far away came the mutter of the drums. Kane mechanically cleansed his sword on his tattered garments. The trail ended here, and Kane was conscious of a strange feeling of futility. He always felt that, after he had killed a foe. Somehow it always seemed that no real good had been wrought; as if the foe had, after all, escaped his just vengeance.

With a shrug of his shoulders Kane turned his attention to his bodily needs. Now that the heat of battle had passed, he began to feel weak and faint from the loss of blood. That last thrust had been close; had he not managed to avoid its full point by a twist of his body, the blade had transfixed him. As it was, the sword had struck glancingly, plowed along his ribs and sunk deep in the muscles beneath the shoulder blade, inflicting a long, shallow wound.

Kane looked about him and saw that a small stream trickled through the glade at the far side. Here he made the only mistake of that kind that he ever made in his entire life. Mayhap he was dizzy from loss of blood and still mazed from the weird happenings of the night; be that as it may, he laid down his rapier and crossed, weaponless, to the stream. There he laved his wounds and bandaged them as best he could, with strips torn from his clothing.

Then he rose and was about to retrace his steps when a motion among the trees on the side of the glade where he first entered, caught his eye. A huge figure stepped out of the jungle, and Kane saw, and recognized, his doom. The man was Gulka, the gorilla-slayer. Kane remembered that he had not seen the black among those doing homage to N'Longa. How could he know the craft and hatred in that dusky, slanting skull that had led the Negro, escaping the vengeance of his tribesmen, to trail down the only man he had ever feared? The Black God had been kind to his neophyte; had led him upon his victim helpless and unarmed. Now Gulka could kill his man openly--and slowly, as a leopard kills, not smiting him down from ambush as he had planned, silently and suddenly.

A wide grin split the Negro's face, and he moistened his lips. Kane, watching him, was coldly and deliberately weighing his chances. Gulka had already spied the rapiers. He was closer to them than was Kane. The Englishman knew that there was no chance of his winning in a sudden race for the swords.

A slow, deadly rage surged in him--the fury of helplessness. The blood churned in his temples and his eyes smoldered with a terrible light as he eyed the Negro. His fingers spread and closed like claws. They were strong, those hands; men had died in their clutch. Even Gulka's huge black column of a neck might break like a rotten branch between them--a wave of weakness made the futility of these thoughts apparent to an extent that needed not the verification of the moonlight glimmering from the spear in Gulka's black hand. Kane could not even have fled had he wished--and he had never fled from a single foe.

The gorilla-slayer moved out into the glade. Massive, terrible, he was the personification of the primitive, the Stone Age. His mouth yawned in a red cavern of a grin; he bore himself with the haughty arrogance of savage might.

Kane tensed himself for the struggle that could end but one way. He strove to rally his waning forces. Useless; he had lost too much blood. At least he would meet his death on his feet, and somehow he stiffened his buckling knees and held himself erect, though the glade shimmered before him in uncertain waves and the moonlight seemed to have become a red fog through which he dimly glimpsed the approaching black man.

Kane stooped, though the effort nearly pitched him on his face; he dipped water in his cupped hands and dashed it into his face. This revived him, and he straightened, hoping that Gulka would charge and get it over with before his weakness crumpled him to the earth.

Gulka was now about the center of the glade, moving with the slow, easy stride of a great cat stalking a victim. He was not at all in a hurry to consummate his purpose. He wanted to toy with his victim, to see fear come into those grim eyes which had looked him down, even when the possessor of those eyes had been bound to the death stake. He wanted to slay, at last, slowly, glutting his tigerish blood-lust and torture-lust to the fullest extent.

Then suddenly he halted, turned swiftly, facing another side of the glade. Kane, wondering, followed his glance.

At first it seemed like a blacker shadow among the jungle shadows. At first there was no motion, no sound, but Kane instinctively knew that some terrible menace lurked there in the darkness that masked and merged the silent trees. A sullen horror brooded there, and Kane felt as if, from that monstrous shadow, inhuman eyes seared his very soul. Yet simultaneously there came the fantastic sensation that these eyes were not directed on him. He looked at the gorilla-slayer.

The black man had apparently forgotten him; he stood, half- crouching, spear lifted, eyes fixed upon that clump of blackness. Kane looked again. Now there was motion in the shadows; they merged fantastically and moved out into the glade, much as Gulka had done. Kane blinked: was this the illusion that precedes death? The shape he looked upon was such as he had visioned dimly in wild nightmares, when the wings of sleep bore him back through lost ages.

He thought at first it was some blasphemous mockery of a man, for it went erect and was tall as a tall man. But it was inhumanly broad and thick, and its gigantic arms hung nearly to its misshapen feet. Then the moonlight smote full upon its bestial face, and Kane's mazed mind thought that the thing was the Black God coming out of the shadows, animated and blood-lusting. Then he saw that it was covered with hair, and he remembered the manlike thing dangling from the roof- pole in the native village. He looked at Gulka.

The Negro was facing the gorilla, spear at the charge. He was not afraid, but his sluggish mind was wondering over the miracle that brought this beast so far from his native jungles.

The mighty ape came out into the moonlight and there was a terrible majesty about his movements. He was nearer Kane than Gulka but he did not seem to be aware of the white man. His small, blazing eyes were fixed on the black man with terrible intensity. He advanced with a curious swaying stride.

Far away the drums whispered through the night, like an accompaniment to this grim Stone Age drama. The savage crouched in the middle of the glade, but the primordial came out of the jungle with eyes bloodshot and blood-lusting. The Negro was face to face with a thing more primitive than he. Again ghosts of memories whispered to Kane: you have seen such sights before (they murmured), back in the dim days, the dawn days, when beast and beast-man battled for supremacy.

Gulka moved away from the ape in a half-circle, crouching, spear ready. With all his craft he was seeking to trick the gorilla, to make a swift kill, for he had never before met such a monster as this, and though he did not fear, he had begun to doubt. The ape made no attempt to stalk or circle; he strode straight forward toward Gulka.

The black man who faced him and the white man who watched could not know the brutish love, the brutish hate that had driven the monster down from the low, forest-covered hills of the north to follow for leagues the trail of him who was the scourge of his kind--the slayer of his mate, whose body now hung from the roof-pole of the Negro village.

The end came swiftly, almost like a sudden gesture. They were close, now, beast and beast-man; and suddenly, with an earth-shaking roar, the gorilla charged. A great hairy arm smote aside the thrusting spear, and the ape closed with the Negro. There was a shattering sound as of many branches breaking simultaneously, and Gulka slumped silently to the earth, to lie with arms, legs and body flung in strange, unnatural positions. The ape towered an instant above him, like a statue of the primordial triumphant.

Far away Kane heard the drums murmur. The soul of the jungle, the soul of the jungle: this phrase surged through his mind with monotonous reiteration.

The three who had stood in power before the Black God that night, where were they? Back in the village where the drums rustled lay Songa--King Songa, once lord of life and death, now a shriveled corpse with a face set in a mask of horror. Stretched on his back in the middle of the glade lay he whom Kane had followed many a league by land and sea. And Gulka the gorilla-slayer lay at the feet of his killer, broken at last by the savagery which had made him a true son of this grim land which had at last overwhelmed him.

Yet the Black God still reigned, thought Kane dizzily, brooding back in the shadows of this dark country, bestial, blood-lusting, caring naught who lived or died, so that he drank.

Kane watched the mighty ape, wondering how long it would be before the huge simian spied and charged him. But the gorilla gave no evidence of having even seen him. Some dim impulse of vengeance yet unglutted prompting him, he bent and raised the Negro. Then he slouched toward the jungle, Gulka's limbs trailing limply and grotesquely. As he reached the trees, the ape halted, whirling the giant form high in the air with seemingly no effort, and dashed the dead man up among the branches. There was a rending sound as a broken projecting limb tore through the body hurled so powerfully against it, and the dead gorilla-slayer dangled there hideously.

A moment the clear moon limned the great ape in its glimmer, as he stood silently gazing up at his victim; then like a dark shadow he melted noiselessly into the jungle.

Kane walked slowly to the middle of the glade and took up his rapier. The blood had ceased to flow from his wounds, and some of his strength was returning, enough, at least, for him to reach the coast where his ship awaited him. He halted at the edge of the glade for a backward glance at Le Loup's upturned face and still form, white in the moonlight, and at the dark shadow among the trees that was Gulka, left by some bestial whim, hanging as the she-gorilla hung in the village.

Afar the drums muttered: "The wisdom of our land is ancient; the wisdom of our land is dark; whom we serve, we destroy. Flee if you would live, but you will never forget our chant. Never, never," sang the drums.

Kane turned to the trail which led to the beach and the ship waiting there.

Contents

SKULLS IN THE STARS
by Robert E. Howard

He told how murders walk the earth

I

There are two roads to Torkertown. One, the shorter and more direct route, leads across a barren upland moor, and the other, which is much longer, winds its tortuous way in and out among the hummocks and quagmires of the swamps, skirting the low hills to the east. It was a dangerous and tedious trail; so Solomon Kane halted in amazement when a breathless youth from the village he had just left, overtook him and implored him for God's sake to take the swamp road.

"The swamp road!" Kane stared at the boy. He was a tall, gaunt man, was Solomon Kane, his darkly pallid face and deep brooding eyes, made more sombre by the drab Puritanical garb he affected.

"Yes, sir, 'tis far safer," the youngster answered to his surprised exclamation.

"Then the moor road must be haunted by Satan himself, for your townsmen warned me against traversing the other."

"Because of the quagmires, sir, that you might not see in the dark. You had better return to the village and continue your journey in the morning, sir."

"Taking the swamp road?"

"Yes, sir."

Kane shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

"The moon rises almost as soon as twilight dies. By its light I can reach Torkertown in a few hours, across the moor."

"Sir, you had better not. No one ever goes that way. There are no houses at all upon the moor, while in the swamp there is the house of old Ezra who lives there all alone since his maniac cousin, Gideon, wandered off and died in the swamp and was never found--and old Ezra though a miser would not refuse you lodging should you decide to stop until morning. Since you must go, you had better go the swamp road."

Kane eyed the boy piercingly. The lad squirmed and shuffled his feet.

"Since this moor road is so dour to wayfarers," said the Puritan, "why did not the villagers tell me the whole tale, instead of vague mouthings?"

"Men like not to talk of it, sir. We hoped that you would take the swamp road after the men advised you to, but when we watched and saw that you turned not at the forks, they sent me to run after you and beg you to reconsider."

"Name of the Devil!" exclaimed Kane sharply, the unaccustomed oath showing his irritation; "the swamp road and the moor road--what is it that threatens me and why should I go miles out of my way and risk the bogs and mires?"

Sir," said the boy, dropping his voice and drawing closer, "we be simple villagers who like not to talk of such things lest foul fortune befall us, but the moor road is a way accurst and hath not been traversed by any of the countryside for a year or more. It is death to walk those moors by night, as hath been found by some score of unfortunates. Some foul horror haunts the way and claims men for his victims."

"So? And what is this thing like?" "No man knows. None has ever seen, it and lived, but late-farers have heard terrible laughter far out on the fen and men have heard the horrid shrieks of its victims. Sir, in God's name return to the village, there pass the night, and tomorrow take the swamp trail to Torkertown."

Far back in Kane's gloomy eyes a scintillant light had begun to glimmer, like a witch's torch glinting under fathoms of cold grey ice. His blood quickened. Adventure! The lure of life-risk and drama! Not that Kane recognized his sensations as such. He sincerely considered that he voiced his real feelings when he said:

"These things be deeds of some power of evil. The lords of darkness have laid a curse upon the country. A strong man is needed to combat Satan and his might. Therefore I go, who have defied him many a time."

"Sir," the boy began, then closed his mouth as he saw the futility of argument. He only added

"The corpses of the victims are bruised and torn, sir."

He stood there at the crossroads, sighing; regretfully as he watched the tall, rangy figure swinging up the road that led toward the moors.

The sun was setting as Kane came over the brow of the low hill which debouched into the upland fen. Huge and blood-red it sank down behind the sullen horizon of the moors, seeming to touch the rank grass with fire; so for a moment the watcher seemed to be gazing out across a sea of blood. Then the dark shadows came gliding from the east, the western blaze faded, and Solomon Kane struck out, boldly in the gathering darkness.

The road was dim from disuse but was clearly defined. Kane went swiftly but warily, sword and pistols at hand. Stars blinked out and night winds whispered among the grass like weeping spectres. The moon began to rise, lean and haggard, like a skull among the stars.

Then suddenly Kane stopped short. From somewhere in front of him sounded a strange and eery echo--or something like an echo. Again, this time louder. Kane started forward again. Were his senses deceiving him? No!

Far out, there pealed a whisper of frightful slaughter. And again, closer this time. No human being ever laughed like that--there was no mirth in it, only hatred and horror and soul-destroying terror. Kane halted. He was not afraid, but for the second he was almost unnerved. Then, stabbing through that awesome laughter, came the sound of a scream that was undoubtedly human. Kane started forward, increasing his gait. He cursed the illusive lights and flickering shadows which veiled the moor in the rising moon and made accurate sight impossible. The laughter continued, growing louder, as did the screams. Then sounded faintly the drum of frantic human feet. Kane broke into a run. Some human was being hunted to death out there on the fen, and by what manner of horror God only knew. The sound of the flying feet halted abruptly and the screaming rose unbearably, mingled with other sounds unnameable and hideous. Evidently the man had been overtaken, and Kane, his flesh crawling, visualized some ghastly fiend of the darkness crouching on the back of its victim crouching and tearing. Then the noise of a terrible and short struggle came clearly through the abysmal silence of the night and the footfalls began again, but stumbling and uneven. The screaming continued, but with a gasping gurgle. The sweat stood cold on Kane's forehead and body. This was heaping horror on horror in an intolerable manner. God, for a moment's clear light! The frightful drama was being enacted within a very short distance of him, to judge by the ease with which the sounds reached him. But this hellish half-light veiled all in shifting, shadows, so that the moors appeared a haze of blurred illusions, and stunted trees, and bushes seemed like giants.

Kane shouted, striving to increase the speed of his advance. The shrieks of the unknown broke into a hideous shrill squealing; again there was the sound of a struggle, and then from the shadows of the tall grass a thing came reeling--a thing that had once been a man--a gore-covered, frightful thing that fell at Kane's feet and writhed and grovelled and raised its terrible face to the rising moon, and gibbered and yammered, and fell down again and died in its own blood.

The moon was up now and the light was better. Kane bent above the body, which lay stark in its unnameable mutilation, and he shuddered a rare thing for him, who had seen the deeds of the Spanish Inquisition and the witch-finders.

Some wayfarer, he supposed. Then like a hand of ice on his spine he was aware that he was not alone. He looked up, his cold eyes piercing the shadows whence the dead man had staggered. He saw nothing, but he knew--he felt--that other eyes gave back his stare, terrible eyes not of this earth. He straightened and drew a pistol, waiting. The moonlight spread like a lake of pale blood over the moor, and trees and grasses took on their proper sizes. The shadows melted, and Kane saw! At first he thought it only a shadow of mist, a wisp of moor fog that swayed in the tall grass before him. He gazed. More illusion, he thought. Then the thing began to take on shape, vague and indistinct. Two hideous eyes flamed at him--eyes which held all the stark horror which has been the heritage of man since the fearful dawn ages--eyes frightful and insane, with an insanity transcending earthly insanity. The form of the thing was misty and vague, a brain-shattering travesty on the human form, like, yet horribly unlike. The grass and bushes beyond showed clearly through it.

Kane felt the blood pound in his temples, yet he was as cold as ice. How such an unstable being as that which wavered before him could harm a man in a physical way was more than he could understand, yet the red horror at his feet gave mute testimony that the fiend could act with terrible material effect.

Of one thing Kane was sure; there would be no hunting of him across the dreary moors, no screaming and fleeing to be dragged down again and again. If he must die he would die in his tracks, his wounds in front.

Now a vague and grisly mouth gaped wide and the demoniac laughter again shrieked but, soul-shaking in its nearness. And in the midst of feat threat of doom, Kane deliberately levelled his long pistol and fired. A maniacal yell of rage and mockery answered the report, and the thing came at him like a flying sheet of smoke, long shadowy arms stretched to drag him down.

Kane, moving with the dynamic speed of a famished wolf, fired the second pistol with as little effect, snatched his long rapier from its sheath and thrust into the centre of the misty attacker. The blade sang as it passed clear through, encountering no solid resistance, and Kane felt icy fingers grip his limbs, bestial talons tear his garments and the skin beneath,

He dropped the useless sword and sought to grapple with his foe. It was like fighting a floating mist, a flying shadow armed with dagger like claws. His savage blows met empty air, his leanly mighty arms, in whose grasp strong men had died, swept nothingness and clutched emptiness. Naught was solid or real save the flaying, apelike fingers with their crooked talons, and the crazy eyes which burned into the shuddering depths of his soul.

Kane realized that he was in a desperate plight indeed. Already his garments hung in tatters and he bled from a score of deep wounds. But he never flinched, and the thought of flight never entered his mind. He had never fled from a single foe, and had the thought occurred to him he would have flushed with shame.

He saw no help for it now, but that his form should lie there beside the fragments of the other ' victim, but the thought held no terrors for him. His only wish was to give as good an account of himself as possible before the end came, and if he could, to inflict some damage on his unearthly foe. There above the dead man's torn body, man fought with demon under the pale light of the rising moon, with all the advantages with the demon, save one. And that one was enough to overcome the others. For if abstract hate may bring into material substance a ghostly thing, may not courage, equally abstract, form a concrete weapon to combat that ghost? Kane fought with his arms and his feet and his hands, and he was aware at last that the ghost began to give back before him, and the fearful slaughter changed to screams of baffled fury. For man's only weapon is courage that flinches not from the gates of Hell itself, and against such not even the legions of Hell can stand. Of this Kane knew nothing; he only knew that the talons which tore and rended him seemed to grow weaker and wavering, that a wild light grew and grew in the horrible eyes. And reeling and gasping, he rushed in, grappled the thing at last and threw it, and as they tumbled about on the moor and it writhed and lapped his limbs like a serpent of smoke, his flesh crawled and his hair stood on end, for he began to understand its gibbering. He did not hear and comprehend as a man hears and comprehends the speech of a man, but the frightful secrets it imparted in whisperings and yammerings and screaming silences sank fingers of ice into his soul, and he knew. II

The hut of old Ezra the miser stood by the road in the midst of the swamp, half screened by the sullen trees which grew about it. The wall; were rotting, the roof crumbling, and great pallid and green fungus-monsters clung to it and writhed about the doors and windows, as if seeking to peer within. The trees leaned above it and their grey branches intertwined so that it crouched in semi-darkness like a monstrous dwarf over" whose shoulder ogres leer.

The road which wound down into the swamp among rotting stumps and rank hummocks and scummy, snake-haunted pools and bogs, crawled past the hut. Many people passed that way these days, but few saw old Ezra, save a glimpse of a yellow face, peering through the fungus-screened windows, itself like an ugly fungus.

Old Ezra the miser partook much of the quality of the swamp, for he was gnarled and bent and sullen; his fingers were like clutching parasitic plants and his locks hung like drab moss above eyes trained to the murk of the swamplands. His eyes were like a dead man's, yet hinted of depths abysmal and loathsome as the dead lakes of the swamplands.

These eyes gleamed now at the man who stood in front of his hut. This man was tall and gaunt and dark, his face was haggard and claw-marked, and he was bandaged of arm and leg. Somewhat behind this man stood a number of villagers.

"You are Ezra of the swamp road?"

"Aye, and what want ye of me?"

"Where is your cousin Gideon, the maniac youth who abode with you?"

"Gideon?"

'Aye." He wandered away into the swamp and never came back. No doubt he lost his way and was set upon by wolves or died in a quagmire or was struck by an adder."

"How long ago?"

"Over a year."

"Aye. Hark ye, Ezra the miser. Soon after your cousin's disappearance, a countryman, coming home across the moors, was set upon by some unknown fiend and torn to pieces, and thereafter it became death to cross those moors. First men of the countryside, then strangers who wandered over the fen, fell to the clutches of the thing. Many men have died, since the first one.

"Last night I crossed the moors, and heard the flight and pursuing of another victim, a stranger who knew not the evil of the moors. Ezra the miser, it was a fearful thing, for the wretch twice broke from the fiend, terribly wounded, and each time the demon caught and dragged him down again. And at last he fell dead at my very, feet, done to death in a manner that would freeze the statue of a saint."

The villagers moved restlessly and murmured fearfully to each other, and old Ezra's eyes shifted furtively. Yet the sombre expression of Solomon Kane never altered, and his condor-like stare seemed to transfix the miser.

"Aye, aye!" muttered old Ezra hurriedly; "a bad thing, a bad thing! Yet why do you tell this thing to me?" "Aye, a sad thing. Harken further, Ezra. The fiend came out of the shadows and I fought with it over the body of its victim. Aye, how I overcame it, I know not, for the battle was hard and long but the powers of good and light were on my side, which are mightier than the powers of Hell.

"At the last I was stronger, and it broke from me and fled, and I followed to no avail. Yet before it fled it whispered to me a monstrous truth."

Old Ezra started, stared wildly, seemed to shrink into himself.

"Nay, why tell me this?" he muttered.

"I returned to the village and told my tale, said Kane, "for I knew that now I had the power to rid the moors of its curse forever'. Ezra, come with us!"

"Where?" gasped the miser.

"To the rotting oak on the moors." Ezra reeled as though struck; he screamed incoherently and turned to flee.

On the instant, at Kane's sharp order, two brawny villagers sprang forward and seized the miser. They twisted the dagger from his withered hand, and pinioned his arms, shuddering as their fingers encountered his clammy flesh.

Kane motioned them to follow, and turning strode up the trail, followed by the villagers, who found their strength taxed to the utmost in their task of bearing their prisoner along. Through the swamp they went and out, taking a little-used trail which led up over the low hills and out on the moors.

The sun was sliding down the horizon and old Ezra stared at it with bulging eyes--stared as if he could not gaze enough. Far out on the moors geared up the great oak tree, like a gibbet, now only a decaying shell. There Solomon Kane halted.

Old Ezra writhed in his captor's grasp and made inarticulate noises.

"Over a year ago," said Solomon Kane, "you, fearing that your insane cousin Gideon would tell men of your cruelties to him, brought him away from the swamp by the very trail by which we came, and murdered him here in the night."

Ezra cringed and snarled.

"You can not prove this lie!"

Kane spoke a few words to an agile villager. The youth clambered up the rotting bole of the tree and from a crevice, high up, dragged something that fell with a clatter at the feet of the miser. Ezra went limp with a terrible shriek.

The object was a man's skeleton, the skull cleft.

"You--how knew you this? You are Satan!" gibbered old Ezra.

Kane folded his arms.

"The thing I, fought last night told me this thing as we reeled in battle, and I followed it to this tree. For the fiend is Gideon's ghost."

Ezra shrieked again and fought savagely.

"You knew," said Kane sombrely, "you knew what things did these deeds. You feared the ghost the maniac, and that is why you chose to leave his body on the fen instead of concealing it in the swamp. For you knew the ghost would haunt the place of his death. He was insane in life, and in death he did not know where to find his slayer; else he had come to you in your hut. He hates man but you, but his mazed spirit can not tell one man from another, and he slays all, lest he let his killer escape. Yet he will know you and rest in peace, forever after. Hate hath made of his ghost, solid thing that can rend and slay, and though he feared you terribly in life, in death he fears you not at all."

Kane halted. He glanced at the sun.

"All this I had from Gideon's ghost, in his yammerings and his whisperings and his shrieking silences. Naught but your death will lay that ghost."

Ezra listened in breathless silence and Kane pronounced the words of his doom.

"A hard thing it is," said Kane sombrely, "to sentence a man to death in cold blood and in such a manner as I have in mind, but you must die that others may live--and God knoweth you deserve death.

"You shall not die by noose, bullet or sword, but at the talons of him you slew--for naught else will satiate him."

At these words Ezra's brain shattered, his knees gave way and he fell grovelling and screaming for death, begging them to burn him at the stake, to flay him alive. Kane's face was set like death, and the villagers, the fear rousing their cruelty, bound the screeching wretch to the oak tree, and one of them bade him make his peace with God. But Ezra made no answer, shrieking in a high shrill voice with unbearable monotony. Then the villager would have struck the miser across across the face, but Kane stayed him.

"Let him make his peace with Satan, whom he is more like to meet, " said the Puritan grimly. "The sun is about to set. Loose his cords-so that he may work loose by dark, since it is better to meet death free and unshackled than bound like a sacrifice." As they turned to leave him, old Ezra yammered and gibbered unhuman sounds and then fell silent, staring at the sun with terrible intensity.

They walked away across the fen, and Kane flung a last look at the grotesque form bound to the tree, seeming in the uncertain light like a great fungus growing to the bole. And suddenly the miser screamed hideously:

"Death! Death! There are skulls in the Stars!"

"Life was good to him, though he was gnarled and churlish and evil," Kane sighed. "Mayhap God has a place for such souls where fire and sacrifice may cleanse them of their dross as fire cleans the forest or fungus things. Yet my heart is heavy within me." "Nay, sir," one of the villagers spoke, "you have done but the will of God, and good alone shall come of

this night's deed." "Nay," answered Kane heavily. "I know not--I know not." The sun had gone down and night spread with amazing swiftness, as if great shadows came rushing down from unknown voids to cloak the world with hurrying darkness. Through the thick night came a weird echo, and the men halted and looked back the way they had come.

Nothing could be seen. The moor was an ocean of shadows and the tall grass about them bent in long waves before the, faint wind, breaking the deathly stillness with breathless murmurings.

Then far away the red disk of the moon rose over the fen, and for an instant a grim silhouette was etched blackly against it. A shape came flying across the face of the moon--a bent, grotesque thing whose feet seemed scarcely to touch the earth; and close behind came a thing like a flying shadow--a nameless, shapeless horror.

A moment the racing twain stood out boldly against the moon; then they merged into one unnameable, formless mass, and vanished in the shadows.

Far across the fen sounded a single shriek of terrible laughter.

THE END

Contents

RATTLE OF BONES

By Robert E. Howard

"Landlord, ho!" The shout broke the lowering silence and reverberated through the black forest with sinister echoing.

"This place hath a forbidding aspect, meseemeth."

Two men stood in front of the forest tavern. The building was low, long and rambling, built of heavy logs. Its small windows were heavily barred and the door was closed. Above the door its sinister sign showed faintly--a cleft skull.

This door swung slowly open and a bearded face peered out. The owner of the face stepped back and motioned his guests to enter--with a grudging gesture it seemed. A candle gleamed on a table; a flame smoldered in the fireplace.

"Your names?"

"Solomon Kane," said the taller man briefly.

"Gaston l'Armon," the other spoke curtly. "But what is that to you?"

"Strangers are few in the Black Forest," grunted the host, "bandits many. Sit at yonder table and I will bring food."

The two men sat down, with the bearing of men who have traveled far. One was a tall gaunt man, clad in a featherless hat and somber black garments, which set off the dark pallor of his forbidding face. The other was of a different type entirely, bedecked with lace and plumes, although his finery was somewhat stained from travel. He was handsome in a bold way, and his restless eyes shifted from side to side, never still an instant.

The host brought wine and food to the rough-hewn table and then stood back in the shadows, like a somber image. His features, now receding into vagueness, now luridly etched in the firelight as it leaped and flickered, were masked in a beard which seemed almost animal-like in thickness. A great nose curved above this beard and two small red eyes stared unblinkingly at his guests.

"Who are you?" suddenly asked the younger man.

"I am the host of the Cleft Skull Tavern," sullenly replied the other. His tone seemed to challenge his questioner to ask further.

"Do you have many guests?" l'Armon pursued.

"Few come twice," the host grunted.

Kane started and glanced up straight into those small red eyes, as if he sought for some hidden meaning in the host's words. The flaming eyes seemed to dilate, then dropped sullenly before the Englishman's cold stare.

"I'm for bed," said Kane abruptly, bringing his meal to a close. "I must take up my journey by daylight."

"And I," added the Frenchman. "Host, show us to our chambers."

Black shadows wavered on the walls as the two followed their silent host down a long, dark hall. The stocky, broad body of their guide seemed to grow and expand in the light of the small candle which he carried, throwing a long, grim shadow behind him.

At a certain door he halted, indicating that they were to sleep there. They entered; the host lit a candle with the one he carried, then lurched back the way he had come.

In the chamber the two men glanced at each other. The only furnishings of the room were a couple of bunks, a chair or two and a heavy table.

"Let us see if there be any way to make fast the door," said Kane. "I like not the looks of mine host."

"There are racks on door and jamb for a bar," said Gaston, "but no bar."

"We might break up the table and use its pieces for a bar," mused Kane.

"Mon Dieu," said l'Armon, "you are timorous, m'sieu."

Kane scowled. "I like not being murdered in my sleep," he answered gruffly.

"My faith!" the Frenchman laughed. "We are chance met--until I overtook you on the forest road an hour before sunset, we had never seen each other."

"I have seen you somewhere before," answered Kane, "though I can not now recall where. As for the other, I assume every man is an honest fellow until he shows me he is a rogue; moreover, I am a light sleeper and slumber with a pistol at hand."

The Frenchman laughed again.

"I was wondering how m'sieu could bring himself to sleep in the room with a stranger! Ha! Ha! All right, m'sieu Englishman, let us go forth and take a bar from one of the other rooms."

Taking the candle with them, they went into the corridor. Utter silence reigned and the small candle twinkled redly and evilly in the thick darkness.

"Mine host hath neither guests nor servants," muttered Solomon Kane. "A strange tavern! What is the name, now? These German words come not easily to me--the Cleft Skull? A bloody name, i'faith."

They tried the rooms next to theirs, but no bar rewarded their search. At last they came to the last room at the end of the corridor. They entered. It was furnished like the rest, except that the door was provided with a small barred opening, and fastened from the outside with a heavy bolt, which was secured at one end to the door-jamb. They raised the bolt and looked in.

"There should be an outer window, but there is not," muttered Kane. "Look!"

The floor was stained darkly. The walls and the one bunk were hacked in places, great splinters having been torn away.

"Men have died in here," said Kane, somberly. "Is yonder not a bar fixed in the wall?"

"Aye, but 'tis made fast," said the Frenchman, tugging at it. "The--"

A section of the wall swung back and Gaston gave a quick exclamation. A small, secret room was revealed, and the two men bent over the grisly thing that lay upon its floor.

"The skeleton of a man!" said Gaston. "And behold, how his bony leg is shackled to the floor! He was imprisoned here and died."

"Nay," said Kane, "the skull is cleft--methinks mine host had a grim reason for the name of his hellish tavern. This man, like us, was no doubt a wanderer who fell into the fiend's hands."

"Likely," said Gaston without interest; he was engaged in idly working the great iron ring from the skeleton's leg bones. Failing in this, he drew his sword and with an exhibition of remarkable strength cut the chain which joined the ring on the leg to a ring set deep in the log floor.

"Why should he shackle a skeleton to the floor?" mused the Frenchman. "Monbleu! 'Tis a waste of good chain. Now, m'sieu," he ironically addressed the white heap of bones, "I have freed you and you may go where you like!"

"Have done!" Kane's voice was deep. "No good will come of mocking the dead."

"The dead should defend themselves," laughed l'Armon. "Somehow, I will slay the man who kills me, though my corpse climb up forty fathoms of ocean to do it."

Kane turned toward the outer door, closing the door of the secret room behind him. He liked not this talk which smacked of demonry and witchcraft; and he was in haste to face the host with the charge of his guilt.

As he turned, with his back to the Frenchman, he felt the touch of cold steel against his neck and knew that a pistol muzzle was pressed close beneath the base of his brain.

"Move not, m'sieu!" The voice was low and silky. "Move not, or I will scatter your few brains over the room."

The Puritan, raging inwardly, stood with his hands in air while l'Armon slipped his pistols and sword from their sheaths.

"Now you can turn," said Gaston, stepping back.

Kane bent a grim eye on the dapper fellow, who stood bareheaded now, hat in one hand, the other hand leveling his long pistol.

"Gaston the Butcher!" said the Englishman somberly. "Fool that I was to trust a Frenchman! You range far, murderer! I remember you now, with that cursed great hat off--I saw you in Calais some years agone."

"Aye--and now you will see me never again. What was that?"

"Rats exploring yon skeleton," said Kane, watching the bandit like a hawk, waiting for a single slight wavering of that black gun muzzle. "The sound was of the rattle of bones."

"Like enough," returned the other. "Now, M'sieu Kane, I know you carry considerable money on your person. I had thought to wait until you slept and then slay you, but the opportunity presented itself and I took it. You trick easily."

"I had little thought that I should fear a man with whom I had broken bread," said Kane, a deep timbre of slow fury sounding in his voice.

The bandit laughed cynically. His eyes narrowed as he began to back slowly toward the outer door. Kane's sinews tensed involuntarily; he gathered himself like a giant wolf about to launch himself in a death leap, but Gaston's hand was like a rock and the pistol never trembled.

"We will have no death plunges after the shot," said Gaston. "Stand still, m'sieu; I have seen men killed by dying men, and I wish to have distance enough between us to preclude that possibility. My faith--I will shoot, you will roar and charge, but you will die before you reach me with your bare hands. And mine host will have another skeleton in his secret niche. That

is, if I do not kill him myself. The fool knows me not nor I him, moreover--"

The Frenchman was in the doorway now, sighting along the barrel. The candle, which had been stuck in a niche on the wall, shed a weird and flickering light which did not extend past the doorway. And with the suddenness of death, from the darkness behind Gaston's back, a broad, vague form rose up and a gleaming blade swept down. The Frenchman went to his knees like a butchered ox, his brains spilling from his cleft skull. Above him towered the figure of the host, a wild and terrible spectacle, still holding the hanger with which he had slain the bandit.

"Ho! ho!" he roared. "Back!"

Kane had leaped forward as Gaston fell, but the host thrust into his very face a long pistol which he held in his left hand.

"Back!" he repeated in a tigerish roar, and Kane retreated from the menacing weapon and the insanity in the red eyes.

The Englishman stood silent, his flesh crawling as he sensed a deeper and more hideous threat than the Frenchman had offered. There was something inhuman about this man, who now swayed to and fro like some great forest beast while his mirthless laughter boomed out again.

"Gaston the Butcher!" he shouted, kicking the corpse at his feet. "Ho! ho! My fine brigand will hunt no more! I had heard of this fool who roamed the Black Forest--he wished gold and he found death! Now your gold shall be mine; and more than gold--vengeance!"

"I am no foe of yours," Kane spoke calmly.

"All men are my foes! Look--the marks on my wrists! See--the marks on my ankles! And deep in my back--the kiss of the knout! And deep in my brain, the wounds of the years of the cold, silent cells where I lay as punishment for a crime I never committed!" The voice broke in a hideous, grotesque sob.

Kane made no answer. This man was not the first he had seen whose brain had shattered amid the horrors of the terrible Continental prisons.

"But I escaped!" the scream rose triumphantly. "And here I make war on all men ... What was that?"

Did Kane see a flash of fear in those hideous eyes?

"My sorcerer is rattling his bones!" whispered the host, then laughed wildly. "Dying, he swore his very bones would weave a net of death for me. I shackled his corpse to the floor, and now, deep in the night, I hear his bare skeleton clash and rattle as he seeks to be free, and I laugh, I laugh! Ho! ho! How he yearns to rise and stalk like old King Death along these dark corridors when I sleep, to slay me in my bed!"

Suddenly the insane eyes flared hideously: "You were in that secret room, you and this dead fool! Did he talk to you?"

Kane shuddered in spite of himself. Was it insanity or did he actually hear the faint rattle of bones, as if the skeleton had moved slightly? Kane shrugged his shoulders; rats will even tug at dusty bones.

The host was laughing again. He sidled around Kane, keeping the Englishman always covered, and with his free hand opened the door. All was darkness within, so that Kane could not even see the glimmer of the bones on the floor.

"All men are my foes!" mumbled the host, in the incoherent manner of the insane. "Why should I spare any man? Who lifted a hand to my aid when I lay for years in the vile dungeons of Karlsruhe--and for a deed never proven? Something happened to my brain, then. I became as a wolf--a brother to these of the Black Forest to which I fled when I escaped.

"They have feasted, my brothers, on all who lay in my tavern--all except this one who now clashes his bones, this magician from Russia. Lest he come stalking back through the black shadows when night is over the world, and slay me--for who may slay the dead?--I stripped his bones and shackled him. His sorcery was not powerful enough to save him from me, but all men know that a dead magician is more evil than a living one. Move not, Englishman! Your bones I shall leave in this secret room beside this one, to--"

The maniac was standing partly in the doorway of the secret room, now, his weapon still menacing Kane. Suddenly he seemed to topple backward, and vanished in the darkness; and at the same instant a vagrant gust of wind swept down the outer corridor and slammed the door shut behind him. The candle on the wall flickered and went out. Kane's groping hands, sweeping over the floor, found a pistol, and he straightened, facing the door where the maniac had vanished. He stood in the utter darkness, his blood freezing, while a hideous muffled screaming came from the secret room, intermingled with the dry, grisly rattle of fleshless bones. Then silence fell.

Kane found flint and steel and lighted the candle. Then, holding it in one hand and the pistol in the other, he opened the secret door.

"Great God!" he muttered as cold sweat formed on his body. "This thing is beyond all reason, yet with mine own eyes I see it! Two vows have here been kept, for Gaston the Butcher swore that even in death he would avenge his slaying, and his was the hand which set yon fleshless monster free. And he--"

The host of the Cleft Skull lay lifeless on the floor of the secret room, his bestial face set in lines of terrible fear; and deep in his broken neck were sunk the bare fingerbones of the sorcerer's skeleton.

THE END

Contents

A GENT FROM BEAR CREEK

By Robert E. Howard

Chapter I - STRIPED SHIRTS AND BUSTED HEARTS

If Joel Braxton hadn't drawed a knife whilst I was beating his head agen a spruce log, I reckon I wouldn't of had that quarrel with Glory McGraw, and things might of turned out different to what they did. Pap's always said the Braxtons was no-account folks, and I allow he's right. First thing I knowed Jim Garfield hollered: "Look out, Breck, the yaller hound's got a knife!" Then I felt a kind of sting and looked down and seen Joel had cut a big gash in my buckskin shirt and scratched my hide trying to get at my innards.

I let go of his ears and taken the knife away from him and throwed it into a blackjack thicket, and throwed him after it. They warn't no use in him belly-aching like he done just because they happened to be a tree in his way. I dunno how he expects to get throwed into a blackjack thicket without getting some hide knocked off.

But I am a good-natured man, and I was a easy-going youngster, even then. I paid no heed to Joel's bloodthirsty threats whilst his brother and Jim Garfield and the others was pulling him out of the bresh and dousing him in the creek to wash the blood off. I got on to my mule Alexander and headed for Old Man McGraw's cabin where I was started to when I let myself be beguiled into stopping with them idjits.

The McGraws is the only folks on Bear Creek besides the Reynoldses and the Braxtons which ain't no kin to me one way or another, and I'd been sweet on Glory McGraw ever since I was big enough to wear britches. She was the tallest, finest, purtiest gal in the Humbolt Mountains, which is covering considerable territory. They warn't a gal on Bear Creek, not even my own sisters, which could swing a axe like her, or fry a b'ar steak as tasty, or make hominy as good, and they warn't nobody, man nor woman, which could outrun her, less'n it was me.

As I come up the trail that led up to the McGraw cabin, I seen her, just scooping a pail of water out of the creek. The cabin was just out of sight on the other side of a clump of alders. She turned around and seen me, and stood there with the pail dripping in her hand, and her sleeves rolled up, and her arms and throat and bare feet was as white as anything you ever seen, and her eyes was the same color as the sky, and her hair looked like gold dust when the sun hit it.

I taken off my coonskin cap, and said: "Good mornin', Glory, how're you-all this mornin'?"

"Joe got kicked right severe by pap's sorrel mare yesterday," she says. "Just knocked some hide off, though. Outside of that we're all doin' fine. Air you glued to that mule?"

"No'm," I says, and clumb down, and says: "Lemme tote yore pail, Glory."

She started to hand it to me, and then she frowned and p'inted at my shirt, and says: "You been fightin' agen."

"Nobody but Joel Braxton," I said. "'Twarn't nothin'. He said moskeeters in the Injun Territory was bigger'n what they be in Texas."

"What you know about it?" says she. "You ain't never been to Texas."

"Well, he ain't never been to the Injun Territory neither," I said. "'Taint the moskeeters. It's the principle of the thing. My folks all come from Texas, and no Braxton can slander the State around me."

"You fight too much," she said. "Who licked?"

"Why, me, of course," I said. "I always do, don't I?"

This harmless statement seemed to irritate her.

"I reckon you think nobody on Bear Creek can lick you," she sneered.

"Well," I says truthfully, "nobody ain't, up to now--outside of pap."

"You ain't never fit none of my brothers," she snapped.

"That's why," I said. "I've took quite a lot of sass offa them ganglin' mavericks jest because they was yore brothers and I didn't want to hurt 'em."

Gals is funny about some things. She got mad and jerked the pail out of my hand, and says: "Oh, is that so? Well, lemme tell you right now, Breckinridge Elkins, the littlest one of my brothers can lick you like a balky hoss, and if you ever lay a finger on one of 'em, I'll fix you! And furthermore and besides, they's a gent up to the cabin right now which could pull his shootin' iron and decorate yore whole carcass with lead polka-dots whilst you was fumblin' for yore old cap-and-ball pistol!"

"I don't claim to be no gunfighter," I says mildly. "But I bet he cain't sling iron fast as my cousin Jack Gordon."

"You and yore cousins!" says she plenty scornful. "This feller is sech a gent as you never drempt existed! He's a cowpuncher from the Wild River Country, and he's ridin' through to Chawed Ear and he stopped at our cabin for dinner. If you could see him, you wouldn't never brag no more. You with that old mule and them moccasins and buckskin clothes!"

"Well, gosh, Glory!" I says plumb bewildered. "What's the matter with buckskin? I like it better'n homespun."

"Hah!" sneered she. "You oughta see Mr. Snake River Wilkinson! He ain't wearin' neither buckskins nor homespun. Store-bought clothes! I never seen such elegance. Star top boots, and gold-mounted spurs! And a red neckcloth--he said silk. I dunno. I never seen nothin' like it before. And a shirt all red and green and yaller and beautiful! And a white Stetson hat! And a pearl-handled six-shooter! And the finest hoss and riggin's you ever seen, you big dummox!"

"Aw, well, gosh!" I said, getting irritated. "If this here Mister Wilkinson is so blame gorgeous, whyn't you marry him?"

I ought not to said it. Her eyes flashed blue sparks.

"I will!" she gritted. "You think a fine gentleman like him wouldn't marry me, hey? I'll show you! I'll marry him right now!"

And impulsively shattering her water bucket over my head she turned and run up the trail.

"Glory, wait!" I hollered, but by the time I got the water out of my eyes and the oak splinters out of my hair she was gone.

Alexander was gone too. He taken off down the creek when Glory started yelling at me, because he was a smart mule in his dumb way, and could tell when thunder-showers was brewing. I run him for a mile before I caught him, and then I got onto him and headed for the McGraw cabin agen. Glory was mad enough to do anything she thought would worry me, and they warn't nothing would worry me more'n for her to marry some dern cowpuncher from the river country. She was plumb wrong when she thought I thought he wouldn't have her. Any man which would pass up a chance to get hitched with Glory McGraw would be a dern fool, I don't care what color his shirt was.

My heart sunk into my moccasins as I approached the alder clump where we'd had our row. I figgered she'd stretched things a little talking about Mr. Wilkinson's elegance, because whoever heard of a shirt with three colors into it, or gold-mounted spurs? Still, he was bound to be rich and wonderful from what she said, and what chance did I have? All the clothes I had was what I had on, and I hadn't never even seen a store-bought shirt, much less owned one. I didn't know whether to fall down in the trail and have a good bawl, or go get my rifle-gun and lay for Mr. Wilkinson.

Then, jest as I got back to where I'd saw Glory last, here she come again, running like a scairt deer, with her eyes all wide and her mouth open.

"Breckinridge!" she panted. "Oh, Breckinridge! I've played hell now!"

"What you mean?" I said.

"Well," says she, "that there cowpuncher Mister Wilkinson had been castin' eyes at me ever since he arriv at our cabin, but I hadn't give him no encouragement. But you made me so mad awhile ago, I went back to the cabin, and I marched right up to him, and I says: 'Mister Wilkinson, did you ever think about gittin' married?' He grabbed me by the hand and he says, says he: 'Gal, I been thinkin' about it ever since I seen you choppin' wood outside the cabin as I rode by. Fact is, that's why I stopped here.' I was so plumb flabbergasted I didn't know what to say, and the first thing I knowed, him and pap was makin' arrangements for the weddin'!"

"Aw, gosh!" I said.

She started wringing her hands.

"I don't want to marry Mister Wilkinson!" she hollered. "I don't love him! He turnt my head with his elegant manners and striped shirt! What'll I do? Pap's sot on me marryin' the feller!"

"Well, I'll put a stop to that," I says. "No dem cowcountry dude can come into the Humbolts and steal my gal. Air they all up to the cabin now?"

"They're arguin' about the weddin' gift," says Glory. "Pap thinks Mister Wilkinson oughta give him a hundred dollars. Mister Wilkinson offered him his Winchester instead of the cash. Be keerful, Breckinridge! Pap don't like you much, and Mister Wilkinson has got a awful mean eye, and his scabbard-end tied to his laig."

"I'll be plumb diplomatic," I promised, and got onto my mule Alexander and reched down and lifted Glory on behind me, and we rode up the path till we come to within maybe a hundred foot of the cabin door. I seen a fine white hoss tied in front of the cabin, and the saddle and bridle was the most elegant I ever seen. The silverwork shone when the sun hit it. We got off and I tied Alexander, and Glory hid behind a white oak. She warn't scairt of nobody but her old man, but he shore had her number.

"Be keerful, Breckinridge," she begged. "Don't make pap or Mister Wilkinson mad. Be tactful and meek."

So I said I would, and went up to the door. I could hear Miz McGraw and the other gals cooking dinner in the back room, and I could hear Old Man McGraw talking loud in the front room.

"'Taint enough!" says he. "I oughta have the Winchester and ten dollars. I tell you, Wilkinson, it's cheap enough for a gal like Glory! It plumb busts my heart strings to let her go, and nothin' but greenbacks is goin' to soothe the sting!"

"The Winchester and five bucks," says a hard voice which I reckoned was Mister Wilkinson. "It's a prime gun, I tell you. Ain't another'n like it in these mountains."

"Well," begun Old Man McGraw in a covetous voice, and jest then I come in through the door, ducking my head to keep from knocking it agen the lintel-log.

Old Man McGraw was setting there, tugging at his black beard, and them long gangling boys of his'n, Joe and Bill and John, was there gawking as usual, and there on a bench nigh the empty fireplace sot Mister Wilkinson in all his glory. I batted my eyes. I never seen such splendor in all my born days. Glory had told the truth about everything: the white Stetson with the fancy leather band, and the boots and gold-mounted spurs, and the shirt. The shirt nigh knocked my eyes out. I hadn't never dreamed nothing could be so beautiful--all big broad stripes of red and yaller and green! I seen his gun, too, a pearl-handled Colt .45 in a black leather scabbard which was wore plumb smooth and the end tied down to his laig with a rawhide thong. I could tell he hadn't never wore a glove on his right hand, neither, by the brownness of it. He had the hardest, blackest eyes I ever seen. They looked right through me.

I was very embarrassed, being quite young then, but I pulled myself together and says very polite: "Howdy, Mister McGraw."

"Who's this young grizzly?" demanded Mister Wilkinson suspiciously.

"Git out of here, Elkins," requested Old Man McGraw angrily. "We're talkin' over private business. You git!"

"I know what kind of business you-all are talkin' over," I retorted, getting irritated. But I remembered Glory said be diplomatic, so I said: "I come here to tell you the weddin's off! Glory ain't goin' to marry Mister Wilkinson. She's goin' to marry me, and anybody which comes between us had better be able to rassle cougars and whup grizzlies bare-handed!"

"Why, you--" begun Mister Wilkinson in a blood-thirsty voice, as he riz onto his feet like a painter fixing to go into action.

"Git outa here!" bellered Old Man McGraw jumping up and grabbing the iron poker. "What I does with my datter ain't none of yore business! Mister Wilkinson here is makin' me a present of his prime Winchester and five dollars in hard money! What could you offer me, you mountain of beef and ignorance?"

"A bust in the snoot, you old tightwad," I replied heatedly, but still remembering to be diplomatic. They warn't no use in offending him, and I was determined to talk quiet and tranquil, in spite of his insults. So I said: "A man which would sell his datter for five dollars and a gun ought to be et alive by the buzzards! You try to marry Glory to Mister Wilkinson and see what happens to you, sudden and onpleasant!"

"Why, you--!" says Old Man McGraw, swinging up his poker. "I'll bust yore fool skull like a egg!"

"Lemme handle him," snarled Mister Wilkinson. "Git outa the way and gimme a clean shot at him. Lissen here, you jack-eared mountain-mule, air you goin' out of here perpendicular, or does you prefer to go horizontal?"

"Open the ball whenever you feels lucky, you stripe-bellied polecat!" I retorted courteously, and he give a snarl and went for his gun, but I got mine out first and shot it out of his hand along with one of his fingers before he could pull his trigger.

He give a howl and staggered back agen the wall, glaring wildly at me, and at the blood dripping off his hand, and I stuck my old cap-and-ball .44 back in the scabbard and said: "You may be accounted a fast gunslinger down in the low country, but yo're tolerable slow on the draw to be foolin' around Bear Creek. You better go on home now, and--"

It was at this moment that Old Man McGraw hit me over the head with his poker. He swung it with both hands as hard as he could, and if I hadn't had on my coonskin cap I bet it would have skint my head some. As it was it knocked me to my knees, me being off-guard that way, and his three boys run in and started beating me with chairs and benches and a table laig. Well, I didn't want to hurt none of Glory's kin, but I had bit my tongue when the old man hit me with his poker, and that always did irritate me. Anyway, I seen they warn't no use arguing with them fool boys. They was out for blood--mine, to be exact.

So I riz up and taken Joe by the neck and crotch and throwed him through a winder as gentle as I could, but I forgot about the hickory-wood bars which was nailed acrost it to keep the bears out. He took 'em along with him, and that was how he got skint up like he did. I heard Glory let out a scream outside, and would have hollered out to let her know I was all right and for her not to worry about me, but just as I opened my mouth to do it, John jammed the butt-end of a table laig into it.

Sech treatment would try the patience of a saint, still and all I didn't really intend to hit John as hard as I did. How was I to know a tap like I give him would knock him through the door and dislocate his jawbone?

Old Man McGraw was dancing around trying to get another whack at me with his bent poker without hitting Bill which was hammering me over the head with a chair, but Mister Wilkinson warn't taking no part in the fray. He was backed up agen a wall with a wild look on his face. I reckon he warn't used to Bear Creek squabbles.

I taken the chair away from Bill and busted it over his head jest to kinda cool him off a little, and jest then Old Man McGraw made another swipe at me with his poker, but I ducked and grabbed him, and Bill stooped over to pick up a bowie knife which had fell out of somebody's boot. His back was towards me so I planted my moccasin in the seat of his britches with considerable force and he shot head-first through the door with a despairing howl. Somebody else screamed too, that sounded like Glory. I didn't know at the time I that she was running up to the door and was knocked down by Bill as he catapulted into the yard.

I couldn't see what was going on outside, and Old Man McGraw was chawing my thumb and feeling for my eye, so I throwed him after John and Bill, and he's a liar when he said I aimed him at that rain-barrel a-purpose. I didn't even know they was one there till I heard the crash as his head went through the staves.

I turned around to have some more words with Mister Wilkinson, but he jumped through the winder I'd throwed Joe through, and when I tried to foller him, I couldn't get my shoulders through. So I run out at the door and Glory met me just as I hit the yard and she give me a slap in the face that sounded like a beaver hitting a mud bank with his tail.

"Why, Glory!" I says, dumbfounded, because her blue eyes was blazing, and her yaller hair was nigh standing on end. She was so mad she was crying and that's the first time I ever knowed she could cry. "What's the matter? What've I did?"

"What have you did?" she raged, doing a kind of a war-dance on her bare feet. "You outlaw! You murderer! You jack-eared son of a spotted tail skunk! Look what you done!" She p'inted at her old man dazedly pulling his head out of the rooins of the rain-barrel, and her brothers laying around the yard in various positions, bleeding freely and groaning loudly. "You tried to murder my family!" says she, shaking her fists under my nose. "You throwed Bill onto me on purpose!"

"I didn't neither!" I exclaimed, shocked and scandalized. "You know I wouldn't hurt a hair of yore head, Glory! Why, all I done, I done it for you--"

"You didn't have to mutilate my pap and my brothers!" she wept furiously. Ain't that just like a gal? What could I done but what I did? She hollered: "If you really loved me you wouldn't of hurt 'em! You jest done it for meanness! I told you to be ca'm and gentle! Whyn't you do it? Shet up! Don't talk to me! Well, whyn't you say somethin'? Ain't you got no tongue?"

"I handled 'em easy as I could!" I roared, badgered beyond endurance. "It warn't my fault. If they'd had any sense, they wouldn't--"

"Don't you dare slander my folks!" she yelped. "What you done to Mister Wilkinson?"

The aforesaid gent jest then come limping around the corner of the cabin, and started for his hoss, and Glory run to him and grabbed his arm, and said: "If you still want to marry me, stranger, it's a go! I'll ride off with you right now!"

He looked at me and shuddered, and jerked his arm away.

"Do I look like a dern fool?" he inquired with some heat. "I advises you to marry that young grizzly there, for the sake of public safety, if nothin' else! Marry you when he wants you? No, thank you! I'm leavin' a valuable finger as a sooverneer of my sojourn, but I figger it's a cheap price! After watchin' that human tornado in action, I calculate a finger ain't nothin' to bother about! Adios! If I ever come within a hundred miles of Bear Creek again it'll be because I've gone plumb loco!"

And with that he forked his critter and took off up the trail like the devil was after him.

"Now look what you done!" wept Glory. "Now he won't never marry me!"

"But I thought you didn't want to marry him!" I says, plumb bewildered.

She turned on me like a catamount.

"I didn't!" she shrieked. "I wouldn't marry him if he was the last man on earth! But I demands the right to say yes or no for myself! I don't aim to be bossed around by no hillbilly on a mangy mule!"

"Alexander ain't mangy," I said. "Besides, I warn't, tryin' to boss you around, Glory. I war just fixin' it so yore pap wouldn't make you marry Mister Wilkinson. Bein' as we aims to marry ourselves--"

"Who said we aimed to?" she hollered. "Me marry you, after you beat up my pap and my brothers like you done? You think yo're the best man on Bear Creek! Ha! You with yore buckskin britches and old cap-and-ball pistol and coonskin cap! Me marry you? Git on yore mangy mule and git before I takes a shotgun to you!"

"All right!" I roared, getting mad at last. "All right, if that's the way you want to ack! You ain't the only gal in these mountains! They's plenty of gals which would be glad to have me callin' on 'em."

"Who, for a instance?" she sneered.

"Ellen Reynolds, for instance!" I bellered. "That's who!"

"All right!" says she, trembling with rage. "Go and spark that stuck-up hussy on yore mangy mule with yore old moccasins and cap-and-ball gun! See if I care!"

"I aim to!" I assured her bitterly. "And I won't be on no mule, neither. I'll be on the best hoss in the Humbolts, and I'll have me some boots on to my feet, and a silver mounted saddle and bridle, and a pistol that shoots store-bought ca'tridges, too! You wait and see!"

"Where you think you'll git 'em?" she sneered.

"Well, I will!" I bellered, seeing red. "You said I thought I was the best man on Bear Creek! Well, by golly, I am, and I aim to prove it! I'm glad you gimme the gate! If you hadn't I'd of married you and settled down in a cabin up the creek somewheres and never done nothin' nor seen nothin' nor been nothin' but yore husband! Now I'm goin' to plumb bust this State wide open from one end to the other'n, and folks is goin' to know about me all over everywheres!"

"Heh! heh! heh!" she laughed bitterly.

"I'll show you!" I promised her wrathfully, as I forked my mule, and headed down the trail with her laughter ringing in my ears. I kicked Alexander most vicious in the ribs, and he give a bray of astonishment and lit a shuck for home. A instant later the alder clump hid the McGraw cabin from view and Glory McGraw and my boyhood dreams was out of sight behind me.

Chapter II - MOUNTAIN MAN

"I'LL SHOW her!" I promised the world at large, as I rode through the bresh as hard as Alexander could run. "I'll go out into the world and make a name for myself, by golly! She'll see. Whoa, Alexander!"

Because I'd jest seen a bee-tree I'd located the day before. My busted heart needed something to soothe it, and I figgered fame and fortune could wait a little whilst I drowned my woes in honey.

I was up to my ears in this beverage when I heard my old man calling: "Breckinridge! Oh, Breckinridge! Whar air you? I see you now. You don't need to climb that tree. I ain't goin' to larrup you."

He come up and said: "Breckinridge, ain't that a bee settin' on to yore ear?"

I reched up, and sure enough, it was. Come to think about it, I had felt kind of like something was stinging me somewheres.

"I swan, Breckinridge," says pap, "I never seen a hide like yore'n not even amongst the Elkinses. Lissen to me now: old Buffalo Rogers jest come through on his way back from Tomahawk, and the postmaster there said they was a letter for me, from Mississippi. He wouldn't give it to nobody but me or some of my folks. I dunno who'd be writin' me from Mississippi; last time I was there was when I was fightin' the Yankees. But anyway, that letter is got to be got. Me and yore maw have decided yo're to go git it."

"Clean to Tomahawk?" I said. "Gee whiz, Pap!"

"Well," he says, combing his beard with his fingers, "yo're growed in size, if not in years. It's time you seen somethin' of the world. You ain't never been more'n thirty miles away from the cabin you was born in. Yore brother Garfield ain't able to go on account of that b'ar he tangled with, and Buckner is busy skinnin' the b'ar. You been to whar the trail goin' to Tomahawk passes. All you got to do is foller it and turn to the right whar it forks. The left goes on to Perdition."

"Great!" I says. "This is whar I begins to see the world!" And I added to myself: "This is whar I begins to show Glory McGraw I'm a man of importance, by golly!"

Well, next morning before good daylight I was off, riding my mule Alexander, with a dollar pap gimme stuck in the bottom of my pistol scabbard. Pap rode with me a few miles and give me advice.

"Be keerful how you spend that dollar I give you," he said. "Don't gamble. Drink in reason. Half a gallon of corn juice is enough for any man. Don't be techy--but don't forgit that yore pap was once the rough-and-tumble champeen of Gonzales County, Texas. And whilst yo're feelin' for the other feller's eye, don't be keerless and let him chaw yore ear off. And don't resist no officer."

"What's them, Pap?" I inquired.

"Down in the settlements," he explained, "they has men which their job is to keep the peace. I don't take no stock in law myself, but them city folks is different from us. You do what they says, and if they says give up yore gun, even, why you up and do it!"

I was shocked, and meditated a while, and then says: "How can I tell which is them?"

"They'll have a silver star stuck onto their shirt," he says, so I said I'd do like he told me. He then reined around and went back up the mountains, and I rode on down the path.

Well, I camped late that night where the path come out onto the Tomahawk trail, and the next morning I rode on down the trail, feeling like I was a long way from home. It was purty hot, and I hadn't went far till I passed a stream and decided I'd take a swim. So I tied Alexander to a cottonwood, and hung my buckskins close by, but I taken my gun belt with my cap-and-ball .44 and hung it on a willer limb reching out over the water. They was thick bushes all around the stream.

Well, I div deep, and as I come up, I had a feeling like somebody had hit me over the head with a club. I looked up, and there was a Injun holding on to a limb with one hand and leaning out over the water with a club in the other hand.

He yelled and swung at me again, but I div, and he missed, and I come up right under the limb where my gun was hung. I reched up and grabbed it and let bam at him just as he dived into the bushes, and he let out a squall and grabbed the seat of his pants. Next minute I heard a horse running, and glimpsed him tearing away through the bresh on a pinto mustang, setting his hoss like it was a red-hot stove, and dern him, he had my clothes in one hand! I was so upsot by this that I missed him clean, and jumping out, I charged through the bushes and saplings, but he was already out of sight. I knowed it warn't likely he was with a war-party--just a dern thieving Piute--but what a fix I was in! He'd even stole my moccasins.

I couldn't go home, in that shape, without the letter, and admit I missed a Injun twice. Pap would larrup the tar out of me. And if I went on, what if I met some women, in the valley settlements? I don't reckon they ever was a young'un half as bashful as what I was in them days. Cold sweat busted out all over me. I thought, here I started out to see the world and show Glory McGraw I was a man among men, and here I am with no more clothes than a jackrabbit. At last, in desperation, I buckled on my belt and started down the trail towards Tomahawk. I was about ready to commit murder to get me some pants.

I was glad the Injun didn't steal Alexander, but the going was so rough I had to walk and lead him, because I kept to the thick bresh alongside the trail. He had a tough time getting through the bushes, and the thorns scratched him so he hollered, and ever' now and then I had to lift him over jagged rocks. It was tough on Alexander, but I was too bashful to travel in the open trail without no clothes on.

After I'd gone maybe a mile I heard somebody in the trail ahead of me, and peeking through the bushes, I seen a most pecooliar sight. It was a man on foot, going the same direction as me, and he had on what I instinctly guessed was city clothes. They warn't buckskin nor homespun, nor yet like the duds Mister Wilkinson had on, but they were very beautiful, with big checks and stripes all over 'em. He had on a round hat with a narrer brim, and shoes like I hadn't never seen before, being neither boots nor moccasins. He was dusty, and he cussed considerable as he limped along. Ahead of him I seen the trail made a hoss-shoe bend, so I cut straight across and got ahead of him, and as he come along, I come out of the bresh and throwed down on him with my cap-and-ball.

He throwed up his hands and hollered: "Don't shoot!"

"I don't want to, mister," I said, "but I got to have clothes!"

He shook his head like he couldn't believe I was so, and he said: "You ain't the color of a Injun, but--what kind of people live in these hills, anyway?"

"Most of 'em's Democrats," I said. "But I ain't got no time to talk politics. You climb out of them riggin's."

"My God!" he wailed. "My horse threw me off and ran away, and I've bin walkin' for hours, expecting to get scalped by Injuns any minute, and now a naked lunatic on a mule demands my clothes! It's too dern much!"

"I cain't argy, mister," I said; "somebody's liable to come up the trail any minute. Hustle!" So saying I shot his hat off to encourage him.

He give a howl and shucked his duds in a hurry.

"My underclothes, too?" he demanded, shivering though it was very hot.

"Is that what them things is?" I demanded, shocked. "I never heard of a man wearin' such womanish things. The country is goin' to the dogs, just like pap says. You better git goin'. Take my mule. When I git to where I can git some regular clothes, we'll swap back."

He clumb onto Alexander kind of dubious, and says to me, despairful: "Will you tell me one thing--how do I get to Tomahawk?"

"Take the next turn to the right," I said, "and--"

Jest then Alexander turned his head and seen them underclothes on his back, and he give a loud and ringing bray and sot sail down the trail at full speed with the stranger hanging on with both hands. Before they was out of sight they come to where the trail forked, and Alexander taken the left branch instead of the right, and vanished amongst the ridges.

I put on the clothes, and they scratched my hide something fierce. I thinks, well, I got store-bought clothes quicker'n I hoped to. But I didn't think much of 'em. The coat split down the back, and the pants was too short, but the shoes was the wust; they pinched all over. I throwed away the socks, having never wore none, but put on what was left of the hat.

I went on down the trail, and taken the right-hand fork, and in a mile or so I come out on a flat, and heard hosses running. The next thing a mob of men on hosses bust into view. One of 'em yelled: "There he is!" and they all come for me full tilt. Instantly I decided that the stranger had got to Tomahawk after all, somehow, and had sot his friends onto me for stealing his clothes.

So I left the trail and took out across the sage grass, and they all charged after me, yelling stop. Well, them dern shoes pinched my feet so bad I couldn't make much speed, so after I had run maybe a quarter of a mile I perceived that the hosses were beginning to gain on me. So I wheeled with my cap-and-ball in my hand, but I was going so fast, when I turned, them dern shoes slipped and I went over backwards into a cactus bed just as I pulled the trigger. So I only knocked the hat off of the first hossman. He yelled and pulled up his hoss, right over me nearly, and as I drawed another bead on him, I seen he had a bright shiny star on to his shirt. I dropped my gun and stuck up my hands.

They swarmed around me--cowboys, from their looks. The man with the star got off his hoss and picked up my gun and cussed.

"What did you lead us this chase through this heat and shoot at me for?" he demanded.

"I didn't know you was a officer," I said.

"Hell, McVey," said one of 'em, "you know how jumpy tenderfeet is. Likely he thought we was Santry's outlaws. Where's yore hoss?"

"I ain't got none," I said.

"Got away from you, hey?" said McVey. "Well, climb up behind Kirby here, and let's git goin'."

To my surprise, the sheriff stuck my gun back in the scabbard, and so I clumb up behind Kirby, and away we went. Kirby kept telling me not to fall off, and it made me mad, but I said nothing. After an hour or so we come to a bunch of houses they said was Tomahawk. I got panicky when I seen all them houses, and would have jumped down and run for the mountains, only I knowed they'd catch me, with them dern pinchy shoes on.

I hadn't never seen such houses before. They was made out of boards, mostly, and some was two stories high. To the north-west and west the hills riz up a few hundred yards from the backs of the houses, and on the other sides there was plains, with bresh and timber on them.

"You boys ride into town and tell the folks that the shebang starts soon," said McVey. "Me and Kirby and Richards will take him to the ring."

I could see people milling around in the streets, and I never had no idee they was that many folks in the world. The sheriff and the other two fellers rode around the north end of the town and stopped at a old barn and told me to get off. So I did, and we went in and they had a kind of room fixed up in there with benches and a lot of towels and water buckets, and the sheriff said: "This ain't much of a dressin' room, but it'll have to do. Us boys don't know much about this game, but we'll second you as good as we can. One thing--the other feller ain't got no manager nor seconds neither. How do you feel?"

"Fine," I said, "but I'm kind of hungry."

"Go git him somethin', Richards," said the sheriff.

"I didn't think they et just before a bout," said Richards.

"Aw, I reckon he knows what he's doin'," said McVey. "Gwan."

So Richards pulled out, and the sheriff and Kirby walked around me like I was a prize bull, and felt my muscles, and the sheriff said: "By golly, if size means anything, our dough is as good as in our britches right now!"

I pulled my dollar out of my scabbard and said I would pay for my keep, and they haw-hawed and slapped me on the back and said I was a great joker. Then Richards come back with a platter of grub, with a lot of men wearing boots and guns and whiskers, and they stomped in and gawped at me, and McVey said: "Look him over, boys! Tomahawk stands or falls with him today!"

They started walking around me like him and Kirby done, and I was embarrassed and et three or four pounds of beef and a quart of mashed pertaters, and a big hunk of white bread, and drunk about a gallon of water, because I was purty thirsty. Then they all gaped like they was surprised about something, and one of 'em said: "How come he didn't arrive on the stagecoach yesterday?"

"Well," said the sheriff, "the driver told me he was so drunk they left him at Bisney, and come on with his luggage, which is over there in the corner. They got a hoss and left it there with instructions for him to ride on to Tomahawk as soon as he sobered up. Me and the boys got nervous today when he didn't show up, so we went out lookin' for him, and met him hoofin' it down the trail."

"I bet them Perdition hombres starts somethin'," said Kirby. "Ain't a one of 'em showed up yet. They're settin' over at Perdition soakin' up bad licker and broodin' on their wrongs. They shore wanted this show staged over there. They claimed that since Tomahawk was furnishin' one-half of the attraction, and Gunstock the other half, the razee ought to be throwed at Perdition."

"Nothin' to it," said McVey. "It laid between Tomahawk and Gunstock, and we throwed a coin and won it. If Perdition wants trouble she can git it. Is the boys r'arin' to go?"

"Is they!" says Richards. "Every bar in Tomahawk is crowded with hombres full of licker and civic pride. They're bettin' their shirts, and they has been nine fights already. Everybody in Gunstock's here."

"Well, le's git goin'," says McVey, getting nervous. "The quicker it's over, the less blood there's likely to be spilt."

The first thing I knowed, they had laid hold of me and was pulling my clothes off, so it dawned on me that I must be under arrest for stealing that stranger's clothes. Kirby dug into the baggage which was in one corner of the stall, and dragged out a funny looking pair of pants; I know now they was white silk. I put 'em on because I didn't have nothing else to put on, and they fitted me like my skin. Richards tied a American flag around my waist, and they put some spiked shoes onto my feet.

I let 'em do like they wanted to, remembering what pap said about not resisting no officer. Whilst so employed I begun to hear a noise outside, like a lot of people whooping and cheering. Purty soon in come a skinny old gink with whiskers and two guns on, and he hollered: "Lissen here, Mac, dern it, a big shipment of gold is down there waitin' to be took off by the evenin' stage, and the whole blame town is deserted on account of this dern foolishness. Suppose Comanche Santry and his gang gits wind of it?"

"Well," said McVey, "I'll send Kirby here to help you guard it."

"You will like hell," says Kirby. "I'll resign as deputy first. I got every cent of my dough on this scrap, and I aim to see it."

"Well, send somebody!" says the old codger. "I got enough to do runnin' my store, and the stage stand, and the post office, without--"

He left, mumbling in his whiskers, and I said: "Who's that?"

"Aw," said Kirby, "that's old man Brenton that runs the store down at the other end of town, on the east side of the street. The post office is in there, too."

"I got to see him," I says. "There's a letter--"

Just then another man come surging in and hollered: "Hey, is yore man ready? Folks is gittin' impatient!"

"All right," says McVey, throwing over me a thing he called a bathrobe. Him and Kirby and Richards picked up towels and buckets and things, and we went out the oppersite door from what we come in, and they was a big crowd of people there, and they whooped and shot off their pistols. I would have bolted back into the barn, only they grabbed me and said it was all right. We pushed through the crowd, and I never seen so many boots and pistols in my life, and we come to a square corral made out of four posts sot in the ground, and ropes stretched between. They called this a ring and told me to get in. I done so, and they had turf packed down so the ground was level as a floor and hard and solid. They told me to set down on a stool in one corner, and I did, and wrapped my robe around me like a Injun.

Then everybody yelled, and some men, from Gunstock, McVey said, clumb through the ropes on the other side. One of 'em was dressed like I was, and I never seen such a funny-looking human. His ears looked like cabbages, and his nose was plumb flat, and his head was shaved and looked right smart like a bullet. He sot down in a oppersite corner.

Then a feller got up and waved his arms, and hollered: "Gents, you all know the occasion of this here suspicious event. Mister Bat O'Tool, happenin' to be passin' through Gunstock, consented to fight anybody which would meet him. Tomahawk riz to the occasion by sendin' all the way to Denver to procure the services of Mister Bruiser McGoorty, formerly of San Francisco!"

He p'inted at me, and everybody cheered and shot off their pistols, and I was embarrassed and bust out in a cold sweat.

"This fight," said the feller, "will be fit accordin' to London Prize Ring Rules, same as in a champeenship go. Bare fists, round ends when one of 'em's knocked down or throwed down. Fight lasts till one or t'other ain't able to come up to the scratch when time's called. I, Yucca Blaine, have been selected as referee because, bein' from Chawed Ear, I got no prejudices either way. Air you all ready? Time!"

McVey hauled me off my stool and pulled off my bathrobe and pushed me out into the ring. I nearly died with embarrassment, but I seen the feller they called O'Tool didn't have on no more clothes than me. He approached and held out his hand like he wanted to shake hands, so I held out mine. We shook hands, and then without no warning he hit me a awful lick on the jaw with his left. It was like being kicked by a mule. The first part of me which hit the turf was the back of my head. O'Tool stalked back to his corner, and the Gunstock boys was dancing and hugging each other, and the Tomahawk fellers was growling in their whiskers and fumbling with their guns and bowie knives.

McVey and his deperties rushed into the ring before I could get up and dragged me to my corner and began pouring water on me.

"Air you hurt much?" yelled McVey.

"How can a man's fist hurt anybody?" I ast. "I wouldn't of fell down, only I was caught off-guard. I didn't know he was goin' to hit me. I never played no game like this here'n before."

McVey dropped the towel he was beating me in the face with, and turned pale. "Ain't you Bruiser McGoorty of San Francisco?" he hollered.

"Naw," I said. "I'm Breckinridge Elkins, from up in the Humbolt Mountains. I come here to git a letter for pap."

"But the stagecoach driver described them clothes--" he begun wildly.

"A Injun stole my clothes," I explained, "so I taken some off'n a stranger. Maybe that was Mister McGoorty."

"What's the matter?" ast Kirby, coming up with another bucket of water. "Time's about ready to be called."

"We're sunk!" bawled McVey. "This ain't McGoorty! This is a derned hillbilly which murdered McGoorty and stole his clothes!"

"We're rooint!" exclaimed Richards, aghast. "Everybody's bet their dough without even seein' our man, they was that full of trust and civic pride. We cain't call it off now. Tomahawk is rooint! What'll we do?"

"He's goin' to git in there and fight his derndest," said McVey, pulling his gun and jamming it into my back. "We'll hang him after the fight."

"But he cain't box!" wailed Richards.

"No matter," said McVey; "the fair name of our town is at stake; Tomahawk promised to supply a fighter to fight O'Tool, and--"

"Oh!" I said, suddenly seeing light. "This here is a fight then, ain't it?"

McVey give a low moan, and Kirby reched for his gun, but just then the referee hollered time, and I jumped up and run at O'Tool. If a fight was all they wanted, I was satisfied. All that talk about rules, and the yelling of the crowd and all had had me so confused I hadn't knowed what it was all about. I hit at O'Tool and he ducked and hit me in the belly and on the nose and in the eye and on the ear. The blood spurted, and the crowd hollered, and he looked plumb dumbfounded and gritted betwixt his teeth: "Are you human? Why don't you fall?"

I spit out a mouthful of blood and got my hands on him and started chawing his ear, and he squalled like a catamount. Yucca run in and tried to pull me loose and I give him a slap under the ear and he turned a somersault into the ropes.

"Yore man's fightin' foul!" he squalled, and Kirby said: "Yo're crazy! Do you see this gun? You holler 'foul' just once more, and it'll go off!"

Meanwhile O'Tool had broke loose from me and caved in his knuckles on my jaw, and I come for him again, because I was beginning to lose my temper. He gasped: "If you want to make an alley-fight out of it, all right. I wasn't raised in Five Points for nothing!" He then rammed his knee into my groin, and groped for my eye, but I got his thumb in my teeth and begun masticating it, and the way he howled was a caution.

By this time the crowd was crazy, and I throwed O'Tool and begun to stomp him, when somebody let bang at me from the crowd and the bullet cut my silk belt and my pants started to fall down.

I grabbed 'em with both hands, and O'Tool riz up and rushed at me, bloody and bellering, and I didn't dare let go my pants to defend myself. I whirled and bent over and lashed out backwards with my right heel like a mule, and I caught him under the chin. He done a cartwheel in the air, his head hit the turf, and he bounced on over and landed on his back with his knees hooked over the lower rope. There warn't no question about him being out. The only question was, was he dead?

A roar of "Foul!" went up from the Gunstock men, and guns bristled all around the ring.

The Tomahawk men was cheering and yelling that I'd won fair and square, and the Gunstock men was cussing and threatening me, when somebody hollered: "Leave it to the referee!"

"Sure," said Kirby. "He knows our man won fair, and if he don't say so, I'll blow his head off!"

"That's a lie!" bellered a Gunstock man. "He knows it war a foul, and if he says it warn't, I'll kyarve his gizzard with this here bowie knife!"

At them words Yucca fainted, and then a clatter of hoofs sounded above the din, and out of the timber that hid the trail from the east a gang of hossmen rode at a run. Everybody yelled: "Look out, here comes them Perdition illegitimates!"

Instantly a hundred guns covered 'em, and McVey demanded: "Come ye in peace or in war?"

"We come to unmask a fraud!" roared a big man with a red bandanner around his neck. "McGoorty, come forth!"

A familiar figger, now dressed in cowboy togs, pushed forward on my mule. "There he is!" this figger yelled, p'inting a accusing finger at me. "That's the desperado that robbed me! Them's my tights he's got on!"

"What is this?" roared the crowd.

"A cussed fake!" bellered the man with the red bandanner. "This here is Bruiser McGoorty!"

"Then who's he?" somebody bawled, p'inting at me.

"I'm Breckinridge Elkins and I can lick any man here!" I roared, getting mad. I brandished my fists in defiance, but my britches started sliding down again, so I had to shut up and grab 'em.

"Aha!" the man with the red bandanner howled like a hyener. "He admits it! I dunno what the idee is, but these Tomahawk polecats has double-crossed somebody! I trusts that you jackasses from Gunstock realizes the blackness and hellishness of their hearts! This man McGoorty rode into Perdition a few hours ago in his unmentionables, astraddle of that there mule, and told us how he'd been held up and robbed and put on the wrong road. You skunks was too proud to stage this fight in Perdition, but we ain't the men to see justice scorned with impunity! We brought McGoorty here to show you that you was bein' gypped by Tomahawk! That man ain't no prize fighter; he's a highway robber!"

"These Tomahawk coyotes has framed us!" squalled a Gunstock man, going for his gun.

"Yo're a liar!" roared Richards, bending a .45 barrel over his head.

The next instant guns was crashing, knives was gleaming, and men was yelling blue murder. The Gunstock braves turned frothing on the Tomahawk warriors, and the men from Perdition, yelping with glee, pulled their guns, and begun fanning the crowd indiscriminately, which give back their fire. McGoorty give a howl and fell down on Alexander's neck, gripping around it with both arms, and Alexander departed in a cloud of dust and gun-smoke.

I grabbed my gunbelt, which McVey had hung over the post in my corner, and I headed for cover, holding onto my britches whilst the bullets hummed around me as thick as bees. I wanted to take to the bresh, but I remembered that blamed letter, so I headed for town. Behind me there riz a roar of banging guns and yelling men. Jest as I got to the backs of the row of buildings which lined the street, I run head on into something soft. It was McGoorty, trying to escape on Alexander. He had hold of jest one rein, and Alexander, evidently having rounded one end of the town, was traveling in a circle and heading back where he started from.

I was going so fast I couldn't stop, and I run right over Alexander and all three of us went down in a heap. I jumped up, afeared Alexander was kilt or crippled, but he scrambled up snorting and trembling, and then McGoorty weaved up, making funny noises. I poked my cap-and-ball into his belly.

"Off with them pants!" I hollered.

"My God!" he screamed. "Again? This is getting to be a habit!"

"Hustle!" I bellered. "You can have these scandals I got on now."

He shucked his britches and grabbed them tights and run like he was afeared I'd want his underwear too. I jerked on the pants, forked Alexander and headed for the south end of town. I kept behind the houses, though the town seemed to be deserted, and purty soon I come to the store where Kirby had told me old man Brenton kept the post office. Guns was barking there, and across the street I seen men ducking in and out behind a old shack, and shooting.

I tied Alexander to a corner of the store and went in the back door. Up in the front part I seen old man Brenton kneeling behind some barrels with a .45-90, and he was shooting at the fellers in the shack acrost the street. Every now and then a slug would hum through the door and comb his whiskers, and he would cuss worse'n pap did that time he sot down in a b'ar trap.

I went up to him and tapped him on the shoulder and he give a squall and flopped over and let go bam! right in my face and singed off my eyebrows. And the fellers acrost the street hollered and started shooting at both of us.

I'd grabbed the barrel of his Winchester, and he was cussing and jerking at it with one hand and feeling in his boot for a knife with the other'n, and I said: "Mister Brenton, if you ain't too busy, I wish you'd gimme that there letter which come for pap."

"Don't never come up behind me like that again!" he squalled. "I thought you was one of them dern outlaws! Look out! Duck, you blame fool!"

I let go of his gun, and he taken a shot at a head which was aiming around the corner of the shack, and the head let out a squall and disappeared.

"Who is them fellers?" I ast.

"Comanche Santry and his bunch, from up in the hills," snarled old man Brenton, jerking the lever of his Winchester. "They come after that gold. A hell of a sheriff McVey is; never sent me nobody. And them fools over at the ring are makin' so much noise they'll never hear the shootin' over here. Look out, here they come!"

Six or seven men rushed out from behind the shack and run acrost the street, shooting as they come. I seen I'd never get my letter as long as all this fighting was going on, so I unslung my old cap-and-ball and let bam at them three times, and three of them outlaws fell acrost each other in the street, and the rest turned around and run back behind the shack.

"Good work, boy!" yelled old man Brenton. "If I ever--oh, Judas Iscariot, we're blowed up now!"

Something was pushed around the corner of the shack and come rolling down towards us, the shack being on higher ground than what the store was. It was a keg, with a burning fuse which whirled as the keg revolved and looked like a wheel of fire.

"What's in that there kaig?" I ast.

"Blastin' powder!" screamed old man Brenton, scrambling up. "Run, you dern fool! It's comin' right into the door!"

He was so scairt he forgot all about the fellers acrost the street, and one of 'em caught him in the thigh with a buffalo rifle, and he plunked down again, howling blue murder. I stepped over him to the door--that's when I got that slug in my hip--and the keg hit my laigs and stopped, so I picked it up and heaved it back acrost the street. It hadn't no more'n hit the shack when bam! it exploded and the shack went up in smoke. When it stopped raining pieces of wood and metal, they warn't no sign to show any outlaws had ever hid behind where that shack had been.

"I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't saw it myself," old man Brenton moaned faintly.

"Air you hurt bad, Mister Brenton?" I ast.

"I'm dyin'," he groaned.

"Well, before you die, Mister Brenton," I says, "would you mind givin' me that there letter for pap?"

"What's yore pap's name?" he ast.

"Roarin' Bill Elkins, of Bear Creek," I said.

He warn't as bad hurt as he thought. He reched up and got hold of a leather bag and fumbled in it and pulled out a envelope. "I remember tellin' old Buffalo Rogers I had a letter for Bill Elkins," he said, fingering it over. Then he said: "Hey, wait! This ain't for yore pap. My sight is gittin' bad. I read it wrong the first time. This here is for Bill Elston that lives between here and Perdition."

I want to spike a rumor which says I tried to murder old man Brenton and tore down his store for spite. I've done told how he got his laig broke, and the rest was accidental. When I realized that I had went through all that embarrassment for nothing, I was so mad and disgusted I turned and run out of the back door, and I forgot to open the door and that's how it got tore off the hinges.

I then jumped on to Alexander and forgot to ontie him loose from the store. I kicked him in the ribs, and he bolted and tore loose that corner of the building and that's how come the roof to fall in. Old man Brenton inside was scairt and started yelling bloody murder, and about that time a mob of men come up to investigate the explosion which had stopped the three-cornered battle between Perdition, Tomahawk and Gunstock, and they thought I was the cause of everything, and they all started shooting at me as I rode off.

Then was when I got that charge of buckshot in my back.

I went out of Tomahawk and up the hill trail so fast I bet me and Alexander looked like a streak; and I says to myself it looks like making a name for myself in the world is going to be tougher than I thought, because it's evident that civilization is full of snares for a boy which ain't reched his full growth and strength.

Chapter III - MEET CAP'N KIDD

I DIDN'T pull up Alexander till I was plumb out of sight of Tomahawk. Then I slowed down and taken stock of myself, and my spirits was right down in my spiked shoes which still had some of Mister O'Tool's hide stuck onto the spikes. Here I'd started forth into the world to show Glory McGraw what a he-bearcat I was, and now look at me. Here I was without even no clothes but them derned spiked shoes which pinched my feet, and a pair of britches some cow-puncher had wore the seat out of and patched with buckskin. I still had my gunbelt and the dollar pap gimme, but no place to spend it. I likewise had a goodly amount of lead under my hide.

"By golly!" I says, shaking my fists at the universe at large. "I ain't goin' to go back to Bear Creek like this, and have Glory McGraw laughin' at me! I'll head for the Wild River settlements and git me a job punchin' cows till I got money enough to buy me store-bought boots and a hoss!"

I then pulled out my bowie knife which was in a scabbard on my gunbelt, and started digging the slug out of my hip, and the buckshot out of my back. Them buckshot was kinda hard to get to, but I done it. I hadn't never held a job of punching cows, but I'd had plenty experience roping wild bulls up in the Humbolts. Them bulls wanders off the lower ranges into the mountains and grows most amazing big and mean. Me and Alexander had had plenty experience with them, and I had me a lariat which would hold any steer that ever bellered. It was still tied to my saddle, and I was glad none of them cowpunchers hadn't stole it. Maybe they didn't know it was a lariat. I'd made it myself, especial, and used it to rope them bulls and also cougars and grizzlies which infests the Humbolts. It was made out of buffalo hide, ninety foot long and half again as thick and heavy as the average lariat, and the honda was a half-pound chunk of iron beat into shape with a sledge hammer. I reckoned I was qualified for a vaquero even if I didn't have no cowboy clothes and was riding a mule.

So I headed acrost the mountains for the cowcountry. They warn't no trail the way I taken, but I knowed the direction Wild River lay in, and that was enough for me. I knowed if I kept going that way I'd hit it after awhile. Meanwhile, they was plenty of grass in the draws and along the creeks to keep Alexander fat and sleek, and plenty of squirrels and rabbits for me to knock over with rocks. I camped that night away up in the high ranges and cooked me nine or ten squirrels over a fire and et 'em, and while that warn't much of a supper for a appertite like mine, still I figgered next day I'd stumble on to a b'ar or maybe a steer which had wandered offa the ranges.

Next morning before sunup I was on Alexander and moving on, without no breakfast, because it looked like they warn't no rabbits nor nothing near abouts, and I rode all morning without sighting nothing. It was a high range, and nothing alive there but a buzzard I seen onst, but late in the afternoon I crossed a backbone and come down into a whopping big plateau

about the size of a county, with springs and streams and grass growing stirrup-high along 'em, and clumps of cottonwood, and spruce, and pine thick up on the hillsides. They was canyons and cliffs, and mountains along the rim, and altogether it was as fine a country as I ever seen, but it didn't look like nobody lived there, and for all I know I was the first white man that ever come into it. But they was more soon, as I'll relate.

Well, I noticed something funny as I come down the ridge that separated the bare hills from the plateau. First I met a wildcat. He come lipping along at a right smart clip, and he didn't stop. He just gimme a wicked look sidewise and kept right on up the slope. Next thing I met a lobo wolf, and after that I counted nine more wolves, and they was all heading west, up the slopes. Then Alexander give a snort and started trembling, and a cougar slid out of a blackjack thicket and snarled at us over his shoulder as he went past at a long lope. All them varmints was heading for the dry bare country I'd just left, and I wondered why they was leaving a good range like this one to go into that dern no-account country.

It worried Alexander too, because he smelt of the air and brayed kind of plaintively. I pulled him up and smelt the air too, because critters run like that before a forest fire, but I couldn't smell no smoke, nor see none. So I rode on down the slopes and started across the flats, and as I went I seen more bobcats, and wolves, and painters, and they was all heading west, and they warn't lingering none, neither. They warn't no doubt that them critters was pulling their freight because they was scairt of something, and it warn't humans, because they didn't 'pear to be scairt of me a mite. They just swerved around me and kept trailing. After I'd gone a few miles I met a herd of wild hosses, with the stallion herding 'em. He was a big mean-looking cuss, but he looked scairt as bad as any of the critters I'd saw.

The sun was getting low, and I was getting awful hungry as I come into a open spot with a creek on one side running through clumps of willers and cottonwoods, and on the other side I could see some big cliffs looming up over the tops of the trees. And whilst I was hesitating, wondering if I ought to keep looking for eatable critters, or try to worry along on a wildcat or a wolf, a big grizzly come lumbering out of a clump of spruces and headed west. When he seen me and Alexander he stopped and snarled like he was mad about something, and then the first thing I knowed he was charging us. So I pulled my .44 and shot him through the head, and got off and onsaddled Alexander and turnt him loose in grass stirrup-high, and skun the b'ar. Then I cut me off some steaks and started a fire and begun reducing my appertite. That warn't no small job, because I hadn't had nothing to eat since the night before.

Well, while I was eating I heard hosses and looked up and seen six men riding towards me from the east. One was as big as me, but the other ones warn't but about six foot tall apiece. They was cowpunchers, by their look, and the biggest man was dressed plumb as elegant as Mister Wilkinson was, only his shirt was jest only one color. But he had on fancy boots and a white Stetson and a ivory-butted Colt, and what looked like the butt of a sawed-off shotgun jutted out of his saddle-scabbard. He was dark and had awful mean eyes, and a jaw which it looked like he could bite the spokes out of a wagon wheel if he wanted to.

He started talking to me in Piute, but before I could say anything, one of the others said: "Aw, that ain't no Injun, Donovan, his eyes ain't the right color."

"I see that, now," says Donovan. "But I shore thought he was a Injun when I first rode up and seen them old ragged britches and his sunburnt hide. Who the devil air you?"

"I'm Breckinridge Elkins, from Bear Creek," I says, awed by his magnificence.

"Well," says he, "I'm Wild Bill Donovan, which name is heard with fear and tremblin' from Powder River to the Rio Grande. Just now I'm lookin' for a wild stallion. Have you seen sech?"

"I seen a bay stallion headin' west with his herd," I said.

"'Twarn't him," says Donovan. "This here one's a pinto, the biggest, meanest hoss in the world. He come down from the Humbolts when he was a colt, but he's roamed the West from Border to Border. He's so mean he ain't never got him a herd of his own. He takes mares away from other stallions, and then drifts on alone just for pure cussedness. When he comes into a country all other varmints takes to the tall timber."

"You mean the wolves and painters and b'ars I seen headin' for the high ridges was runnin' away from this here stallion?" I says.

"Exactly," says Donovan. "He crossed the eastern ridge sometime durin' the night, and the critters that was wise high-tailed it. We warn't far behind him; we come over the ridge a few hours ago, but we lost his trail somewhere on this side."

"You chasin' him?" I ast.

"Ha!" snarled Donovan with a kind of vicious laugh. "The man don't live what can chase Cap'n Kidd! We're just follerin' him. We been follerin' him for five hundred miles, keepin' outa sight, and hopin' to catch him off guard or somethin'. We got to have some kind of a big advantage before we closes in, or even shows ourselves. We're right fond of life! That devil has kilt more men than any other ten hosses on this continent."

"What you call him?" I says.

"Cap'n Kidd," says Donovan. "Cap'n Kidd was a big pirate long time ago. This here hoss is like him in lots of ways, particularly in regard to morals. But I'll git him, if I have to foller him to the Gulf and back. Wild Bill Donovan always gits what he wants, be it money, woman, or hoss! Now lissen here, you range-country hobo: we're a-siftin' north from here, to see if we cain't pick up Cap'n Kidd's sign. If you see a pinto stallion bigger'n you ever dreamed a hoss could be, or come onto his tracks, you drop whatever yo're doin' and pull out and look for us, and tell me about it. You keep lookin' till you find us, too. If you don't you'll regret it, you hear me?"

"Yessir," I said. "Did you gents come through the Wild River country?"

"Maybe we did and maybe we didn't," he says with haughty grandeur. "What business is that of yore'n, I'd like to know?"

"Not any," I says. "But I was aimin' to go there and see if I could git me a job punchin' cows."

At that he throwed back his head and laughed long and loud, and all the other fellers laughed too, and I was embarrassed.

"You git a job punchin' cows?" roared Donovan. "With them britches and shoes, and not even no shirt, and that there ignorant-lookin' mule I see gobblin' grass over by the creek? Haw! haw! haw! haw! You better stay up here in the mountains whar you belong and live on roots and nuts and jackrabbits like the other Piutes, red or white! Any self-respectin' rancher would take a shotgun to you if you was to ast him for a job. Haw! haw! haw!" he says, and rode off still laughing.

I was that embarrassed I bust out into a sweat. Alexander was a good mule, but he did look kind of funny in the face. But he was the only critter I'd ever found which could carry my weight very many miles without giving plumb out. He was awful strong and tough, even if he was kind of dumb and pot-bellied. I begun to get kind of mad, but Donovan and his men was already gone, and the stars was beginning to blink out. So I cooked me some more b'ar steaks and et 'em, and the land sounded awful still, not a wolf howling nor a cougar squalling. They was all west of the ridge. This critter Cap'n Kidd sure had the country to hisself, as far as the meat-eating critters was consarned.

I hobbled Alexander close by and fixed me a bed with some boughs and his saddle blanket, and went to sleep. I was woke up shortly after midnight by Alexander trying to get in bed with me.

I sot up in irritation and prepared to bust him in the snoot, when I heard what had scairt him. I never heard such a noise. My hair stood straight up. It was a stallion neighing, but I never heard no hoss critter neigh like that. I bet you could of heard it for fifteen miles. It sounded like a combination of a wild hoss neighing, a rip saw going through a oak log full of knots, and a hungry cougar screeching. I thought it come from somewhere within a mile of the camp, but I warn't sure. Alexander was shivering and whimpering he was that scairt, and stepping all over me as he tried to huddle down amongst the branches and hide his head under my shoulder. I shoved him away, but he insisted on staying as close to me as he could, and when I woke up again next morning he was sleeping with his head on my belly.

But he must of forgot about the neigh he heard, or thought it was jest a bad dream or something, because as soon as I taken the hobbles off of him he started cropping grass and wandered off amongst the thickets in his pudding-head way.

I cooked me some more b'ar steaks, and wondered if I ought to go and try to find Mister Donovan and tell him about hearing the stallion neigh, but I figgered he'd heard it. Anybody that was within a day's ride ought to of heard it. Anyway, I seen no reason why I should run errands for Donovan.

I hadn't got through eating when I heard Alexander give a horrified bray, and he come lickety-split out of a grove of trees and made for the camp, and behind him come the biggest hoss I ever seen in my life. Alexander looked like a pot-bellied bull pup beside of him. He was painted--black and white--and he r'ared up with his long mane flying agen the sunrise, and give a scornful neigh that nigh busted my ear-drums, and turned around and sa'ntered back towards the grove, cropping grass as he went, like he thunk so little of Alexander he wouldn't even bother to chase him.

Alexander come blundering into camp, blubbering and hollering, and run over the fire and scattered it every which away, and then tripped hisself over the saddle which was laying nearby, and fell on his neck braying like he figgered his life was in danger.

I catched him and throwed the saddle and bridle on to him, and by that time Cap'n Kidd was out of sight on the other side of the thicket. I onwound my lariat and headed in that direction. I figgered not even Cap'n Kidd could break that lariat. Alexander didn't want to go; he sot back on his haunches and brayed fit to deefen you, but I spoke to him sternly, and it seemed to convince him that he better face the stallion than me, so he moved out, kind of reluctantly.

We went past the grove and seen Cap'n Kidd cropping grass in the patch of rolling prairie just beyond, so I rode towards him, swinging my lariat. He looked up and snorted kinda threateningly, and he had the meanest eye I ever seen in man or beast; but he didn't move, just stood there looking contemptuous, so I throwed my rope and piled the loop right around his neck, and Alexander sot back on his haunches.

Well, it was about like roping a roaring hurricane. The instant he felt that rope Cap'n Kidd give a convulsive start, and made one mighty lunge for freedom. The lariat held, but the girths didn't. They held jest long enough for Alexander to get jerked head over heels, and naturally I went along with him. But right in the middle of the somesault we taken, both girths snapped.

Me and the saddle and Alexander landed all in a tangle, but Cap'n Kidd jerked the saddle from amongst us, because I had my rope tied fast to the horn, Texas-style, and Alexander got loose from me by the simple process of kicking me vi'lently in the ear. He also stepped on my face when he jumped up, and the next instant he was high-tailing it through the bresh in the general direction of Bear Creek. As I learned later he didn't stop till he run into pap's cabin and tried to hide under my brother John's bunk.

Meanwhile Cap'n Kidd had throwed the loop offa his head and come for me with his mouth wide open, his ears laid back and his teeth and eyes flashing. I didn't want to shoot him, so I riz up and run for the trees. But he was coming like a tornado, and I seen he was going to run me down before I could get to a tree big enough to climb, so I grabbed me a sapling about as thick as my laig and tore it up by the roots, and turned around and busted him over the head with it, just as he started to r'ar up to come down on me with his front hoofs.

Pieces of roots and bark and wood flew every which a way, and Cap'n Kidd grunted and batted his eyes and went back on to his haunches. It was a right smart lick. If I'd ever hit Alexander that hard it would have busted his skull like a egg--and Alexander had a awful thick skull, even for a mule.

Whilst Cap'n Kidd was shaking the bark and stars out of his eyes, I run to a big oak and clumb it. He come after me instantly, and chawed chunks out of the tree as big as washtubs, and kicked most of the bark off as high up as he could rech, but it was a good substantial tree, and it held. He then tried to climb it, which amazed me most remarkable, but he didn't do much good at that. So he give up with a snort of disgust and trotted off.

I waited till he was out of sight, and then I clumb down and got my rope and saddle, and started follering him. I knowed there warn't no use trying to catch Alexander with the lead he had. I figgered he'd get back to Bear Creek safe. And Cap'n Kidd was the critter I wanted now. The minute I lammed him with that tree and he didn't fall, I knowed he was the hoss for me--a hoss which could carry my weight all day without giving out, and likewise full of spirit. I says to myself I rides him or the buzzards picks my bones.

I snuck from tree to tree, and presently seen Cap'n Kidd swaggering along and eating grass, and biting the tops off of young sapling, and occasionally tearing down a good sized tree to get the leaves off. Sometimes he'd neigh like a steamboat whistle, and let his heels fly in all directions just out of pure cussedness. When he done this the air was full of flying bark

and dirt and rocks till it looked like he was in the middle of a twisting cyclone. I never seen such a critter in my life. He was as full of pizen and rambunctiousness as a drunk Apache on the warpath.

I thought at first I'd rope him and tie the other end of the rope to a big tree, but I was a-feared he'd chawed the lariat apart. Then I seen something that changed my mind. We was close to the rocky cliffs which jutted up above the trees, and Cap'n Kidd was passing a canyon mouth that looked like a big knife cut. He looked in and snorted, like he hoped they was a mountain lion hiding in there, but they warn't, so he went on. The wind was blowing from him towards me and he didn't smell me.

After he was out of sight amongst the trees I come out of cover and looked into the cleft. It was kinda like a short blind canyon. It warn't but about thirty foot wide at the mouth, but it widened quick till it made a kind of bowl a hundred yards acrost, and then narrowed to a crack again. Rock walls five hundred foot high was on all sides except at the mouth.

"And here," says I to myself, "is a ready-made corral!"

Then I lay to and started to build a wall to close the mouth of the canyon. Later on I heard that a scientific expedition (whatever the hell that might be) was all excited over finding evidences of a ancient race up in the mountains. They said they found a wall that could of been built only by giants. They was crazy; that there was the wall I built for Cap'n Kidd.

I knowed it would have to be high and solid if I didn't want Cap'n Kidd to jump it or knock it down. They was plenty of boulders laying at the foot of the cliffs which had weathered off, and I didn't use a single rock which weighed less'n three hundred pounds, and most of 'em was a lot heavier than that. It taken me most all morning, but when I quit I had me a wall higher'n the average man could reach, and so thick and heavy I knowed it would hold even Cap'n Kidd.

I left a narrer gap in it, and piled some boulders close to it on the outside, ready to shove 'em into the gap. Then I stood outside the wall and squalled like a cougar. They ain't even a cougar hisself can tell the difference when I squalls like one. Purty soon I heard Cap'n Kidd give his war-neigh off yonder, and then they was a thunder of hoofs and a snapping and crackling of bresh, and he come busting into the open with his ears laid back and his teeth bare and his eyes as red as a Comanche's war-paint. He sure hated cougars. But he didn't seem to like me much neither. When he seen me he give a roar of rage, and come for me lickety-split. I run through the gap and hugged the wall inside, and he come thundering after me going so fast he run clean across the bowl before he checked hisself. Before he could get back to the gap I'd run outside and was piling rocks in it. I had a good big one about the size of a fat hawg and I jammed it in the gap first and piled t'others on top of it.

Cap'n Kidd arriv at the gap all hoofs and teeth and fury, but it was already filled too high for him to jump and too solid for him to tear down. He done his best, but all he done was to knock some chunks offa the rocks with his heels. He sure was mad. He was the maddest hoss I ever seen, and when I got up on the wall and he seen me, he nearly busted with rage.

He went tearing around the bowl, kicking up dust and neighing like a steamboat on the rampage, and then he come back and tried to kick the wall down again. When he turned to gallop off I jumped offa the wall and landed square on his back, but before I could so much as grab his mane he throwed me clean over the wall and I landed in a cluster of boulders and cactus and skun my shin. This made me mad so I got the lariat and the saddle and clumb back on the wall and roped him, but he jerked the rope out of my hand before I could get any kind of a purchase, and went bucking and pitching around all over the bowl trying to get shet of the rope. So purty soon he pitched right into the cliff-wall and he lammed it so hard with his hind hoofs that a whole section of overhanging rock was jolted loose and hit him right between the ears. That was too much even for Cap'n Kidd.

It knocked him down and stunned him, and I jumped down into the bowl and before he could come to I had my saddle on to him, and a hackamore I'd fixed out of a piece of my lariat. I'd also mended the girths with pieces of the lariat, too, before I built the wall.

Well, when Cap'n Kidd recovered his senses and riz up, snorting and war-like, I was on his back. He stood still for a instant like he was trying to figger out jest what the hell was the matter, and then he turned his head and seen me on his back. The next instant I felt like I was astraddle of a ring-tailed cyclone.

I dunno what all he done. He done so many things all at onst I couldn't keep track. I clawed leather. The man which could have stayed onto him without clawing leather ain't born yet, or else he's a cussed liar. Sometimes my feet was in the stirrups and sometimes they warn't, and sometimes they was in the wrong stirrups. I cain't figger out how that could be, but it was so. Part of the time I was in the saddle and part of the time I was behind it on his rump, or on his neck in front of it. He kept reching back trying to snap my laig and onst he got my thigh between his teeth and would ondoubtedly of tore the muscle out if I hadn't shook him loose by beating him over the head with my fist.

One instant he'd have his head betwixt his feet and I'd be setting on a hump so high in the air I'd get dizzy, and the next thing he'd come down stiff-laiged and I could feel my spine telescoping. He changed ends so fast I got sick at my stummick and he nigh unjointed my neck with his sunfishing. I calls it sunfishing because it was more like that than anything. He occasionally rolled over and over on the ground, too, which was very uncomfortable for me, but I hung on, because I was afeared if I let go I'd never get on him again. I also knowed that if he ever shaken me loose I'd had to shoot him to keep him from stomping my guts out. So I stuck, though I'll admit that they is few sensations more onpleasant than having a hoss as big as Cap'n Kidd roll on you nine or ten times.

He tried to scrape me off agen the walls, too, but all he done was scrape off some hide and most of my pants, though it was when he lurched agen that outjut of rock that I got them ribs cracked, I reckon.

He looked like he was able to go on forever, and aimed to, but I hadn't never met nothing which could outlast me, and I stayed with him, even after I started bleeding at the nose and mouth and ears, and got blind, and then all to onst he was standing stock still in the middle of the bowl, with his tongue hanging out about three foot, and his sweat-soaked sides heaving, and the sun was just setting over the mountains. He'd bucked nearly all afternoon!

But he was licked. I knowed it and he knowed it. I shaken the stars and sweat and blood out of my eyes and dismounted by the simple process of pulling my feet out of the stirrups and falling off. I laid there for maybe a hour, and was most amazing sick, but so was Cap'n Kidd. When I was able to stand on my feet I taken the saddle and the hackamore off and he didn't kick me nor nothing. He jest made a half-hearted attempt to bite me but all he done was to bite the buckle offa my gunbelt. They was a little spring back in the cleft where the bowl narrered in the cliff, and plenty of grass, so I figgered he'd be all right when he was able to stop blowing and panting long enough to eat and drink.

I made a fire outside the bowl and cooked me what was left of the b'ar meat, and then I lay down on the ground and slept till sunup.

When I riz up and seen how late it was, I jumped up and run and looked over the wall, and there was Cap'n Kidd mowing the grass down as ca'm as you please. He give me a mean look, but didn't say nothing. I was so eager to see if he was going to let me ride him without no more foolishness that I didn't stop for breakfast, nor to fix the buckle onto my gunbelt. I left it hanging on a spruce limb, and clumb into the bowl. Cap'n Kidd laid back his ears but didn't do nothing as I approached outside of making a swipe at me with his left hoof. I dodged and give him a good hearty kick in the belly and he grunted and doubled up, and I clapped the saddle on him. He showed his teeth at that, but he let me cinch it up, and put on the hackamore, and when I got on him he didn't pitch but about ten jumps and make but one snap at my laig.

Well, I was plumb tickled as you can imagine. I clumb down and opened the gap in the wall and led him out, and when he found he was outside the bowl he bolted and dragged me for a hundred yards before I managed to get the rope around a tree. After I tied him up though, he didn't try to bust loose.

I started back towards the tree where I left my gunbelt when I heard hosses running, and the next thing I knowed Donovan and his five men busted into the open and pulled up with their mouths wide open. Cap'n Kidd snorted warlike when he seen 'em, but didn't cut up no other way.

"Blast my soul!" says Donovan. "Can I believe my eyes? If there ain't Cap'n Kidd hisself, saddled and tied to that tree! Did you do that?"

"Yeah," I said.

He looked me over and said: "I believes it. You looked like you been through a sausage-grinder. Air you still alive?"

"My ribs is kind of sore," I said.

"--!" says Donovan. "To think that a blame half-naked hillbilly should do what the best hossmen of the West has attempted in vain! I don't aim to stand for it! I knows my rights! That there is my hoss by rights! I've trailed him nigh a thousand miles, and combed this cussed plateau in a circle. He's my hoss!"

"He ain't, nuther," I says. "He come from the Humbolts original, jest like me. You said so yoreself. Anyway, I caught him and broke him, and he's mine."

"He's right, Bill," one of the men says to Donovan.

"You shet up!" roared Donovan. "What Wild Bill Donovan wants, he gits!"

I reched for my gun and then remembered in despair that it was hanging on a limb a hundred yards away. Donovan covered me with the sawed-off shotgun he jerked out of his saddle-holster as he swung down.

"Stand where you be," he advised me. "I ought to shoot you for not comin' and tellin' me when you seen the hoss, but after all you've saved me the trouble of breakin' him in."

"So yo're a hoss-thief!" I said wrathfully.

"You be keerful what you calls me!" he roared. "I ain't no hoss thief. We gambles for that hoss. Set down!"

I sot and he sot on his heels in front of me, with his sawed-off still covering me. If it'd been a pistol I would of took it away from him and shoved the barrel down his throat. But I was quite young in them days and bashful about shotguns. The others squatted around us, and Donovan says: "Smoky, haul out yore deck--the special one. Smoky deals, hillbilly, and the high hand wins the hoss."

"I'm puttin' up my hoss, it looks like," I says fiercely. "What you puttin' up?"

"My Stetson hat!" says he. "Haw! haw! haw!"

"Haw! haw! haw!" chortles the other hoss-thieves.

Smoky started dealing and I said: "Hey! Yo're dealin' Donovan's hand offa the bottom of the deck!"

"Shet up!" roared Donovan, poking me in the belly with his shotgun. "You be keerful how you slings them insults around! This here is a fair and square game, and I just happen to be lucky. Can you beat four aces?"

"How you know you got four aces?" I says fiercely. "You ain't looked at yore hand yet."

"Oh," says he, and picked it up and spread it out on the grass, and they was four aces and a king. "By golly!" says he. "I shore called that shot right!"

"Remarkable foresight!" I said bitterly, throwing down my hand which was a three, five and seven of hearts, a ten of clubs and a jack of diamonds.

"Then I wins!" gloated Donovan, jumping up. I riz too, quick and sudden, but Donovan had me covered with that cussed shotgun.

"Git on that hoss and ride him over to our camp, Red," says Donovan, to a big red-headed hombre which was shorter than him but jest about as big. "See if he's properly broke. I wants to keep my eye on this hillbilly myself."

So Red went over to Cap'n Kidd which stood there saying nothing, and my heart sunk right down to the tops of my spiked shoes. Red ontied him and clumb on him and Cap'n Kidd didn't so much as snap at him. Red says: "Git goin', cuss you!" Cap'n Kidd turnt his head and looked at Red and then he opened his mouth like a alligator and started laughing. I never seen a hoss laugh before, but now I know what they mean by a hoss-laugh. Cap'n Kidd didn't neigh nor nicker. He jest laughed. He laughed till the acorns come rattling down outa the trees and the echoes rolled through the cliffs like thunder. And then he reched his head around and grabbed Red's laig and dragged him out of the saddle, and held him upside down with guns and things spilling out of his scabbards and pockets, and Red yelling blue murder. Cap'n Kidd shaken him till he looked like a rag and swung him around his head three or four times, and then let go and throwed him clean through a alder thicket.

Them fellers all stood gaping, and Donovan had forgot about me, so I grabbed the shotgun away from him and hit him under the ear with my left fist and he bit the dust. I then swung the gun on the others and roared: "Onbuckle them gunbelts, cuss ye!" They was bashfuller about buckshot at close range than I was. They didn't argy. Them four gunbelts was on the grass before I stopped yelling.

"All right," I said. "Now go catch Cap'n Kidd."

Because he had gone over to where their hosses was tied and was chawing and kicking the tar out of them and they was hollering something fierce.

"He'll kill us!" squalled the men.

"Well, what of it?" I snarled. "Gwan!"

So they made a desperate foray onto Cap'n Kidd and the way he kicked 'em in the belly and bit the seat out of their britches was beautiful to behold. But whilst he was stomping them I come up and grabbed his hackamore and when he seen who it was he stopped fighting, so I tied him to a tree away from the other hosses. Then I throwed Donovan's shotgun onto the men and made 'em get up and come over to where Donovan was laying, and they was a bruised and battered gang. The way they taken on you'd of thought somebody had mistreated 'em.

I made 'em take Donovan's gunbelt offa him and about that time he come to and sot up, muttering something about a tree falling on him.

"Don't you remember me?" I says. "I'm Breckinridge Elkins."

"It all comes back," he muttered. "We gambled for Cap'n Kidd."

"Yeah," I says, "and you won, so now we gambles for him again. You sot the stakes before. This time I sets 'em. I matches these here britches I got on agen Cap'n Kidd, and yore saddle, bridle, gunbelt, pistol, pants, shirt, boots, spurs and Stetson."

"Robbery!" he bellered. "Yo're a cussed bandit!"

"Shet up," I says, poking him in the midriff with his shotgun. "Squat! The rest of you, too."

"Ain't you goin' to let us do somethin' for Red?" they said. Red was laying on the other side of the thicket Cap'n Kidd had throwed him through, groaning loud and fervent.

"Let him lay for a spell," I says. "If he's dyin' they ain't nothin' we can do for him, and if he ain't, he'll keep till this game's over. Deal, Smoky, and deal from the top of the deck this time."

So Smoky dealed in fear and trembling, and I says to Donovan: "What you got?"

"A royal flush of diamonds, by God!" he says. "You cain't beat that!"

"A royal flush of hearts'll beat it, won't it, Smoky?" I says, and Smoky says: "Yuh--yuh--yeah! Yeah! Oh, yeah!"

"Well," I said, "I ain't looked at my hand yet, but I bet that's jest what I got. What you think?" I says, p'inting the shotgun at Donovan's upper teeth. "Don't you reckon I've got a royal flush in hearts?"

"It wouldn't surprise me a bit," says Donovan, turning pale.

"Then everybody's satisfied and they ain't no use in me showin' my hand," I says, throwing the cards back into the pack. "Shed them duds!"

He shed 'em without a word, and I let 'em take up Red, which had seven busted ribs, a dislocated arm and a busted laig, and they kinda folded him acrost his I saddle and tied him in place. Then they pulled out without saying a word or looking back. They all looked purty wilted, and Donovan particularly looked very pecooliar in the blanket he had wrapped around his middle. If he'd had a feather in his hair he'd of made a lovely Piute, as I told him. But he didn't seem to appreciate the remark. Some men just naturally ain't got no sense of humor.

They headed east, and as soon as they was out of sight, I put the saddle and bridle I'd won onto Cap'n Kidd and getting the bit in his mouth was about like rassling a mountain tornado. But I done it, and then I put on the riggins I'd won. The boots was too small and the shirt fit a mite too snug in the shoulders, but I sure felt elegant, nevertheless, and stalked up and down admiring myself and wishing Glory McGraw could see me then.

I cached my old saddle, belt and pistol in a holler tree, aiming to send my younger brother Bill back after 'em. He could have 'em, along with Alexander. I was going back to Bear Creek in style, by golly!

With a joyful whoop I swung onto Cap'n Kidd, headed him west and tickled his flanks with my spurs--them trappers in the mountains which later reported having seen a blue streak traveling westwardly so fast they didn't have time to tell what it was, and was laughed at and accused of being drunk, was did a injustice. What they seen was me and Cap'n Kidd going to Bear Creek. He run fifty miles before he even pulled up for breath.

I ain't going to tell how long it took Cap'n Kidd to cover the distance to Bear Creek. Nobody wouldn't believe me. But as I come up the trail a few miles from my home cabin, I heard a hoss galloping and Glory McGraw bust into view. She looked pale and scairt, and when she seen me she give a kind of a holler and pulled up her hoss so quick it went back onto its haunches.

"Breckinridge!" she gasped. "I jest heard from yore folks that yore mule come home without you, and I was just startin' out to look for--oh!" says she, noticing my hoss and elegant riggings for the first time. She kind of froze up, and said stiffly: "Well, Mister Elkins, I see yo're back home again."

"And you sees me rigged up in store-bought clothes and ridin' the best hoss in the Humbolts, too, I reckon," I said. "I hope you'll excuse me, Miss McGraw. I'm callin' on Ellen Reynolds as soon as I've let my folks know I'm home safe. Good day!"

"Don't let me detain you!" she flared, but after I'd rode on past she hollered: "Breckinridge Elkins, I hate you!"

"I know that," I said bitterly, "they warn't no use in tellin' me again--"

But she was gone, riding lickety-split off through the woods towards her home-cabin and I rode on for mine, thinking to myself what curious critters gals was anyway.

Chapter IV - GUNS OF THE MOUNTAINS

THINGS RUN purty smooth for maybe a month after I got back to Bear Creek. Folks come from miles around to see Cap'n Kidd and hear me tell about licking Wild Bill Donovan, and them fancy clothes sure had a pleasing effeck on Ellen Reynolds. The only flies in the 'intment was Joel Braxton's brother Jim, Ellen's old man, and my Uncle Garfield Elkins; but of him anon as the French says.

Old Man Braxton didn't like me much, but I had learnt my lesson in dealing with Old Man McGraw. I taken no foolishness offa him, and Ellen warn't nigh as sensitive about it as Glory had been. But I warn't sure about Jim Braxton. I discouraged him from calling on Ellen, and I done it purty vi'lent, but I warn't sure he warn't sneaking around and sparking her on the sly, and I couldn't tell just what she thought about him. But I was making progress, when the third fly fell into the 'intment.

Pap's Uncle Garfield Elkins come up from Texas to visit us.

That was bad enough by itself, but between Grizzly Run and Chawed Ear the stage got held up by some masked bandits, and Uncle Garfield, never being able to forget that he was a gunfighting fool thirty or forty years ago, pulled his old cap-and-ball instead of reching for the clouds like he was advised to. For some reason, instead of blowing out his light, they merely busted him over the head with a .45 barrel, and when he come to he was rattling on his way towards Chawed Ear with the other passengers, minus his money and watch.

It was his watch what caused the trouble. That there timepiece had been his grandpap's, back in Kentucky, and Uncle Garfield sot more store by it than he did all his kin folks.

When he arriv onto Bear Creek he imejitly let into howling his woes to the stars like a wolf with the belly-ache. And from then on we heered nothing but that watch. I'd saw it and thunk very little of it. It was big as my fist, and wound up with a key which Uncle Garfield was always losing and looking for. But it was solid gold, and he called it a hairloom, whatever them things is. And he nigh driv the family crazy.

"A passle of big hulks like you-all settin' around and lettin' a old man git robbed of all his property," he would say bitterly. "When I was a young buck, if'n my uncle had been abused that way, I'd of took the trail and never slept nor et till I brung back his watch and the sculp of the skunk which hived it. Men now days--" And so on and so on, till I felt like drownding the old jassack in a barrel of corn licker.

Finally pap says to me, combing his beard with his fingers; "Breckinridge," says he, "I've endured Uncle Garfield's belly-achin' all I aim to. I wants you to go look for his cussed watch, and don't come back without it."

"How'm I goin' to know where to look?" I protested. "The feller which got it may be in Californy or Mexico by now."

"I realizes the difficulties," says pap. "But warn't you eager for farin's which would make you a name in the world?"

"They is times for everything," I said. "Right now I'm interested in sparkin' a gal, which I ain't willin' to leave for no wild goose chase."

"Well," says pap, "I've done made up our mind. If Uncle Garfield knows somebody is out lookin' for his cussed timepiece, maybe he'll give the rest of us some peace. You git goin', and if you cain't find that watch, don't come back till after Uncle Garfield has went home."

"How long does he aim to stay?" I demanded.

"Well," says pap, "Uncle Garfield's visits generally last a year, at least."

At this I bust into earnest profanity.

I says: "I got to stay away from home a year? Dang it, Pap, Jim Braxton'll steal Ellen Reynolds away from me whilst I'm gone. I been courtin' that gal till I'm ready to fall dead. I done licked her old man three times, and now, jest when I got her goin', you tells me I got to up and leave her for a year with that dern Jim Braxton to have no competition with."

"You got to choose between Ellen Reynolds and yore own flesh and blood," says pap. "I'm derned if I'll listen to Uncle Garfield's squawks any longer. You make yore own choice--but if you don't choose to do what I asks you to, I'll fill yore hide with buckshot every time I see you from now on."

Well, the result was that I was presently riding morosely away from home and Ellen Reynolds, and in the general direction of where Uncle Garfield's blasted watch might possibly be.

I rode by the Braxton cabin with the intention of dropping Jim a warning about his actions whilst I was gone, but I didn't see his saddle on the corral fence, so I knowed he warn't there. So I issued a general defiance to the family by slinging a .45 slug through the winder which knocked a corn cob pipe outa old man Braxton's mouth. That soothed me a little, but I knowed very well that Jim would make a bee-line for the Reynolds cabin the second I was out of sight. I could just see him gorging on Ellen's b'ar meat and honey, and bragging on hisself. I hoped Ellen would notice the difference between a loud-mouthed boaster like him, and a quiet modest young man like me, which never bragged, though admittedly the biggest man and the best fighter in the Humbolts.

I hoped to meet Jim somewhere in the woods as I rode down the trail, because I was intending to do something to kinda impede his courting whilst I was gone, like breaking his laig or something, but luck wasn't with me.

I headed in the general direction of Chawed Ear, and a few days later seen me riding in gloomy grandeur through a country quite some distance from Ellen Reynolds. Nobody'd been able to tell me anything in Chawed Ear, so I thought I might as well comb the country between there and Grizzly Run. Probably wouldn't never find them dern bandits anyway.

Pap always said my curiosity would be the ruination of me some day, but I never could listen to guns popping up in the mountains without wanting to find out who was killing who. So that morning, when I heard the rifles talking off amongst the trees, I turned Cap'n Kidd aside and left the trail and rode in the direction of the noise.

A dim path wound up through the big boulders and bushes, and the shooting kept getting louder. Purty soon I come out into a glade, and just as I did, bam! somebody let go at me from the bresh and a .45-70 slug cut both my bridle reins nearly in half. I instantly returned the shot with my .45, getting jest a glimpse of something in the bresh, and a man let out a squall and jumped out into the open, wringing his hands. My bullet had hit the lock of his Winchester and mighty nigh jarred his hands offa him.

"Cease that ungodly noise," I said sternly, p'inting my .45 at his bay-winder, "and explain how come you waylays innercent travellers."

He quit working his fingers and moaning, and he said: "I thought you was Joel Cairn, the outlaw. Yo're about his size."

"Well, I ain't," I said. "I'm Breckinridge Elkins, from Bear Creek. I was jest ridin' over to find out what all the shootin' was about."

The guns was banging in the trees behind the feller, and somebody yelled what was the matter.

"Ain't nothin' the matter," he hollered back. "Just a misunderstandin'." And he says to me: "I'm glad to see you, Elkins. We need a man like you. I'm Sheriff Dick Hopkins, from Grizzly Run."

"Where at's yore star?" I inquired.

"I lost it in the bresh," he said. "Me and my deputies have been chasin' Tarantula Bixby and his gang for a day and a night, and we got 'em cornered over there in a old deserted cabin in a holler. The boys is shootin' at 'em now. I heered you comin' up the trail and snuck over to see who it was. Just as I said, I thought you was Cairn. Come on with me. You can help us."

"I ain't no deperty," I said. "I got nothin' against Tranchler Bixby."

"Well, you want to uphold the law, don't you?" he said.

"Naw," I said.

"Well, gee whiz!" he wailed. "If you ain't a hell of a citizen! The country's goin' to the dogs. What chance has a honest man got?"

"Aw, shet up," I said. "I'll go over and see the fun, anyhow."

So he picked up his gun, and I tied Cap'n Kidd, and follered the sheriff through the trees till we come to some rocks, and there was four men laying behind them rocks and shooting down into a hollow. The hill sloped away mighty steep into a small basin that was jest like a bowl, with a rim of slopes all around. In the middle, of this bowl they was a cabin and puffs of smoke was coming from the cracks between the logs.

The men behind the rocks looked at me in surprise, and one of 'em said: "What the hell?"

The sheriff scowled at them and said, "Boys, this here is Breck Elkins. I done already told him about us bein' a posse from Grizzly Run, and about how we got Tarantula Bixby and two of his cutthroats trapped in that there cabin."

One of the deputies bust into a loud guffaw and Hopkins glared at him and said: "What you laughin' about, you spotted hyener?"

"I swallered my terbaccer and that allus gives me the hystericals," mumbled the deputy, looking the other way.

"Hold up yore right hand, Elkins," requested Hopkins, so I done so, wondering what for, and he said: "Does you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, e pluribus unum, anno dominecker, to wit in status quo?"

"What the hell are you talkin' about?" I demanded.

"Them which God has j'ined asunder let no man put together," said Hopkins. "Whatever you say will be used agen you and the Lord have mercy on yore soul. That means yo're a deputy. I just swore you in."

"Go set on a prickly pear," I snorted disgustedly. "Go catch yore own thieves. And don't look at me like that. I might bend a gun over yore skull."

"But Elkins," pleaded Hopkins, "with yore help we can catch them rats easy. All you got to do is lay up here behind this big rock and shoot at the cabin and keep 'em occupied till we can sneak around and rush 'em from the rear. See, the bresh comes down purty close to the foot of the slope on the other side, and gives us cover. We can do it easy, with somebody keepin' their attention over here. I'll give you part of the reward."

"I don't want no derned blood-money," I said, backing away, "And besides--ow!"

I'd absent-mindedly backed out from behind the big rock where I'd been standing, and a .30-30 slug burned its way acrost the seat of my britches.

"Dern them murderers!" I bellered, seeing red. "Gimme a rifle! I'll learn 'em to shoot a man behind his back! Gwan, and git 'em from behind whilst I attracts their attention with a serenade of hot lead!"

"Good boy!" says Hopkins. "You'll git plenty for this!"

It sounded like somebody was snickering to theirselves as they snuck away, but I give no heed. I squinted cautiously around the big boulder and begun sniping at the cabin. All I could see to shoot at was the puffs of smoke which marked the cracks they was shooting through, but from the cussing and yelling which begun to float up from the shack, I must of throwed some lead mighty close to them.

They kept shooting back, and the bullets splashed and buzzed on the rocks, and I kept looking at the further slope for some sign of Sheriff Hopkins and the posse. But all I heard was a sound of hosses galloping away towards the west. I wondered who it was, and I kept expecting the posse to rush down the oppersite slope and take them desperadoes in the rear, and whilst I was craning my neck around a corner of the boulder--whang! A bullet smashed into the rock a few inches from my face and a sliver of stone taken a notch out of my ear. I don't know of nothing that makes me madder'n getting shot in the ear.

I seen red and didn't even shoot back. A ordinary rifle was too paltry to satisfy me. Suddenly I realized that the big boulder in front of me was jest poised on the slope, its underside partly embedded in the earth. I throwed down my rifle and bent my knees and spread my arms and gripped it.

I shook the sweat and blood outa my eyes, and bellered so them in the hollow could hear me: "I'm givin' you-all a chance to surrender! Come out with yore hands up!"

They give loud and sarcastic jeers, and I yelled: "All right, you ring-tailed jackasses! If you gits squashed like a pancake, it's yore own fault. Here she comes!"

And I heaved with all I had. The veins stood out onto my temples, and my feet sunk into the ground, but the earth bulged and cracked all around the big rock, rivulets of dirt began to trickle down, and the big boulder groaned, give way and lurched over.

A dumbfounded yell riz from the cabin. I lept behind a bush, but the outlaws was too surprised to shoot at me. That enormous boulder was tumbling down the hill, crushing bushes flat and gathering speed as it rolled. And the cabin was right in its path.

Wild yells bust the air, the door was throwed vi'lently open, and a man hove into view. Jest as he started out of the door I let bam at him and he howled and ducked back jest like anybody will when a .45-90 slug knocks their hat off. The next instant that thundering boulder hit the cabin. Smash! It knocked it sidewise like a ten pin and caved in the wall, and the whole structure collapsed in a cloud of dust and bark and splinters.

I run down the slope, and from the yells which issued from under the ruins, I knowed they warn't all kilt.

"Does you-all surrender?" I roared.

"Yes, dern it!" they squalled. "Git us out from under this landslide!"

"Throw out yore guns," I ordered.

"How in hell can we throw anything?" they hollered wrathfully. "We're pinned down by a ton of rocks and boards and we're bein' squoze to death. Help, murder!"

"Aw, shet up," I said. "You all don't hear me carryin' on in no such hysterical way, does you?"

Well, they moaned and complained, and I sot to work dragging the ruins offa them, which warn't no great task. Purty soon I seen a booted laig and I laid hold of it and dragged out the critter it was fastened to, and he looked more done up than what my brother Buckner did that time he rassled a mountain lion for a bet. I taken his pistol out of his belt, and laid him down on the ground and got the others out. They was three, altogether, and I taken their arms and laid 'em out in a row.

Their clothes was nearly tore off, and they was bruised and scratched and had splinters in their hair, but they warn't hurt permanent. They sot up and felt of theirselves, and one of 'em said: "This here's the first earthquake I ever seen in this country."

"'Twarn't no earthquake," said another'n. "It was a avalanche."

"Lissen here, Joe Partland," said the first'n, grinding his teeth. "I says it was a earthquake, and I ain't the man to be called a liar--"

"Oh, you ain't, hey?" says the other'n, bristling up. "Well, lemme tell you somethin', Frank Jackson--"

"This ain't no time for sech argyments," I admonished 'em sternly. "As for that there rock, I rolled that at you-all myself."

They gaped at me, and one of 'em says: "Who are you?" he says, mopping the blood offa his ear.

"Never mind that," I says. "You see this here Winchester? Well, you-all set still and rest yorselves. Soon as the sheriff gits here I'm goin' to hand you over to him."

His mouth fell open. "Sheriff?" he said, dumb-like. "What sheriff?"

"Dick Hopkins, from Grizzly Run," I said.

"Why, you demed fool!" he screamed, scrambling up.

"Set down!" I roared, shoving my rifle barrel at him, and he sank back, all white and shaking. He couldn't hardly talk.

"Lissen to me!" he gasped. "I'm Dick Hopkins! I'm sheriff of Grizzly Run! These men are my deputies."

"Yeah?" I said sarcastically. "And who was the fellers shootin' at you from the bresh?"

"Tarantula Bixby and his gang," he says. "We was follerin' 'em when they jumped us, and bein' outnumbered and surprised, we taken cover in that old hut. They robbed the Grizzly Run bank day before yesterday. And now they'll be gittin' further away every minute! Oh, Judas J. Iscariot! Of all the dumb, bone-headed jackasses--"

"Heh! heh! heh!" I said cynically. "You must think I ain't got no sense. If yo're the sheriff, where at's yore star?"

"It was on my suspenders," he said despairingly. "When you hauled me out by the laig my suspenders caught on somethin' and tore off. If you'll lemme look amongst them rooins--"

"You set still," I commanded. "You cain't fool me. Yo're Tranchler Bixby yoreself. Sheriff Hopkins told me so. Him and the posse'll be here directly. Set still and shet up."

We stayed there, and the feller which claimed to be the sheriff moaned and pulled his hair and shed a few tears, and the other fellers tried to convince me they was deputies till I got tired of their gab and told 'em to shet up or I'd bend my Winchester over their heads. I wondered why Hopkins and them didn't come, and I begun to get nervous, and all to onst the feller which said he was the sheriff give a yell that startled me so I jumped and nearly shot him. He had something in his hand and was waving it around.

"See here?" he hollered so loud his voice cracked. "I found it! It must of fell down into my shirt when my suspenders busted! Look at it, you derned mountain grizzly!"

I looked and my flesh crawled. It was a shiny silver star.

"Hopkins said he lost his'n," I said weakly. "Maybe you found it in the bresh."

"You know better!" he bellered. "Yo're one of Bixby's men. You was left here to hold us whilst Tarantula and the rest made their gitaway. You'll git ninety years for this!"

I turned cold all over as I remembered them hosses I heard galloping. I'd been fooled! This was the sheriff! That pot-bellied thug which shot at me had been Bixby hisself! And whilst I held up the real sheriff and his posse, them outlaws was riding out of the country! I was the prize sucker.

"You better gimme that gun and surrender," opined Hopkins. "Maybe if you do they won't hang you."

"Set still!" I snarled. "I'm the biggest fool that ever straddled a mustang, but even idjits has their feelin's. Pap said never resist a officer, but this here is a special case. You ain't goin' to put me behind no bars, jest because I made a mistake. I'm goin' up that there slope, but I'll be watchin' you. I've throwed yore guns over there in the bresh. If anybody makes a move towards 'em, I'll shove a harp right into his hand."

They set up a chant of hate as I backed away, but they sot still. I went up the slope backwards till I hit the rim, and then I turned and ducked into the bresh and run. I heard 'em cussing something awful down in the hollow, but I didn't pause. I come to where I'd left Cap'n Kidd and forked him and pulled out, being thankful them outlaws had been in too big a hurry to steal him. But I doubt if he'd a-let 'em. I throwed away the rifle they give me and headed west.

I aimed to cross Thunder River at Ghost Canyon, and head into the wild mountain region beyond there. I figgered I could dodge a posse indefinite onst I got there. I let Cap'n Kidd out into a long lope, cussing my reins which had been notched deep by Bixby's bullet. I didn't have time to fix 'em, and Cap'n Kidd was a iron-jawed outlaw.

He was sweating plenty when I finally hove in sight of the place I was heading for. As I topped the canyon's crest before I dipped down to the crossing, I looked back. They was a high notch in the hills a few miles behind me, and as I looked three hossmen was etched in that notch, lined agen the sky behind 'em. I cussed free and fervent. Why hadn't I had sense enough to know Hopkins and his men was bound to have hosses tied somewheres near? They got their mounts and follered me, figgering I'd aim for the country beyond Thunder River. It was about the only place I could go.

Not wanting no running fight with no sheriff's posse, I raced recklessly down the sloping canyon wall, busted out of the bushes--and stopped short. Thunder River was on the rampage--bank-full in the narrow channel and boiling and foaming. Been a cloud-bust somewhere away up on the head, and the hoss warn't never foaled which could swum it. Not even Cap'n Kidd, though he snorted warlike and was game to try it.

They wasn't but one thing to do, and I done it. I wheeled Cap'n Kidd and headed up the canyon. Five miles up the river they was another crossing, with a bridge--if it hadn't been washed away. Like as not it had been, with the luck I was having. A nice pickle Uncle Garfield's cussed watch had got me in, I reflected bitterly. Jest when I was all sot to squelch Glory McGraw onst and for all by marrying Ellen Reynolds, here I was throwed into circumstances which made me a fugitive from justice. I could just imagine Glory laughing at me, and it nigh locoed me.

I was so absorbed in these thoughts I paid little attention to my imejit surroundings, but all of a sudden I heard a noise ahead, above the roar of the river and the thunder of Cap'n Kidd's hoofs on the rocky canyon floor. We was approaching a bend in the gorge where a low ridge run out from the canyon wall, and beyond that ridge I heard guns banging. I heaved back on the reins--and both of 'em snapped in two!

Cap'n Kidd instantly clamped his teeth on the bit and bolted, like he always does when he gits the chance. He headed straight for the bushes at the end of the ridge, and I leaned forward and tried to get hold of the bit rings with my fingers. But all I done was swerve him from his course. Instead of follering the canyon bed on around the end of the ridge, he went right over the rise, which sloped on that side. It didn't slope on t'other side; it fell away abrupt. I had a fleeting glimpse of five men crouching amongst the bushes on the canyon floor with guns in their hands. They looked up--and Cap'n Kidd braced his laigs and slid to a halt at the lip of the blow bluff, and simultaneous bogged his head and throwed me heels over head down amongst 'em.

My boot heel landed on somebody's head, and the spur knocked him cold and blame near sculped him. That partly bust my fall, and it was further cushioned by another feller which I lit on in a setting position, and which taken no further interest in the proceedings. But the other three fell on me with loud brutal yells, and I reched for my .45 and found to my humiliation that it had fell out of my scabbard when I was throwed.

So I riz up with a rock in my hand and bounced it offa the head of a feller which was fixing to shoot me, and he dropped his pistol and fell on top of it. At this juncture one of the survivors put a buffalo gun to his shoulder and sighted, then evidently fearing he would hit his companion which was carving at me on the other side with a bowie knife, he reversed it and run in swinging it like a club.

The man with the knife got in a slash across my ribs and I then hit him on the chin which was how his jawbone got broke in four places. Meanwhile the other'n swung at me with his rifle, but missed my head and broke the stock off across my shoulder. Irritated at his persistency in trying to brain me with the barrel, I laid hands on him and throwed him head-on agen the bluff, which is when he got his fractured skull and concussion of the brain, I reckon.

I then shaken the sweat outa my eyes, and glaring down, rekernized the remains as Bixby and his gang. I might have knew they'd head for the wild country across the river, same as me. Only place they could go.

Just then, however, a clump of bushes parted, nigh, the river bank, and a big black-bearded man riz up from behind a dead hoss. He had a six-shooter in his hand and he approached me cautiously.

"Who're you?" he demanded suspiciously. "Whar'd you come from?"

"I'm Breckinridge Elkins," I answered, wringing the blood outa my shirt. "What is this here business, anyway?"

"I was settin' here peaceable waitin' for the river to go down so I could cross," he says, "when up rode these yeggs and started shootin'. I'm a honest citizen--"

"Yo're a liar," I said with my usual diplomacy. "Yo're Joel Cairn, the wust outlaw in these hills. I seen yore picher in the post office at Chawed Ear."

With that he p'inted his .45 at me and his beard bristled like the whiskers of a old timber wolf.

"So you know me, hey?" he said. "Well, what you goin' to do about it, hey? Want to colleck the reward money, hey?"

"Naw, I don't," I says. "I'm a outlaw myself, now. I just run foul of the law account of these skunks. They's a posse right behind me."

"They is?" he snarled. "Why'nt you say so? Here, le's catch these fellers' hosses and light out. Cheapskates! They claims I double-crossed 'em in the matter of a stagecoach hold-up we pulled together recent. I been avoidin' 'em 'cause I'm a peaceful man by nater, but they rode onto me onexpected awhile ago. They shot down my hoss first crack; we been tradin' lead for more'n a hour, without doin' much damage, but they'd got me eventually, I reckon. Come on. We'll pull out together.

"No, we won't," I said. "I'm a outlaw by force of circumstances, but I ain't no murderin' bandit."

"Purty particular of yore comperny, ain'tcha?" he sneered. "Well, anyway, help me catch me a hoss. Yore's is still up thar on that bluff. The day's still young--"

He pulled out a big gold watch and looked at it; it was one which wound with a key.

I jumped like I was shot. "Where'd you git that watch?" I hollered.

He jerked up his head kinda startled, and said: "My grandpap gimme it. Why?"

"You're a liar!" I bellered. "You taken that off'n my Uncle Garfield. Gimme that watch!"

"Air you crazy?" he yelled, going white under his whiskers. I plunged for him, seeing red, and he let bang! and I got it in the left thigh. Before he could shoot again I was on top of him and knocked the gun up. It banged but the bullet went singing up over the bluff and Cap'n Kidd squealed with rage and started changing ends. The pistol flew outa Cairn's hand and he hit hit me vi'lently on the nose which made me see stars. So I hit him in the belly and he grunted and doubled up; and come up with a knife out of his boot which he cut me acrost the boozum with, also in the arm and shoulder and kicked me in the groin. So I swung him clear of the ground and throwed him down headfirst and jumped on him with both boots. And that settled his hash.

I picked up the watch where it had fell, and staggered over to the cliff, spurting blood at every step like a stuck hawg.

"At last my search is at a end!" I panted. "I can go back to Ellen Reynolds who patiently awaits the return of her hero--"

It was at this instant that Cap'n Kidd, which had been stung by Cairn's wild shot and was trying to buck off his saddle, bucked hisself off the bluff. He fell on me....

The first thing I heard was bells ringing, and then they turned to hosses galloping. I sot up and wiped off the blood which was running into my eyes from where Cap'n Kidd's left hind shoe had split my sculp. And I seen Sheriff Hopkins, Jackson and Partland come tearing around the ridge. I tried to get up and run, but my right laig wouldn't work. I reched for my gun and it still wasn't there. I was trapped.

"Look there!" yelled Hopkins, plumb wild-eyed. "That's Bixby on the ground--and all his gang! And ye gods, there's Joel Cairn! What is this, anyway? It looks like a battle-field! What's that settin' there? He's so bloody I cain't rekernize him!"

"It's the hillbilly!" yelped Jackson. "Don't move or I'll shoot'cha!"

"I already been shot," I snarled. "Gwan--do yore wust. Fate is agen me."

They dismounted and stared in awe.

"Count the dead, boys," said Hopkins in a still, small voice.

"Aw," said Partland, "ain't none of 'em dead, but they'll never be the same men again. Look! Bixby's comin' to! Who done this, Bixby?"

Bixby cast a wabbly eye about till he spied me, and then he moaned and shrivelled up. "He tried to sculp me!" he wailed. "He ain't human!"

They all looked at me, and all taken their hats off.

"Elkins," says Hopkins in a tone of reverence, "I see it all now. They fooled you into thinkin' they was the posse and we was the outlaws, didn't they? And when you realized the truth, you hunted 'em down, didn't you? And cleaned 'em out single-handed, and Joel Cairn, too, didn't you?"

"Well," I said groggily, "the truth is--"

"We understand," Hopkins soothed. "You mount tain men is all modest. Hey, boys, tie up them outlaws whilst I look at Elkins' wounds."

"If you'll catch my hoss," I said, "I got to be ridin' back--"

"Gee whiz, man!" he said, "you ain't in no shape to ride a hoss! Do you know you got five busted ribs and a fractured arm, and one laig broke and a bullet in the other'n, to say nothin' of bein' slashed to ribbons? We'll rig up a litter for you. What's that you got in yore good hand?"

I suddenly remembered Uncle Garfield's watch which I'd kept clutched in a death grip. I stared at what I held in my hand; and I fell back with a low moan. All I had in my hand was a bunch of busted metal and broken wheels and springs, bent and smashed plumb beyond recognition.

"Grab him!" yelled Hopkins. "He's fainted!"

"Plant me under a pine tree, boys," I murmured weakly. "Just kyarve onto my tombstone: 'He fit a good fight but Fate dealt him the joker.'"

A few days later a melancholy procession wound its way up the trail to Bear Creek. I was being toted on a litter. I told 'em I wanted to see Ellen Reynolds before I died, and to show Uncle Garfield the rooins of the watch so he'd know I done my duty as I seen it.

When we'd got to within a few miles of my home cabin, who should meet us but Jim Braxton, which tried to conceal his pleasure when I told him in a weak voice that I was a dying man. He was all dressed up in new buckskins and his exuberance was plumb disgustful to a man in my condition.

"Too bad," says he. "Too bad, Breckinridge. I hoped to meet you, but not like this, of course. Yore pap told me to tell you about yore Uncle Garfield's watch if I seen you. He thought I might run into you on my way to Chawed Ear to git a licence--"

"Hey?" I said, pricking up my ears.

"Yeah, me and Ellen Reynolds is goin' to git married," he says. "Well, as I started to say, seems like one of them bandits which robbed the stage was a feller whose dad was a friend of yore Uncle Garfield's back in Texas. He rekernized the name in the watch and sent it back, and it got here the day after you left--"

They say it was jealousy which made me rise up on my litter and fracture Jim Braxton's jawbone. I denies that. I stoops to no sech petty practices. What impelled me was family conventions. I couldn't hit Uncle Garfield; I had to hit somebody; and Jim Braxton jest happened to be the only man in rech.

Chapter V - A GENT FROM BEAR CREEK

"YOU," says my sister Ouachita, p'inting a accusing finger at me, "ought a be shot for the way you treat Glory McGraw!"

"Don't mention that gal's name to me," I says bitterly. "I don't want to hear nothin' about her. Don't talk to me about her--why you think I ain't treated her right?"

"Well," says Ouachita, "after they brung you back from Chawed Ear lookin' like you'd been through a sorghum mill, Glory come right over when she heered you was hurt. And what did you do when she come through the door?"

"I didn't do nothin'," I says. "What'd I do?"

"You turnt over towards the wall," says Ouachita, "and you says, says you: 'Git that woman outa here; she's come to t'ant me in my helpless condition!'"

"Well, she did!" I said fiercely.

"She didn't!" says Ouachita. "When she heered you say them words, she turnt pale, and she turnt around and walked outa the cabin with her head up in the air, not sayin' a word. And she ain't been back since."

"Well, I don't want her to," I says. "She come over here jest to gloat on my misery."

"I don't believe no such," says Ouachita. "First thing she says, was: 'Is Breckinridge hurt bad?' And she didn't say it in no gloatin' way. She come over here to help you, I bet, and you talked to her like that! You ought to be ashamed."

"You mind yore own business," I advised her, and got up and got outa the cabin to get some peace and quiet.

I went towards the creek aiming to do a little fishing. My laig had knit proper and quick, and that had been the only thing which had kept me laid up. On my way to the creek I got to thinking over what Ouachita had said, and I thought, well, maybe I was a mite hasty. Maybe Glory did repent of her treatment of me when I was laying wounded. Maybe I ought not to of spoke so bitterly.

I thought, it's no more'n my neighborly duty to go over and thank Glory for coming over to see me, and tell her I didn't mean what I said. I'd tell her I was delirious and thought it was Ellen Reynolds. After all, I was a man with a great, big, generous, forgiving heart, and if forgiving Glory McGraw was going to brighten her life, why, I warn't one to begrudge it. So I headed for the McGraw cabin--a trail I hadn't took since the day I shot up Mister Wilkinson.

I went afoot because I wanted to give my laig plenty of exercise now it was healed. And I hadn't gone more'n halfway when I met the gal I was looking for. She was riding her bay mare, and we met face to face right spang in the middle of the trail. I taken off my Stetson and says: "Howdy, Glory. You warn't by any chance headin' for my cabin?"

"And why should I be headin' for yore cabin, Mister Elkins?" she said as stiff and cold as a frozen bowie knife.

"Well," I said, kinda abashed, "well--uh--that is, Glory, I jest want to thank you for droppin' in to see about me when I was laid up, and--"

"I didn't," she snapped. "I jest come to borrer some salt. I didn't even know you'd been hurt."

"What you want to talk like that for, Glory?" I protested. "I didn't aim to hurt yore feelin's. Fact is, I war delirious, and thought you was somebody else--"

"Ellen Reynolds, maybe?" says she sneeringly. "Or was she already there, holdin' yore hand? Oh, no! I'd plumb forgot! She was gittin' married to Jim Braxton about that time! Too bad, Breckinridge! But cheer up! Ellen's got a little sister which'll be growed up in a few years. Maybe you can git her--if some Braxton don't beat you to her."

"To hell with the Braxtons and the Reynolds too!" I roared, seeing red again. "And you can go along with 'em, far's I'm consarned! I was right! Ouachita's a fool, sayin' you was sorry for me. You jest come over there to gloat over me when I was laid up!"

"I didn't!" she says, in a changed voice.

"You did, too!" I says bitterly. "You go yore way and I'll go mine. You think I cain't git me no woman, just because you and Ellen Reynolds turned me down. Well, you-all ain't the only women they is! I ain't goin' to marry no gal on Bear Creek! I'm goin' to git me a town-gal!"

"A town-gal wouldn't look at a hillbilly like you!" she sneered.

"Oh, is that so?" I bellered, convulsively jerking some saplings up by the roots in my agitation. "Well, lemme tell you somethin', Miss McGraw, I'm pullin' out right now, this very day, for the settlements, where purty gals is thick as flies in watermelon time, and I aim to bring back the purtiest one of the whole kaboodle! You wait and see!"

And I went storming away from there so blind mad that I fell into the creek before I knowed it, and made a most amazing splash. I thought I heard Glory call me to come back, jest before I fell, but I was so mad I didn't pay no attention. I'd had about all the badgering I could stand for one day. I clumb out on t'other side, dripping like a muskrat, and headed for the tall timber. I could hear her laughing behind me, and she must of been kinda hysterical, because it sounded like she was crying instead of laughing, but I didn't stop to see. All I wanted was to put plenty of distance between me and Glory McGraw, and I headed for home as fast as I could laig it.

It was my fullest intention to saddle Cap'n Kidd and pull out for Chawed Ear or somewheres as quick as I could. I meant what I said about getting me a town-gal. But right then I was fogging head-on into the cussedest mix-up I'd ever saw, up to that time, and didn't know it. I didn't even get a inkling of it when I almost stumbled over a couple of figures locked in mortal combat on the bank of the creek.

I was surprised when I seen who it was. The folks on Bear Creek ain't exactly what you'd call peaceable by nature, but Erath Elkins and his brother-in-law Joel Gordon had always got along well together, even when they was full of corn juice. But there they was, so tangled up they couldn't use their bowies to no advantage, and their cussin' was scandalous to hear.

Remonstrances being useless, I kicked their knives out of their hands and throwed 'em bodily into the creek. That broke their holds and they come swarming out with blood-thirsty shrieks and dripping whiskers, and attacked me. Seeing they was too blind mad to have any sense, I bashed their heads together till they was too dizzy to do anything but holler.

"Is this any way for relatives to ack?" I ast disgustedly.

"Lemme at him!" howled Joel, gnashing his teeth whilst blood streamed down his whiskers. "He's broke three of my fangs and I'll have his life!"

"Stand aside, Breckinridge!" raved Erath. "No man can chaw a ear offa me and live to tell the tale."

"Aw, shet up," I snorted. "Ca'm down, before I sees is yore fool heads harder'n this." I brandished a large fist under their noses and they subsided sulkily. "What's all this about?" I demanded.

"I jest discovered my brother-in-law is a thief," said Joel bitterly. At that Erath give a howl and a vi'lent plunge to get at his relative, but I kind of pushed him backwards, and he fell over a willer stump.

"The facks is, Breckinridge," says Joel, "me and this here polecat found a buckskin poke full of gold nuggets in a holler oak over on Apache Ridge yesterday, right nigh the place whar yore brother Garfield fit them seven wildcats last year. We didn't know whether somebody in these parts had jest hid it thar for safe-keepin', or whether some old prospector had left it thar a long time ago and maybe got sculped by the Injuns and never come back to git it. We agreed to leave it alone for a month, and if it was still thar when we come back, we'd feel purty shore that the original owner was dead, and we'd split the gold between us. Well, last night I got to worryin' lest somebody'd find it which warn't as honest as me, so this mornin' I thought I better go see if it was still thar..."

At this p'int Erath laughed bitterly.

Joel glared at him ominously and continued: "Well, no sooner I hove in sight of the holler tree than this skunk let go at me from the bresh with a rifle-gun--"

"That's a lie!" yelped Erath. "It war jest the other way around!"

"Not bein' armed, Breckinridge," Joel said with dignity, "and realizin' that this coyote was tryin' to murder me so he could claim all the gold, I laigged it for home and my weppin's. And presently I sighted him sprintin' through the bresh after me."

Erath begun to foam slightly at the mouth. "I warn't chasin' you!" he howled. "I war goin' home after my rifle-gun."

"What's yore story, Erath?" I inquired.

"Last night I drempt somebody had stole the gold," he answered sullenly. "This mornin' I went to see if it was safe. Jest as I got to the tree, this murderer begun shootin' at me with a Winchester. I run for my life, and by some chance I finally run right into him. Likely he thought he'd hived me and was comin' for the sculp."

"Did either one of you see t'other'n shoot at you?" I ast.

"How could I, with him hid in the bresh?" snapped Joel. "But who else could it been?"

"I didn't have to see him," growled Erath. "I felt the wind of his lead."

"But each one of you says he didn't have no rifle," I said.

"He's a cussed liar," they accused simultaneous, and would have fell onto each other tooth and nail if they could have got past my bulk. "I'm convinced they'd been a mistake," I said. "Git home and cool off."

"Yo're too big for me to lick, Breckinridge," said Erath. "But I warn you, if you cain't prove to me that it warn't Joel which tried to murder me, I ain't goin' to rest nor sleep nor eat till I've nailed his mangy sculp to the highest pine on Apache Ridge."

"That goes for me, too," says Joel, grinding his teeth. "I'm declarin' truce till tomorrer mornin'. If Breckinridge cain't show me by then that you didn't shoot at me, either my wife or yore'n'll be a widder before midnight."

So saying they stalked off in oppersite directions, whilst I stared helplessly after 'em, slightly dazed at the responsibility which had been dumped onto me. That's the drawback of being the biggest man in yore settlement. All the relatives piles their trouble onto you. Here it was up to me to stop what looked like the beginnings of a regular family feud which was bound to reduce the population awful. I couldn't go sparking me no town-gal with all this hell brewing.

The more I thought of the gold them idjits had found, the more I felt like I ought to go and take a look at it myself, so I went back to the corral and saddled Cap'n Kidd and lit out for Apache Ridge. From the remarks they'd let fall whilst cussing each other, I had a purty good idee where the holler oak was at, and sure enough I found it without much trouble. I tied Cap'n Kidd and clumb up onto the trunk till I reched the holler. And then as I was craning my neck to look in, I heard a voice say: "Another dern thief!"

I looked around and seen Uncle Jeppard Grimes p'inting a gun at me.

"Bear Creek is goin' to hell," says Uncle Jeppard. "First it was Erath and Joel, and now it's you. I aim to throw a bullet through yore hind laig jest to teach you a little honesty. Hold still whilst I draws my bead."

With that he started sighting along the barrel of his Winchester, and I says: "You better save yore lead for that Injun over there."

Him being a old Injun fighter he jest naturally jerked his head around quick, and I pulled my .45 and shot the rifle out of his hands. I jumped down and put my foot on it, and he pulled a knife out of his leggin', and I taken it away from him and shaken him till he was so addled when I let him go he run in a circle and fell down cussing something terrible.

"Is everybody on Bear Creek gone crazy?" I demanded. "Cain't a man look into a holler tree without gittin' assassinated?"

"You was after my gold!" swore Uncle Jeppard.

"So it's yore gold, hey?" I said. "Well, a holler tree ain't no bank."

"I know it," he growled, combing the pine-needles out of his whiskers. "When I come here early this mornin' to see if it was safe, like I frequent does, I seen right off somebody'd been handlin' it. Whilst I was meditatin' over this, I seen Joel Gordon sneakin' towards the tree. I fired a shot acrost his bows in warnin' and he run off. But a few minutes later here come Erath Elkins slitherin' through the pines. I was mad by this time, so I combed his whiskers with a chunk of lead and he high-tailed it. And now, by golly, here you come--"

"You shet up!" I roared. "Don't you accuse me of wantin' yore blame gold. I jest wanted to see if it was safe, and so did Joel and Erath. If them men was thieves, they'd have took it when they found it yesterday. Where'd you git it, anyway?"

"I panned it, up in the hills," he said sullenly. "I ain't had time to take it to Chawed Ear and git it changed into cash money. I figgered this here tree was as good a place as any. But I done put it elsewhar now."

"Well," I said, "you got to go tell Erath and Joel it war you which shot at 'em, so they won't kill each other. They'll be mad at you, but I'll restrain 'em, with a hickery club, if necessary."

"All right," he said. "I'm sorry I misjedged you, Breckinridge. Jest to show I trusts you, I'll show you whar I hid it after I taken it outa the tree."

He led me through the trees till he come to a big rock jutting out from the side of a cliff, and p'inted at a smaller rock wedged beneath it.

"I pulled out that there rock," he said, "and dug a hole and stuck the poke in. Look!"

He heaved the rock out and bent down. And then he went straight up in the air with a yell that made me jump and pull my gun with cold sweat busting out all over me.

"What's the matter?" I demanded. "Air you snake-bit!"

"Yeah, by human snakes!" he hollered. "It's gone! I been robbed!"

I looked and seen the impressions the wrinkles in the buckskin poke had made in the soft earth. But there warn't nothing there now.

Uncle Jeppard was doing a scalp dance with a gun in one hand and a bowie knife in the other'n. "I'll fringe my leggin's with their mangy sculps! I'll pickle their hearts in a barr'l of brine! I'll feed their gizzards to my houn' dawgs!" he yelled.

"Whose gizzards?" I inquired.

"Whose, you idjit?" he howled. "Joe Gordon and Erath Elkins, dern it! They didn't run off. They snuck back and seen me move the gold! War-paint and rattlesnakes! I've kilt better men than them for less'n half that much!"

"Aw," I said, "t'ain't possible they stole yore gold--"

"Then whar is it?" he demanded bitterly. "Who else knowed about it?"

"Look here!" I said, p'inting to a belt of soft loam nigh the rocks. "There's a hoss's tracks."

"Well, what of it?" he demanded. "Maybe they had hosses tied in the bresh."

"Aw, no," I said. "Look how the calks is sot. They ain't no hosses on Bear Creek shod like that. These is the tracks of a stranger--I bet the feller I seen ride past my cabin jest about daybreak. A black-whiskered man with one ear missin'. That hard ground by the big rock don't show where he got off and stomped around, but the man which rode this hoss stole yore gold, I'll bet my guns."

"I ain't convinced," says Uncle Jeppard. "I'm goin' home and ile my rifle-gun, and then I'm goin' to go over and kill Joel and Erath."

"Now you lissen," I said forcibly, taking hold of the front of his buckskin shirt and h'isting him off the ground by way of emphasis, "I know what a stubborn old jassack you are, Uncle Jeppard, but this time you got to lissen to reason, or I'll forgit myself to the extent of kickin' the seat out of yore britches. I'm goin' to foller this feller and take yore gold away from him, because I know it war him that stole it. And don't you dare to kill nobody till I git back."

"I'll give you till tomorrer mornin'," he compromised. "I won't pull a trigger till then. But," said Uncle Jeppard waxing poetical, "if my gold ain't in my hands by the time the mornin' sun h'ists itself over the shinin' peaks of the Jackass Mountains, the buzzards will rassle their hash on the carcasses of Joel Gordon and Erath Elkins."

I went away from there, and mounted Cap'n Kidd and headed west on the stranger's trail. A hell of a chance I had to go sparking a town-gal, with my lunatickal relatives thirsting for each other's gore.

It was still tolerably early in the morning, and one of them long summer days ahead of me. They warn't a hoss in the Humbolts which could equal Cap'n Kidd for endurance. I've rode him a hundred miles between sundown and sunup. But the hoss the stranger was riding must have been some chunk of hoss-meat hisself, and of course he had a long start of me. The day wore on, and still I hadn't come up with my man. I'd covered a lot of distance and was getting into country I warn't familiar with, but I didn't have no trouble follering his trail, and finally, late in the evening, I come out on a narrer dusty path where the calk-marks of his hoss's shoes was very plain.

The sun sunk lower and my hopes dwindled. Even if I got the thief and got the gold, it'd be a awful push to get back to Bear Creek in time to prevent mayhem. But I urged on Cap'n Kidd, and presently we come out into a road, and the tracks I was follering merged with a lot of others. I went on, expecting to come to some settlement, and wondering jest where I was.

Jest at sundown I rounded a bend in the road and I seen something hanging to a tree, and it was a man. They was another man in the act of pinning something to the corpse's shirt, and when he heard me he wheeled and jerked his gun--the man, I mean, not the corpse. He was a mean looking cuss, but he warn't Black Whiskers. Seeing I made no hostile motion, he put up his gun and grinned.

"That feller's still kickin'?" I said.

"We just strung him up," he said. "The other boys has rode back to town, but I stayed to put this warnin' on his buzzum. Can you read?"

"No," I said.

"Well," says he, "this here paper says: 'Warnin' to all outlaws and specially them on Grizzly Mountain--Keep away from Wampum.'"

"How far's Wampum from here?" I ast.

"Half a mile down the road," he said. "I'm Al Jackson, one of Bill Ormond's deputies. We aim to clean up Wampum. This is one of them outlaws which has denned up on Grizzly Mountain."

Before I could say anything more, I heard somebody breathing quick and gaspy, and they was a patter of bare feet in the bresh, and a kid gal about fourteen years old bust into the road.

"You've killed Uncle Joab!" she shrieked. "You murderers! A boy told me they was fixin' to hang him! I run as fast as I could--"

"Git away from that corpse!" roared Jackson, hitting at her with his quirt.

"You stop that!" I ordered. "Don't you hit that young 'un."

"Oh, please, Mister!" she wept, wringing her hands. "You ain't one of Ormond's men. Please help me! He ain't dead--I seen him move!"

Waiting for no more I spurred alongside the body and drawed my knife.

"Don't you cut that rope!" squawked the deputy, jerking his gun. So I hit him under the jaw and knocked him out of his saddle and into the bresh beside the road where he lay groaning. I then cut the rope and eased the hanged man down onto my saddle and got the noose offa his neck. He was purple in the face and his eyes was closed and his tongue lolled out, but he still had some life in him. Evidently they didn't drop him, but jest hauled him up to strangle to death.

I laid him on the ground and worked over him till some of his life begun to come back to him, but I knowed he ought to have medical attention, so I said: "Where's the nearest doctor?"

"Doc Richards in Wampum," whimpered the kid. "But if we take him there Ormond'll git him again. Won't you please take him home?"

"Where you-all live?" I inquired.

"We been livin' in a cabin on Grizzly Mountain every since Ormond run us out of Wampum," she whimpered.

"Well," I said, "I'm goin' to put yore uncle onto Cap'n Kidd and you can set behind the saddle and help hold him on, and tell me which way to go."

I done this and Cap'n Kidd didn't like it none, but after I busted him between the ears with the butt of my six-shooter he subsided and come along sulkily as I led him. As we went I seen that deputy Jackson drag hisself out of the bresh and go limping down the road holding onto his jaw.

I was losing a awful lot of time, but I couldn't leave this feller to die, even if he was a outlaw, because probably the little gal didn't have nobody else to take care of her but him.

It was well after dark when we come up a narrer trail that wound up a thickly timbered mountain side, and purty soon somebody in a thicket ahead of us hollered: "Halt whar you be or I'll shoot!"

"Don't shoot, Jim!" called the gal. "This is Betty, and we're bringin' Uncle Joab home."

A tall hard-looking young feller stepped out into the open, p'inting his Winchester at me. He cussed when he seen our load.

"He ain't dead," I said. "But we oughta git him to his cabin."

So Jim led the way through the thickets till we come into a clearing where they was a cabin and a woman come running out and screamed like a catamount when she seen Joab. Me and Jim lifted him off and toted him in and laid him on a bunk, and the women begun to work over him, and I went out to my hoss, because I was in a hurry to get gone. Jim follered me.

"This is the kind of stuff we've been havin' ever since Ormond come to Wampum," he says bitterly. "We been livin' up here like rats, afeared to stir in the open. I warned Joab agen slippin' down into the village to-day, but he was sot on it, and wouldn't let none of the boys go with him. Said he'd sneak in and git what he wanted and sneak out again."

"Well," I says, "what's yore business ain't none of mine. But this here life is hard lines on the women and chillern."

"You must be a friend of Joab's," he said. "He sent a man east some days ago, but we was afraid one of Ormond's men trailed him and killed him. But maybe he got through. Air you the man Joab sent for?"

"Meanin' am I some gunman come in to clean up the town?" I snorted. "Naw, I ain't. I never seen this feller Joab before."

"Well," says Jim, "cutting him down like you done has already got you in bad with Ormond. Whyn't you help us run them fellers out of the country? They's still a good many of us in these hills, even if we have been run out of Wampum. This hangin' is the last straw. I'll round up the boys tonight, and we'll have a show-down with Ormond's men. We're outnumbered, and we been licked bad onst before, but we'll try it again. Why don't you throw in with us?"

"Lissen," I says, climbing into the saddle, "jest because I cut down a outlaw ain't no sign I'm ready to be one myself. I done it jest because I couldn't stand to see the little gal take on so. Anyway, I'm lookin' for a feller with black whiskers and one ear missin' which rides a roan with a big Lazy-A brand."

Jim fell back from me and lifted his rifle. "You better ride on, then," he said sombrely. "I'm obleeged to you for what you've did--but a friend of Wolf Ashley cain't be no friend of our'n."

I give him a snort of defiance and rode off down the mountains and headed for Wampum, because it was reasonable to suppose that maybe I'd find Black Whiskers there.

Wampum warn't much of a town, but they was one big saloon and gambling hall where sounds of hilarity was coming from, and not many people on the streets and them which was mostly went in a hurry. I stopped one of them and ast him where a doctor lived, and he p'inted out a house where he said Doc Richards lived, so I rode up to the door and hollered, and somebody inside said: "What do you want? I got you covered."

"Air you Doc Richards?" I said, and he said: "Yes, keep your hands away from your belt or I'll salivate you."

"This is a nice, friendly town!" I snorted. "I ain't figgerin' on doin' you no harm. They's a man up in the hills which needs yore attention."

At that the door opened and a man with red whiskers and a shotgun stuck his head out and said: "Who do you mean?"

"They call him Joab," I said. "He's on Grizzly Mountain."

"Hmmmmm!" said Doc Richards, looking at me very sharp where I sot Cap'n Kidd in the starlight. "I set a man's jaw tonight, and he had a good deal to say about a certain party who cut down a man that was hanged. If you happen to be that party, my advice to you is to hit the trail before Ormond catches you."

"I'm hungry and thirsty and I'm lookin' for a man," I said. "I aim to leave Wampum when I'm good and ready."

"I never argue with a man as big as you," said Doc Richards. "I'll ride to Grizzly Mountain as quick as I can get my horse saddled. If I never see you alive again, which is very probable, I'll always remember you as the biggest man I ever saw, and the biggest fool. Good night!"

I thought the folks in Wampum is the queerest acting I ever seen. I taken Cap'n Kidd to the barn which served as a livery stable and seen that he was properly fixed in a stall to hisself, as far away from the other hosses as I could get him, because I knowed if he got to 'em he'd chaw the ears off 'em. The barn didn't look strong enough to hold him, but I told the livery stable man to keep him occupied with fodder, and to run for me if he got rambunctious. Then I went into the big saloon which was called the Golden Eagle. I was low in my spirits because I seemed to have lost Black Whiskers' trail entirely, and even if I found him in Wampum, which I hoped, I never could make it back to Bear Creek by sunup. But I hoped to recover that derned gold yet, and get back in time to save a few lives, anyway.

They was a lot of tough looking fellers in the Golden Eagle drinking and gambling and talking loud and cussing, and they all stopped their noise as I come in, and looked at me very fishy. But I give 'em no heed and went up to the bar, and purty soon they kinda forgot about me, and the racket started up again.

Whilst I was drinking me a few fingers of whisky, somebody shouldered up to me and said: "Hey!" I turnt around and seen a big, broad-built man with a black beard and blood-shot eyes and a pot-belly and two guns on.

I says: "Well?"

"Who air you?" he demanded.

"Who air you?" I come back at him.

"I'm Bill Ormond, sheriff of Wampum," he says. "That's who!" And he showed me a star onto his shirt.

"Oh," I says. "Well, I'm Breckinridge Elkins, from Bear Creek."

I noticed a kind of quiet come over the place, and fellers was laying down their glasses and their billiard sticks, and hitching up their belts and kinda gathering around me. Ormond scowled and combed his beard with his fingers, and rocked on his heels and said: "I got to 'rest you!"

I sot down my glass quick and he jumped back and hollered: "Don't you dast pull no gun on the law!" And they was a kind of movement amongst the men around me.

"What you arrestin' me for?" I demanded. "I ain't busted no law."

"You assaulted one of my deperties," he said, and then I seen that feller Jackson standing behind the sheriff with his jaw all bandaged up. He couldn't work his chin to talk. All he could do was p'int his finger at me and shake his fists.

"You likewise cut down a outlaw we had just hunged," says Ormond. "Yo're under arrest!"

"But I'm lookin' for a man!" I protested. "I ain't got time to be arrested!"

"You should of thunk about that when you busted the law," opined Ormond. "Gimme yore gun and come along peaceable."

A dozen men had their hands on their guns, but it warn't that which made me give in. Pap had always told me not to resist no officer of the law. It was kind of instinctive for me to hand over my gun to this feller with the star on his shirt. Somehow it didn't seem right, but I was kind of bewildered and my thoughts was addled. I ain't one of these fast thinking sharps. So I jest done what pap always told me to do.

Ormond taken me down the street a-ways, with a whole bunch of men follering us, and stopped at a log building with barred winders which was next to a board shack. A man come out of this shack with a big bunch of keys, and Ormond said he was the jailer. So they put me in the log jail and Ormond went off with everybody but the jailer, who sot down on the step outside his shack and rolled hisself a cigaret.

They warn't no light in the jail, but I found the bunk and tried to lay down on it, but it warn't built for a man six and a half foot tall. I sot down on it and at last realized what a infernal mess I was in. Here I ought to be hunting Black Whiskers and getting the gold to take back to Bear Creek and save the lives of a swarm of my kin-folks, but instead of that I was in jail, and no way of getting out without killing a officer of the law. With daybreak Joel and Erath would be at each others' throats, and Uncle Jeppard would be gunning for both of 'em. It was too much to hope that the other relatives would let them three fight it out amongst theirselves. I never seen sech a clan for buttin' into each others' business. The guns would be talking all up and down Bear Creek, and the population would be decreasing with every volley. I thunk about it till I got dizzy and then the jailer stuck his head up to the winder and said if I'd give him five dollars he'd go get me something to eat.

I had five dollars I won in a poker game a few days before and I give it to him, and he went off and was gone quite a spell, and at last he come back and give me a ham sandwich. I ast him was that all he could get for five dollars, and he said grub was awful high in Wampum. I et the sandwich with one bite, and he said if I'd give him some more money he'd get me another sandwich. But I didn't have no more and told him so.

"What!" he said, breathing licker fumes in my face through the winder bars. "No money? And you expect us to feed you for nothin'?" So he cussed me, and went off, and purty soon the sheriff come and looked in at me, and said: "What's this I hear about you not havin' no money?"

"I ain't got none left," I said, and he cussed something fierce.

"How you expeck to pay yore fine?" he demanded. "You think you can lay up in our jail and eat us out of house and home? What kind of a critter are you, anyway?"

Just then the jailer chipped in and said somebody told him I had a hoss down at the livery stable.

"Good," said the sheriff. "We'll sell his hoss for his fine."

"You won't neither," I says, beginning to get mad. "You try to sell Cap'n Kidd, and I'll forgit what pap told me about law-officers, and take you plumb apart."

I riz up and glared at him through the winder, and he fell back and put his hand on his gun. But jest about that time I seen a man going into the Golden Eagle which was in easy sight of the jail, and lit up so the light streamed out into the street. I give a yell that made Ormond jump about a foot. It was Black Whiskers!

"Arrest that man, Sheriff!" I hollered. "He's a thief!"

Ormond whirled and looked, and then he said: "Air you plumb crazy? That's Wolf Ashley, my deperty."

"I don't give a dern," I said. "He stole a poke of gold from my Uncle Jeppard Grimes up in the Humbolts, and I've trailed him clean from Bear Creek. Do yore duty and arrest him."

"You shet up!" roared Ormond. "You cain't tell me my business! I ain't goin' to arrest my best gunman--my star deperty, I mean. What you mean tryin' to start trouble this way? One more yap outa you and I'll throwa chunk of lead through you."

And he turned around and stalked off muttering: "Poke of gold, huh? Holdin' out on me, is he? I'll see about that!"

"I sot down and held my head in bewilderment. What kind of a sheriff was this which wouldn't arrest a derned thief? My thoughts run in circles till my wits was addled. The jailer had gone off and I wondered if he had went to sell Cap'n Kidd. I wondered what was going on back on Bear Creek, and I shivered to think what would bust loose at daybreak. And here I was in jail, with them fellers fixing to sell my hoss, whilst that dern thief swaggered around at large. I looked helplessly out a the winder.

It was getting late, but the Golden Eagle was going full blast. I could hear the music blaring away, and the fellers yipping and shooting their pistols in the air, and their boot heels stomping on the board walk. I felt like busting down and bawling, and then I begun to get mad. I get mad slow, generally, and before I was plumb mad, I heard a noise at the winder.

I seen a pale face staring in at me, and a couple of small white hands on the bars.

"Mister!" a voice whispered. "Oh, Mister!"

I stepped over and looked out and it was the kid gal Betty.

"What you doin' here, gal?" I ast.

"Doc Richards said you was in Wampum," she whispered. "He said he was afraid Ormond would do for you because you helped us, so I slipped away on his hoss and rode here as hard as I could. Jim was out tryin' to round up the boys for a last stand, and Aunt Rachel and the other women was busy with Uncle Joab. They wasn't nobody but me to come, but I had to! You saved Uncle Joab, and I don't care if Jim does say yo're a outlaw because yo're a friend of Wolf Ashley. Oh, I wish't I wasn't jest a gal! I wisht I could shoot a gun, so's I could kill Bill Ormond!"

"That ain't no way for a gal to talk," I says. "Leave the killin' to the men. But I appreciates you goin' to all this trouble. I got some kid sisters myself--in fact I got seven or eight, as near as I remember. Don't you worry none about me. Lots of men gits throwed in jail."

"But that ain't it!" she wept, wringing her hands. "I listened outside the winder of the back room in the Golden Eagle and heard Ormond and Ashley talkin' about you. I dunno what you wanted with Ashley when you ast Jim about him, but he ain't yo're friend. Ormond accused him of stealin' a poke of gold and holdin' out on him, and Ashley said it was a lie. Then Ormond said you told him about it, and he said he'd give Ashley till midnight to perjuice that gold, and if he didn't Wampum would be too small for both of 'em."

"Then he went out to the bar, and I heered Ashley talkin' to a pal of his'n, and Ashley said he'd have to raise some gold somehow, or Ormond would have him killed, but that he was goin' to fix you, Mister, for lyin' about him. Mister, Ashley and his bunch air over in the back of the Golden Eagle right now plottin' to bust into jail before daylight and hang you!"

"Aw," I says, "the sheriff wouldn't let 'em do that."

"But Ormond ain't the sheriff!" she cried. "Him and his gunmen come into Wampum and killed all the people that tried to oppose him, or run 'em up into the hills. They got us penned up there like rats, nigh starvin' and afeared to come to town. Uncle Joab come into Wampum this mornin' to git some salt, and you seen what they done to him. He's the real sheriff. Ormond is jest a bloody outlaw. Him and his gang is usin' Wampum for a hang-out whilst they rob and steal and kill all over the country."

"Then that's what yore friend Jim meant," I said slowly. "And me, like a dumb damn' fool, I thought him and Joab and the rest of you-all was jest outlaws, like that fake deperty said."

"Ormond took Uncle Joab's badge and called hisself the sheriff to fool strangers," she whimpered. "What honest people is left in Wampum air afeared to say anything. Him and his gunmen air rulin' this whole part of the country. Uncle Joab sent a man east to git us some help in the settlements on Buffalo River, but none never come, and from what I overheard tonight, I believe Wolf Ashley follered him and killed him over east of the Humbolts somewheres. What air we goin' to do?" she sobbed.

"Git on Doc Richards' hoss and ride for Grizzly Mountain," I said. "When you git there, tell the Doc to light a shuck for Wampum, because there's goin' to be plenty of work for him time he gits here."

"But what about you?" she cried. "I cain't go off and leave you to git hanged!"

"Don't worry about me, gal," I said. "I'm Breckinridge Elkins of the Humbolt Mountains, and I'm preparin' for to shake my mane! Hustle!"

I reckon something about me convinced her, because she glided away into the shadders, whimpering, and presently I heard the clack of hoss' hoofs dwindling in the distance. I then riz and laid hold of the winder bars and tore' em out by the roots. Then I sunk my fingers into the sill log and tore it out, and three or four more along with it, and the wall give way and the roof fell down on me, but I shaken aside the rooins and heaved up out of the wreckage like a b'ar out of a deadfall.

About this time the jailer come running up, and when he seen what I had did he was so surprised he forgot to shoot with his pistol. So I taken it away from him and knocked down the door of his shack with him and left him laying in its rooins.

I then strode up the street towards the Golden Eagle and here come a feller galloping down the street, and who should it be but that derned fake deputy, Jackson. He couldn't holler with his bandaged jaw, but when he seen me he jerked loose his lariat and piled it around my neck, and sot spurs to his cayuse aiming for to drag me to death. But I seen he had his rope

tied fast to his horn, Texas style, so I laid hold onto it with both hands and braced my laigs, and when the hoss got to the end of the rope, the girths busted and the hoss went out from under the saddle, and Jackson come down on his head in the street and laid still.

I throwed the rope off my neck and went onto the Golden Eagle with the jailer's .45 in my scabbard. I looked in and seen the same crowd there, and Ormond r'ared back at the bar with his belly stuck out, roaring and bragging.

I stepped in and hollered: "Look this way, Bill Ormond, and pull iron, you dirty thief!"

He wheeled, paled, and went for his gun, and I slammed six bullets into him before he could hit the floor. I then throwed the empty gun at the dazed crowd and give one deafening roar and tore into 'em like a mountain cyclone. They begun to holler and surge onto me and I throwed 'em and knocked 'em right and left like ten pins. Some was knocked over the bar and some under the tables and some I knocked down stacks of beer kegs with. I ripped the roulette wheel loose and mowed down a whole row of 'em with it, and I throwed a billiard table through the mirror behind the bar jest for good measure. Three or four fellers got pinned under it and yelled bloody murder.

Meanwhile they was hacking at me with bowies and hitting me with chairs and brass knuckles and trying to shoot me, but all they done with their guns was shoot each other because they was so many they got in each other's way, and the other things just made me madder. I laid hands on as many as I could hug at onst, and the thud of their heads banging together was music to me. I also done good work heaving 'em head-on agen the walls, and I further slammed several of 'em heartily agen the floor and busted all the tables with their carcasses. In the melee the whole bar collapsed, and the shelves behind the bar fell down when I slang a feller into 'em, and bottles rained all over the floor. One of the lamps also fell off the ceiling which was beginning to crack and cave in, and everybody begun to yell: "Fire!" and run out through the doors and jump out the winders.

In a second I was alone in the blazing building except for them which was past running. I'd started for a door myself when I seen a buckskin pouch on the floor along with a lot of other belongings which had fell out of men's pockets as they will when the men gets swung by the feet and smashed agen the wall.

I picked it up and jerked the tie-string, and a trickle of gold dust spilt into my hand. I begun to look on the floor for Ashley, but he warn't there. But he was watching me from outside, because I looked and seen him jest as he let bam at me with a .45 from the back room which warn't on fire much yet. I plunged after him, ignoring his next slug which took me in the shoulder, and then I grabbed him and taken the gun away from him. He pulled a bowie and tried to stab me in the groin, but only sliced my thigh, so I throwed him the full length of the room and he hit the wall so hard his head went through the boards.

Meantime the main part of the saloon was burning so I couldn't go out that way. I started to go out the back door of the room I was in, but got a glimpse of some fellers which was crouching jest outside the door waiting to shoot me as I come out. So I knocked out a section of the wall on another side of the room, and about that time the roof fell in so loud them fellers didn't hear me coming, so I fell on 'em from the rear and beat their heads together till the blood ran out of their ears, and stomped 'em and taken their shotguns away from 'em.

Then I was aware that people was shooting at me in the light of the burning saloon, and I seen that a bunch was ganged up on the other side of the street, so I begun to loose my shotguns into the thick of them, and they broke and run yelling blue murder.

And as they went out one side of the town, another gang rushed in from the other, yelling and shooting, and I snapped a empty shell at 'em before one yelled: "Don't shoot, Elkins! We're friends!" And I seen it was Jim and Doc Richards, and a lot of other fellers I hadn't never seen before then.

They went tearing after Ormond's gang, whooping and yelling, and the way them outlaws took to the tall timber was a caution. They warn't no fight left in 'em at all.

Jim pulled up, and looked at the wreckage of the jail, and the remnants of the Golden Eagle, and he shook his head like he couldn't believe it.

"We was on our way to make a last effort to take the town back from that gang," says he. "Betty met us as we come down the trail and told us you was a friend and a honest man. We hoped to git here in time to save you from gittin' hanged." Again he shaken his head with a kind of bewildered look. Then he says "Oh, say, I'd about forgot. On our way here we run onto a man on the road who said he was lookin' for you. Not knowin' who he was, we roped him and brung him along with us. Bring the prisoner, boys!"

They brung him, tied to his saddle, and it was Jack Gordon, Joel's youngest brother and the fastest gunslinger on Bear Creek.

"What you doin' houndin' me?" I demanded bitterly. "Has the feud begun already and has Joel sot you on my trail? Well, I got what I come after, and I'm headin' back for Bear Creek. I cain't git there by daylight, but maybe I'll git there in time to keep everybody from gittin' kilt. Here's Uncle Jeppard's cussed gold!" And I waved the poke in front of him.

"But that cain't be it!" says he. "I been trailin' you all the way from Bear Creek, tryin' to catch you and tell you the gold had been found! Uncle Jeppard and Joel and Erath got together and everything was explained and is all right. Where'd you git that gold?"

"I dunno whether Ashley's pals got it together so he could give it to Ormond and not git kilt for holdin' out on his boss, or what," I says. "But I know the owner ain't got no more use for it now, and probably stole it in the first place. I'm givin' this gold to Betty," I says. "She shore deserves a reward. And giving it to her makes me feel like maybe some good come outa this wild goose chase, after all."

Jim looked around at the ruins of the outlaw hangout, and murmured something I didn't catch. I says to Jack: "You said Uncle Jeppard's gold was found. Where was it, anyway?"

"Well," said Jack, "little General William Harrison Grimes, Joash Grimes's youngest boy, he seen his grand-pap put the gold under the rock, and he got it out to play with it. He was usin' the nuggets for slugs in his nigger-shooter," Jack said, "and it's plumb cute the way he pops a rattlesnake with 'em. What did you say?"

"Nothin'," I said between my teeth. "Nothin' that'd be fit to repeat, anyway."

"Well," he said, "if you've had yore fun, I reckon yo're ready to start back to Bear Creek with me."

"I reckon I ain't," I said. "I'm goin' to 'tend to my own private affairs for a change. I told Glory McGraw early this mornin' I was goin' to git me a town-gal, and by golly, I meant it. Gwan on back to Bear Creek, and if you see Glory, tell her I'm headin' for Chawed Ear where the purty gals is as thick as honey bees around a apple tree."

Chapter VI - THE FEUD BUSTER

I PULLED out of Wampum before sunup. The folks, wanted me to stay and be a deputy sheriff, but I taken a good look at the female population and seen that the only single woman in town was a Piute squaw. So I headed acrost the mountains for Chawed Ear, swinging wide to avoid coming anywheres nigh to the Humbolts. I didn't want to chance running into Glory McGraw before I had me a town-gal.

But I didn't get to Chawed Ear nigh as soon as I'd figgered to. As I passed through the hills along the head-waters of Mustang River, I run into a camp of cowpunchers from the Triple L which was up there rounding up strays. The foreman needed some hands, and I happened to think maybe I'd cut a better figger before the Chawed Ear belles if'n I had some money in my pocket, so I taken on with them. After he seen me and Cap'n Kidd do one day's work the foreman 'lowed that they warn't no use in hiring the six or seven other men he aimed; he said I filled the bill perfect.

So I worked with 'em three weeks, and then collected my pay and pulled for Chawed Ear.

I was all primed for the purty settlement-gals, little suspected the jamboree I was riding into blind, the echoes of which ain't yet quit circulating through the mountain country. And that reminds me to remark that I'm sick and tired of the slanders which has been noised abroad about that there affair, and if they don't stop, I'll liable to lose my temper, and anybody in the Humbolts can tell you when I loses my temper the effect on the population is wuss'n fire, earthquake and cyclone.

First-off, it's a lie that I rode a hundred miles to mix into a feud which wasn't none of my business. I never heard of the Warren-Barlow war before I come into the Mezquital country. I hear tell the Barlows is talking about suing me for destroying their property. Well, they ought to build their cabins solider if they don't want 'em tore down. And they're all liars when they says the Warrens hired me to exterminate 'em at five dollars a sculp. I don't believe even a Warren would pay five dollars for one of their mangy sculps. Anyway, I don't fight for hire for nobody, And the Warrens needn't belly-ache about me turnin' on 'em and trying to massacre the entire clan. All I wanted to do was kind of disable 'em so they couldn't interfere with my business. And my business, from first to last, was defending the family honor. If I had to wipe up the earth with a couple of feuding clans whilst so doing, I cain't help it. Folks which is particular of their hides ought to stay out of the way of tornadoes, wild bulls, devastating torrents and a insulted Elkins.

This is the way it was: I was dry and hot and thirsty when I hit Chawed Ear, so I went into a saloon and had me a few drinks. Then I was going out and start looking for a gal, when I spied a friendly game of kyards going on between a hoss-thief and three train-robbers, and I decided I'd set in for a hand or so. And whilst we was playing, who should come in but Uncle Jeppard Grimes. I should of knew my day was spoilt the minute he hove in sight. Dern near all the calamities which takes place in southern Nevada can be traced back to that old lobo. He's got a ingrown disposition and a natural talent for pestering his feller man. Specially his relatives.

He didn't say a word about that wild goose chase I went on to get back the gold I thought Wolf Ashley had stole from him. He come over and scowled down on me like I was the missing lynx or something, and purty soon, jest as I was all sot to make a killing, he says: "How can you set there so free and keerless, with four aces into yore hand, when yore family name is bein' besmirched?"

I flang down my hand in annoyance, and said: "Now look what you done! What you mean blattin' out information of sech a private nature? What you talkin' about, anyhow?"

"Well," he says, "durin' the time you been away from home roisterin' and wastin' yore substance in riotous livin'--"

"I been punchin' cows!" I said fiercely. "And before that I was chasin' a man to git back the gold I thought he'd stole from you. I ain't squandered nothin' nowheres. Shet up and tell me whatever yo're a-talkin' about."

"Well," says he, "whilst you been gone young Dick Blanton of Grizzly Run has been courtin' yore sister Elinor, and the family's been expectin' 'em to set the day, any time now. But now I hear he's been braggin' all over Grizzly Run about how he done jilted her. Air you goin' to set there and let yore sister become the laughin' stock of the country? When I was a young man--"

"When you was a young man Dan'l Boone warn't whelped yet!" I bellered, so mad I included him and everybody else in my irritation. They ain't nothing upsets me like injustice done to some of my close kin. "Git out of my way! I'm headin' for Grizzly Run--what you grinnin' at, you spotted hyener?" This last was addressed to the hoss-thief in which I seemed to detect signs of amusement.

"I warn't grinnin'," he said.

"So I'm a liar, I reckon!" I said, impulsively shattering a demi-john over his head, and he fell under the table hollering bloody murder, and all the fellers drinking at the bar abandoned their licker and stampeded for the street hollering: "Take cover, boys! Breckinridge Elkins is on the rampage!"

So I kicked all the slats out of the bar to relieve my feelings, and stormed out of the saloon and forked Cap'n Kidd. Even he seen it was no time to take liberties with me; he didn't pitch but seven jumps, and then he settled down to a dead run, and we headed for Grizzly Run.

Everything kind of floated in a red haze all the way, but them folks which claims I tried to murder' em in cold blood on the road between Chawed Ear and Grizzly Run is jest narrer-minded and super-sensitive. The reason I shot off everybody's hats that I met was jest to kind of ca'm my nerves, because I was afeared if I didn't cool off some by the time I hit Grizzly Run I might hurt somebody. I'm that mild-mannered and retiring by nature that I wouldn't willing hurt man, beast, nor Injun unless maddened beyond all endurance.

That's why I acted with so much self-possession and dignity when I got to Grizzly Run and entered the saloon where Dick Blanton generally hung out.

"Where's Dick Blanton?" I demanded, and everybody must of been nervous, because when I boomed out they all jumped and looked around, and the bartender dropped a glass and turned pale.

"Well," I hollered, beginning to lose patience. "Where is the coyote?"

"G-gimme time, will ya?" stuttered the bar-keep. "I--uh--he--uh--"

"Evadin' the question, hey?" I said, kicking the foot-rail loose. "Friend of his'n, hey? Tryin' to pertect him, hey?" I was so overcome by this perfidy that I lunged for him and he ducked down behind the bar and I crashed into it bodily with all my lunge and weight, and it collapsed on top of him, and all the customers run out of the saloon hollering: "Help, murder, Elkins is killin' the bartender!"

That individual stuck his head up from amongst the rooins of the bar and begged: "For God's sake, lemme alone! Blanton headed south for the Mezquital Mountains yesterday."

I throwed down the chair I was fixing to bust all the ceiling lamps with, and run out and jumped on Cap'n Kidd and headed south, whilst behind me folks emerged from their cyclone cellars and sent a rider up in the hills to tell the sheriff and his deputies they could come on back now.

I knowed where the Mezquitals was, though I hadn't never been there. I crossed the Californy line about sundown, and shortly after dark I seen Mezquital Peak looming ahead of me. Having ca'med down somewhat, I decided to stop and rest Cap'n Kidd. He warn't tired, because that hoss has got alligator blood in his veins, but I knowed I might have to trail Blanton clean to The Angels, and they warn't no use in running Cap'n Kidd's laigs off on the first lap of the chase.

It warn't a very thick settled country I'd come into, very mountainous and thick timbered, but purty soon I come to a cabin beside the trail and I pulled up and hollered: "Hello!"

The candle inside was instantly blowed out, and somebody pushed a rifle barrel through the winder and bawled: "Who be you?"

"I'm Breckinridge Elkins from Bear Creek, Nevada," I said. "I'd like to stay all night, and git some feed for my hoss."

"Stand still," warned the voice. "We can see you agen the stars, and they's four rifle-guns a-kiverin' you."

"Well, make up yore minds," I said, because I could could hear 'em discussin' me. I reckon they thought they was whispering. One of 'em said: "Aw, he cain't be a Barlow. Ain't none of 'em that big." T'other'n said: "Well, maybe he's a derned gunfighter they've sent for to help 'em. Old jake's nephew's been up in Nevady."

"Le's let him in," says a third. "We can mighty quick tell what he is."

So one of 'em come out and 'lowed it would be all right for me to stay the night, and he showed me a corral to put Cap'n Kidd in, and hauled out some hay for him.

"We got to be keerful," he said. "We got lots of enemies in these hills."

We went into the cabin, and they lit the candle again, and sot some corn pone and sow-belly and beans on the table and a jug of corn licker. They was four men, and they said their names was Warren--George, Ezra, Elisha, and Joshua, and they was brothers. I'd always heard tell the Mezquital country was famed for big men, but these fellers warn't so big--not much over six foot high apiece. On Bear Creek they'd been considered kind of puny and undersized, so to speak.

They warn't very talkative. Mostly they sot with their rifles acrost their knees and looked at me without no expression onto their faces, but that didn't stop me from eating a hearty supper, and would of et a lot more only the grub give out; and I hoped they had more licker somewheres else because I was purty dry. When I turned up the jug to take a snort it was brim-full, but before I'd more'n dampened my gullet the dern thing was plumb empty.

When I got through I went over and sot down on a raw-hide bottomed chair in front of the fire-place where they warn't no fire because it was summer time, and they said: "What's yore business, stranger?"

"Well," I said, not knowing I was going to get the surprise of my life, "I'm lookin' for a feller named Dick Blanton--"

By golly, the words warn't clean out of my mouth when they was four men onto my neck like catamounts!

"He's a spy!" they hollered. "He's a cussed Barlow! Shoot him! Stab him! Hit him on the head!"

All of which they was endeavoring to do with such passion they was getting in each other's way, and it was only his over-eagerness which caused George to miss me with his bowie and sink it into the table instead, but Joshua busted a chair over my head and Elisha would of shot me if I hadn't jerked back my head so he jest singed my eyebrows. This lack of hospitality so irritated me that I riz up amongst 'em like a b'ar with a pack of wolves hanging onto him, and commenced committing mayhem on my hosts, because I seen right off they was critters which couldn't be persuaded to respect a guest no other way.

Well, the dust of battle hadn't settled, the casualities was groaning all over the place, and I was jest relighting the candle when I heard a hoss galloping up the trail from the south. I wheeled and drawed my guns as it stopped before the cabin. But I didn't shoot, because the next instant they was a bare-footed gal standing in the door. When she seen the rooins she let out a screech like a catamount.

"You've kilt 'em!" she screamed. "You murderer!"

"Aw, I ain't, neither," I said. "They ain't hurt much--jest a few cracked ribs and dislocated shoulders and busted laigs and sech-like trifles. Joshua's ear'll grow back on all right, if you take a few stitches into it."

"You cussed Barlow!" she squalled, jumping up and down with the hystericals. "I'll kill you! You damned Barlow!"

"I ain't no Barlow, dern it," I said. "I'm Breckinridge Elkins, of Bear Creek. I ain't never even heard of no Barlows."

At that George stopped his groaning long enough to snarl: "If you ain't a friend of the Barlows, how come you askin' for Dick Blanton? He's one of 'em."

"He jilted my sister!" I roared. "I aim to drag him back and make him marry her."

"Well, it was all a mistake," groaned George. "But the damage is done now."

"It's wuss'n you think," said the gal fiercely. "The Warrens has all forted theirselves over at pap's cabin, and they sent me to git you boys. We got to make a stand. The Barlows is gatherin' over to Jake Barlow's cabin, and they aims to make a foray onto us tonight. We was outnumbered to begin with, and now here's our best fightin' men laid out! Our goose is cooked plumb to hell!"

"Lift me onto my hoss," moaned George. "I cain't walk, but I can still shoot." He tried to rise up, and fell back cussing and groaning.

"You got to help us!" said the gal desperately, turning to me. "You done laid out our four best fightin' men, and you owes it to us. It's yore duty! Anyway, you says Dick Blanton's yore enemy--well, he's Jake Barlow's nephew, and he come back here to help 'em clean out us Warrens. He's over to Jake's cabin right now. My brother Bill snuck over and spied on 'em, and he says every fightin' man of the clan is gatherin' there. All we can do is hold the fort, and you got to come help us hold it! Yo're nigh as big as all four of these boys put together."

Well, I figgered I owed the Warrens something, so, after setting some bones and bandaging some wounds and abrasions of which they was a goodly lot, I saddled Cap'n Kidd and we sot out.

As we rode along she said: "That there is the biggest, wildest, meanest-lookin' critter I ever seen. Is he actually a hoss, or some kind of a varmint?"

"He's a hoss," I said. "But he's got painter's blood and a shark's disposition. What's this here feud about?"

"I dunno," she said. "It's been goin' on so long everybody's done forgot what started it. Somebody accused somebody else of stealin' a cow, I think. What's the difference?"

"They ain't none," I assured her. "If folks wants to have feuds it's their own business."

We was follering a winding path, and purty soon we heard dogs barking and about that time the gal turned aside and got off her hoss, and showed me a pen hid in the bresh. It was full of hosses.

"We keep our mounts here so's the Barlows ain't so likely to find 'em and run 'em off," she said, and she turnt her hoss into the pen, and I put Cap'n Kidd in, but I tied him over in one corner by hisself--otherwise he would of started fighting all the other hosses and kicked the fence down.

Then we went on along the path and the dogs barked louder and purty soon we come to a big two-story cabin which had heavy board-shutters over the winders. They was jest a dim streak of candle light come through the cracks. It was dark, because the moon hadn't come up. We stopped in the shadders of the trees, and the gal whistled like a whippoorwill three times, and somebody answered from up on the roof. A door opened a crack in a room which didn't have no light at all, and somebody said: "That you, Elizerbeth? Air the boys with you?"

"It's me," says she, starting towards the door. "But the boys ain't with me."

Then all to onst he throwed open the door and hollered: "Run, gal! They's a grizzly b'ar standin' up on his hind laigs right behind you!"

"Aw, that ain't no b'ar," says she. "That there's Breckinridge Elkins, from up in Nevady. He's goin' to help us fight the Barlows."

We went on into a room where they was a candle on the table, and they was nine or ten men there and thirty-odd women and chillern. They all looked kinda pale and scairt, and the men was loaded down with pistols and Winchesters.

They all looked at me kind of dumb-like, and the old man kept staring at me like he warn't any too sure he hadn't let a grizzly in the house, after all. He mumbled something about making a natural mistake, in the dark, and turnt to the gal, and demanded: "Whar's the boys I sent you after?"

And she says: "This gent mussed 'em up so's they ain't fitten for to fight. Now, don't git rambunctious, Pap. It war jest a honest mistake all around. He's our friend, and he's gunnin' for Dick Blanton."

"Ha! Dick Blanton!" snarled one of the men, lifting his Winchester. "Jest lemme line my sights on him! I'll cook his goose!"

"You won't, neither," I said. "He's got to go back to Bear Creek and marry my sister Elinor. Well," I says, "what's the campaign?"

"I don't figger they'll git here till well after midnight," said Old Man Warren. "All we can do is wait for 'em."

"You means you all sets here and waits till they comes and lays siege?" I says.

"What else?" says he. "Lissen here, young man, don't start tellin' me how to conduck a feud. I growed up in this here'n. It war in full swing when I was born, and I done spent my whole life carryin' it on."

"That's jest it," I snorted. "You lets these dern wars drag on for generations. Up in the Humbolts we bring sech things to a quick conclusion. Mighty nigh everybody up there come from Texas, original, and we fights our feuds Texas style, which is short and sweet--a feud which lasts ten years in Texas is a humdinger. We winds 'em up quick and in style. Where-at is this here cabin where the Barlows is gatherin'?"

"'Bout three mile over the ridge," says a young feller they called Bill.

"How many is they?" I ast.

"I counted seventeen," says he.

"Jest a fair-sized mouthful for a Elkins," I said. "Bill, you guide me to that there cabin. The rest of you can come or stay, it don't make no difference to me."

Well, they started jawing with each other then. Some was for going and some for staying. Some wanted to go with me, and try to take the Barlows by surprise, but the others said it couldn't be done--they'd git ambushed theirselves, and the only sensible thing to be did was to stay forted and wait for the Barlows to come. They given me no more heed--jest sot there and augered.

But that was all right with me. Right in the middle of the dispute, when it looked like maybe the Warrens would get to fighting among theirselves and finish each other before the Barlows could get there, I lit out with the boy Bill, which seemed to have considerable sense for a Warren.

He got him a hoss out of the hidden corral, and I got Cap'n Kidd, which was a good thing. He'd somehow got a mule by the neck, and the critter was almost at its last gasp when I rescued it. Then me and Bill lit out.

We follered winding paths over thick-timbered mountainsides till at last we come to a clearing and they was a cabin there, with light and profanity pouring out of the winders. We'd been hearing the last mentioned for half a mile before we sighted the cabin.

We left our hosses back in the woods a ways, and snuck up on foot and stopped amongst the trees back of the cabin.

"They're in there tankin' up on corn licker to whet their appertites for Warren blood!" whispered Bill, all in a shiver. "Lissen to 'em! Them fellers ain't hardly human! What you goin' to do? They got a man standin' guard out in front of the door at the other end of the cabin. You see they ain't no doors nor winders at the back. They's winders on each side, but if we try to rush it from the front or either side, they'll see us and fill us full of lead before we could git in a shot. Look! The moon's comin' up. They'll be startin' on their raid before long."

I'll admit that cabin looked like it was going to be harder to storm than I'd figgered. I hadn't had no idee in mind when I sot out for the place. All I wanted was to get in amongst them Barlows--I does my best fighting at close quarters. But at the moment I couldn't think of no way that wouldn't get me shot up. Of course I could jest rush the cabin, but the thought of seventeen Winchesters blazing away at me from close range was a little stiff even for me, though I was game to try it, if they warn't no other way.

Whilst I was studying over the matter, all to onst the hosses tied out in front of the cabin snorted, and back up in the hills something went Oooaaaw-w-w! And a idee hit me.

"Git back in the woods and wait for me," I told Bill, as I headed for the thicket where we'd left the hosses.

I rode up in the hills towards where the howl had come from, and purty soon I lit and throwed Cap'n Kidd's reins over his head, and walked on into the deep bresh, from time to time giving a long squall like a cougar. They ain't a catamount in the world can tell the difference when a Bear Creek man imitates one. After awhile one answered, from a ledge jest a few hundred feet away.

I went to the ledge and clumb up on it, and there was a small cave behind it, and a big mountain lion in there. He give a grunt of surprise when he seen I was a human, and made a swipe at me, but I give him a bat on the head with my fist, and whilst he was still dizzy I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hauled him out of the cave and lugged him down to where I left my hoss.

Cap'n Kidd snorted when he seen the cougar and wanted to kick his brains out, but I give him a good kick in the stummick hisself, which is the only kind of reasoning Cap'n Kidd understands, and got on him and headed for the Barlow hangout.

I can think of a lot more pleasant jobs than totin' a full-growed mountain lion down a thick-timbered mountainside on the back of a iron-jawed outlaw at midnight. I had the cat by the back of the neck with one hand, so hard he couldn't squall, and I held him out at arm's length as far from me and the hoss as I could, but every now and then he'd twist around so he could claw Cap'n Kidd with his hind laigs, and when this would happen Cap'n Kidd would squall with rage and start bucking all over the place. Sometimes he would buck the derned cougar onto me, and pulling him loose from my hide was wuss'll pulling cockle-burrs out of a cow's tail.

But presently I arriv close behind the cabin. I whistled like a whippoorwill for Bill, but he didn't answer and warn't nowheres to be seen, so I decided he'd got scairt and pulled out for home. But that was all right with me. I'd come to fight the Barlows, and I aimed to fight 'em, with or without assistance. Bill would jest of been in the way.

I got off in the trees back of the cabin and throwed the reins over Cap'n Kidd's head, and went up to the back of the cabin on foot, walking soft and easy. The moon was well up, by now, and what wind they was, was blowing towards me, which pleased me, because I didn't want the hosses tied out in front to scent the cat and start cutting up before I was ready.

The fellers inside was still cussing and talking loud as I approached one of the winders on the side, and one hollered out: "Come on! Le's git started! I craves Warren gore!" And about that time I give the cougar a heave and throwed him through the winder.

He let out a awful squall as he hit, and the fellers in the cabin hollered louder'n he did. Instantly a most awful bustle broke loose in there and of all the whooping and bellering and shooting I ever heard, and the lion squalling amongst it all, and clothes and hides tearing so you could hear it all over the clearing, and the hosses busting loose and tearing out through the bresh.

As soon as I hove the cat I run around to the door and a man was standing there with his mouth open, too surprised at the racket to do anything. So I taken his rifle away from him and broke the stock off on his head, and stood there at the door with the barrel intending to brain them Barlows as they run out. I was plumb certain they would run out, because I have noticed that the average man is funny that way, and hates to be shet up in a cabin with a mad cougar as bad as the cougar would hate to be shet up in a cabin with a infuriated settler of Bear Creek.

But them scoundrels fooled me. 'Pears like they had a secret door in the back wall, and whilst I was waiting for them to storm out through the front door and get their skulls cracked, they knocked the secret door open and went piling out that way.

By the time I realized what was happening and run around to the other end of the cabin, they was all out and streaking for the trees, yelling blue murder, with their clothes all tore to shreds and them bleeding like stuck hawgs.

That there catamount sure improved the shining hours whilst he was corralled with them Barlows. He come out after 'em with his mouth full of the seats of their britches, and when he seen me he give a kind of despairing yelp and taken out up the mountain with his tail betwixt his laigs like the devil was after him with a red-hot branding iron.

I taken after the Barlows, sot on scuttling at least a few of 'em, and I was on the p'int of letting bam at 'em with my six-shooters as they run, when, jest as they reched the trees, all the Warren men riz out of the bresh and fell on 'em with piercing howls.

That fray was kind of pecooliar. I don't remember a single shot being fired. The Barlows had all dropped their guns in their flight, and the Warrens seemed bent on wiping out their wrongs with their bare fists and gun butts. For a few seconds they was a hell of a scramble--men cussing and howling and bellering, and rifle-stocks cracking over heads, and the bresh crashing underfoot, and then before I could get into it, the Barlows broke every which-way and took out through the woods like jack-rabbits squalling Jedgment Day.

Old Man Warren come prancing out of the bresh waving his Winchester and his beard flying in the moonlight and he hollered: "The sins of the wicked shall return onto 'em! Elkins, we have hit a powerful lick for righteousness this here night!"

"Where'd you all come from?" I ast. "I thought you was still back in yore cabin chawin' the rag."

"Well," he says, "after you pulled out we decided to trail along and see how you come out with whatever you planned. As we come through the woods expectin' to git ambushed every second, we met Bill here who told us he believed you had a idee of circumventin' them devils, though he didn't know what it war. So we come on and hid ourselves at the aidge of the trees to see what'd happen. I see we been too timid in our dealin's with these heathens. We been lettin' 'em force the fightin' too long. You was right. A good offence is the best defence."

"We didn't kill any of the varmints, wuss luck, but we give 'em a prime lickin'. Hey, look there!" he hollered. "The boys has caught one of the critters! Lug him into the cabin, boys!"

They done so, and by the time me and the old man got there, they had the candles lit, and a rope around the Barlow's neck and one end throwed on a rafter.

That cabin was a sight, all littered with broke guns and splintered chairs and tables, and pieces of clothes and strips of hide. It looked jest about like a cabin ought to look where they has jest been a fight between seventeen polecats and a mountain lion. It was a dirt floor, and some of the poles which helped hold up the roof was splintered, so most of the weight was resting on a big post in the centre of the hut.

All the Warrens was crowding around their prisoner, and when I looked over their heads and seen the feller's pale face in the light of the candle I give a yell: "Dick Blanton!"

"So it is!" said Old Man Warren, rubbing his hands with glee. "So it is! Well, young feller, you got any last words to orate?"

"Naw," said Blanton sullenly. "But if it hadn't been for that derned lion spilin' our plans we'd of had you derned Warrens like so much pork. I never heard of a cougar jumpin' through a winder before."

"That there cougar didn't jump," I said, shouldering through the mob. "He was hev. I done the heavin'."

His mouth fell open and he looked at me like he'd saw the ghost of Sitting Bull. "Breckinridge Elkins!" says he. "I'm cooked now, for sure!"

"I'll say you air!" gritted the feller who'd yearned to shoot Blanton earlier in the night. "What we waitin' for? Le's string him up."

"Hold on," I said. "You all cain't hang him. I'm goin' to take him back to Bear Creek."

"You ain't neither," says Old Man Warren. "We're much obleeged to you for the help you've give us tonight, but this here is the first chance we've had to hang a Barlow in fifteen year, and we aims to make the most of it. String him, boys!"

"Stop!" I roared, stepping for'ard.

In a second I was covered by seven rifles, whilst three men laid hold of the rope and started to heave Blanton's feet off the floor. Them seven Winchesters didn't stop me. I'd of taken them guns away and wiped up the floor with them ongrateful mavericks, but I was afeared Blanton might get hit in the wild shooting that was certain to accompany it.

What I wanted to do was something which would put 'em all horse-de-combat, as the French say, without getting Blanton killed. So I laid hold on the center post and before they knowed what I was doing, I tore it loose and broke it off, and the roof caved in and the walls fell inwards on the roof.

In a second they warn't no cabin at all--jest a pile of timber with the Warrens all underneath and screaming blue murder. Of course I jest braced my laigs and when the roof fell my head busted a hole through it, and the logs of the falling walls hit my shoulders and glanced off, so when the dust settled I was standing waist-deep amongst the rooins and nothing but a few scratches to show for it.

The howls that riz from beneath the rooins was blood-curdling, but I knowed nobody was hurt permanent because if they was they wouldn't be able to howl like that. But I expect some of 'em would of been hurt if my head and shoulders hadn't kind of broke the fall of the roof and wall-logs.

I located Blanton by his voice, and pulled pieces of roof board and logs off him until I came onto his laig, and I pulled him out by it and laid him on the ground to get his wind back, because a beam had fell acrost his stummick and when he tried to holler he made the funniest noise I ever heard.

I then kind of rooted around amongst the debris and hauled Old Man Warren out, and he seemed kind of dazed and kept talking about earthquakes.

"You better git to work extricatin' yore misguided kin from under them logs," I told him sternly. "After that there display of ingratitude I got no sympathy for you. In fact, if I was a short-tempered man I'd feel inclined to vi'lence. But bein' the soul of kindness and generosity, I controls my emotions and merely remarks that if I wasn't mild-mannered as a lamb, I'd hand you a boot in the pants--like this!"

I showed him how I meant.

"Owww!" wails he, sailing through the air and sticking his nose to the hilt in the dirt.

"I'll have the law on you, you derned murderer!" he wept, shaking his fists at me, and as I departed with my captive I could hear him chanting a hymn of hate as he pulled logs off of his bellering relatives.

Blanton was trying to say something, but I told him I warn't in no mood for perlite conversation and the less he said the less likely I was to lose my temper and tie his neck into a knot around a blackjack. I was thinking how the last time I seen Glory McGraw I told her I was faring forth to find me a town-gal, and now instead of bringing a wife back to Bear Creek, I was bringing back a brother-in-law. My relatives, I reflected bitterly, was sure playing hell with my matrimonial plans. Looked like I warn't never going to get started on my own affairs.

Cap'n Kidd made the hundred miles from the Mezquital Mountains to Bear Creek by noon the next day, carrying double, and never stopping to eat, sleep, nor drink. Them that don't believe that kindly keep their mouths shet. I have already licked nineteen men for acting like they didn't believe it.

I stalked into the cabin and throwed Dick Blanton down onto the floor before Elinor which looked at him and me like she thought I was crazy.

"What you finds attractive about this coyote," I said bitterly, "is beyond the grasp of my dust-coated brain. But here he is, and you can marry him right away."

She said: "Air you drunk or sunstruck? Marry that good-for-nothin', whisky-swiggin', kyard-shootin' loafer? Why, it ain't been a week since I run him out of the house with a broom-handle."

"Then he didn't jilt you?" I gasped.

"Him jilt me?" she said. "I jilted him!"

I turned to Dick Blanton more in sorrer than in anger.

"Why," said I, "did you boast all over Grizzly Run about jiltin' Elinor Elkins?"

"I didn't want folks to know she turned me down," he said sullenly. "Us Blantons is proud. The only reason I ever thought about marryin' her was I was ready to settle down on the farm pap gave me, and I wanted to marry me a Elkins gal, so I wouldn't have to go to the expense of hirin' a couple of hands and buyin' a span of mules, and--"

They ain't no use in Dick Blanton threatening to have the law onto me. He got off light to what he'd have got if pap and my brothers hadn't all been off hunting. They've got terrible tempers. But I was always too soft-hearted for my own good. In spite of Dick Blanton's insults I held my temper. I didn't do nothing to him at all, except escort him with dignity for five or six miles down the Chawed Ear trail, kicking him in the seat of his britches.

Chapter VII - THE ROAD TO BEAR CREEK

AS I come back up the trail after escorting Dick Blanton down it, I got nervous as I approached the p'int where the path that run from the McGraw cabin came out into it. If they was anybody I in the world right then I didn't want to meet, it was Glory McGraw. I got past and hove a sigh of relief, and jest as I done so, I heard a hoss, and looked back and she was riding out of the path.

I taken to the bresh and to my rage she spurred her hoss and come after me. She was on a fast cayuse, but I thought if I keep my lead I'd be all right, because soon I'd be in the dense thickets where she couldn't come a-hossback. I speeded up, because I'd had about all of her rawhiding I could endure. And then, as I was looking back over my shoulder, I run right smack into a low-hanging oak limb and nearly knocked my brains out. When things stopped spinning around me, I was setting on the ground, and Glory McGraw was setting on her hoss looking down at me.

"Why, Breckinridge," she says mockingly. "Air in you scairt of me? What you want to run from me for?"

"I warn't runnin' from you," I growled, glaring up at her. "I didn't even know you was anywheres around. I seen one of pap's steers sneakin' off in the bresh, and I was tryin' to head him. Now you done scairt him I away!"

I riz and breshed the dust offa my clothes with my I hat, and she says: "I been hearin' a lot about you, Breckinridge. Seems like yo're gittin' to be quite a famous man."

"Hmmmm!" I says, suspicious.

"But where, Breckinridge," she cooed, leaning over the saddle horn towards me, "where is that there purty town-gal you was goin' to bring back to Bear Creek as yore blushin' bride?"

"We ain't sot the day yet," I muttered, looking off.

"Is she purty, Breckinridge?" she pursued.

"Purty as a pitcher," I says. "They ain't a gal on Bear Creek can hold a candle to her."

"Where's she live?" ast Glory.

"War Paint," I said, that being the first town that come into my mind.

"What's her name, Breckinridge?" ast Glory, and I couldn't think of a gal's name if I'd knowed I was going to be shot.

I stammered and floundered, and whilst I was trying my damndest to think of some name to give her, she bust into laughter.

"What a lover you be!" says she. "Cain't even remember the name of the gal yo're goin' to marry--you air goin' to marry her, ain't you, Breckinridge?"

"Yes, I am!" I roared. "I have got a gal in War Paint! I'm goin' to see her right now, soon as I can git back to my corral and saddle my hoss! What d'you think of that, Miss Smarty?"

"I think yo're the biggest liar on Bear Creek!" says she, with a mocking laugh, and reined around and rode off whilst I stood in helpless rage. "Give my regards to yore War Paint sweetheart, Breckinridge!" she called back over her shoulder. "Soon as you remember what her name is!"

I didn't say nothing. I was past talking. I was too full of wishing that Glory McGraw was a man for jest about five minutes. She was clean out of sight before I could even see straight, much less talk or think reasonable. I give a maddened roar and ripped a limb off a tree as big as a man's laig and started thrashing down the bresh all around, whilst chawing the bark offa all the trees I could rech, and by the time I had cooled off a little that thicket looked like a cyclone had hit it. But I felt a little better and I headed for home on the run, cussing a blue streak and the bobcats and painters taken to the high ridges as I come.

I made for the corral, and as I come out into the clearing I heard a beller like a mad bull up at the cabin, and seen my brothers Buckner and Garfield and John and Bill run out of the cabin and take to the woods, so I figgered pap must be having a touch of the rheumatiz. It makes him remarkable peevish. But I went on and saddled Cap'n Kidd. I was determined to make good on what I told Glory. I didn't have no gal in War Paint, but by golly, I aimed to, and this time I warn't to be turnt aside. I was heading for War Paint, and I was going to get me a gal if I had to lick the entire town.

Well, jest as I was leading Cap'n Kidd outa the corral, my sister Brazoria come to the door of the cabin and hollered: "Oh, Breckinridge! Come up to the shack! Pap wants you!"

"--!" says. "What the hell now?"

I went up to the cabin and tied Cap'n Kidd and went in. At first glance I seen pap had past the peevish stage and was having a remorseful spell. Rheumatism effects him that way. But the remorse is always for something that happened a long time ago. He didn't seem a bit regretful for having busted a ox-yoke over brother Garfield's head that morning.

He was laying on his b'ar-skin with a jug of corn licker at his elbow, and he says: "Breckinridge, the sins of my youth is ridin' my conscience heavy. When I was a young man I was free and keerless in my habits, as numerous tombstones on the boundless prairies testifies. I sometimes wonders if I warn't a trifle hasty in shootin' some of the gents which disagreed with my principles. Maybe I should of controlled my passion and jest chawed their ears off.

"Take Uncle Esau Grimes, for instance." And then pap hove a sigh like a bull, and said: "I ain't seen Uncle Esau for many years. Me and him parted with harsh words and gun-smoke. I've often wondered if he still holds a grudge agen me for plantin' that charge of buckshot in his hind laig."

"What about Uncle Esau?" I said.

Pap perjuiced a letter and said: "He was brung to my mind by this here letter which Jim Braxton fotched me from War Paint. It's from my sister Elizabeth, back in Devilville, Arizona, whar Uncle Esau lives. She says Uncle Esau is on his way to Californy, and is due to pass through War Paint about the tenth--that's tomorrer. She don't know whether he intends turnin' off to see me or not, but suggests that I meet him at War Paint, and make peace with him."

"Well?" I demanded, because from the way pap combed his beard with his fingers and eyed me, I knowed he was aiming to call on me to do something for him.

"Well," said pap, taking a long swig out of the jug, "I want you to meet the stage tomorrer mornin' at War Paint, and invite Uncle Esau to come up here and visit us. Don't take no for a answer. Uncle Esau is as cranky as hell, and a pecooliar old duck, but I think he'll like you. Specially if you keep yore mouth shet and don't expose yore ignorance."

"Well," I said, "for onst the job you've sot for me falls in with my own plans. I was just fixin' to light out for War Paint. But how'm I goin' to know Uncle Esau? I ain't never seen him."

"He ain't a big man," said pap. "Last time I seen him he had a right smart growth of red whiskers. You bring him home regardless. Don't pay no attention to his belly-achin'. He's awful suspicious because he's got lots of enemies. He burnt plenty of powder in his younger days, all the way from Texas to Californy. He war mixed up in more feuds and range-wars than any man I ever knowed. He's supposed to have considerable money hid away somewheres, but that ain't got nothin' to do with us. I wouldn't take his blasted money as a gift. All I want to do is talk to him, and git his forgiveness for fillin' his hide with buckshot in a moment of youthful passion.

"If he don't forgive me," says pap, taking another pull at his jug, "I'll bend my .45 over his stubborn old skull. Git goin'."

So I hit out acrost the mountains, and the next morning found me eating breakfast at the aidge of War Paint, with a old hunter and trapper by the name of old Bill Polk which was camped there temporary.

War Paint was a new town which had sprung up out of nothing on account of a gold rush right recent, and old Bill was very bitter.

"A hell of a come-off this is!" he snorted. "Clutterin' up the scenery and scarin' the animals off with their fool houses and claims. Last year I shot deer right whar that saloon yonder stands now," he said, glaring at me like it was my fault.

I said nothing but chawed my venison which we was cooking over his fire, and he said: "No good'll come of it, you mark my word. These mountains won't be fit to live in. These camps draws scum like a dead hoss draws buzzards. The outlaws is already ridin' in from Arizona and Utah and Californy, besides the native ones. Grizzly Hawkins and his thieves is hidin' up in the hills, and no tellin' how many more'll come in. I'm glad they cotched Badger Chisom and his gang after they robbed that bank at Gunstock. That's one gang which won't bedevil us, becaze they're in jail. If somebody'd jest kill Grizzly Hawkins, now--"

"Who's that gal?" I ejaculated suddenly, forgetting to eat in my excitement.

"Who? Whar?" says old Bill, looking around. "Oh, that gal jest goin' by the Golden Queen restaurant? Aw, that's Dolly Rixby, the belle of the town."

"She's awful purty," I says.

"You never seen a purtier," says he.

"I have, too," I says absent-mindedly. "Glory McGraw--" Then I kind of woke up to what I was saying and flang my breakfast into the fire in disgust. "Sure, she's the purtiest gal I ever seen!" I snorted. "Ain't a gal in the Humbolts can hold a candle to her. What you say her name was? Dolly Rixby? A right purty name, too."

"You needn't start castin' sheep's eyes at her," he opined. "They's a dozen young bucks sparkin' her already. I think Blink Wiltshaw's the favorite to put his brand onto her, though. She wouldn't look at a hillbilly like you."

"I might remove the competition," I suggested.

"You better not try no Bear Creek rough-stuff in War Paint," says he. "The town's jest reekin' with law and order. Why, I actually hear they ups and puts you in jail if you shoots a man within the city limits."

I was scandalized. Later I found out that was jest a slander started by the citizens of Chawed Ear which was jealous of War Paint, but at the time I was so upsot by this information I was almost afeared to go into town for fear I'd get arrested.

"Where's Miss Rixby goin' with that bucket?" I ast him.

"She's takin' a bucket of beer to her old man which is workin' a claim up the creek," says old Bill.

"Well, lissen," I says. "You git over there behind that thicket, and when she comes by, make a noise like a Injun."

"What kind of damfoolishness is this?" he demanded. "You want me to stampede the whole camp?"

"Don't make a loud noise," I said. "Jest make it loud enough for her to hear."

"Air you crazy?" he ast.

"No, dern it!" I said fiercely, because she was coming along stepping purty fast. "Git in there and do like I say. I'll rush up from the other side and pertend to rescue her from the Injuns and that'll make her like me. Gwan!"

"I mistrusts yo're a blasted fool," he grumbled. "But I'll do it." He snuck into the thicket which she'd have to pass on the other side, and I circled around so she wouldn't see me till I was ready to rush out and I save her from being sculped. Well, I warn't hardly in position when I heard a kind of mild war-whoop, and it sounded jest like a Blackfoot, only not so loud.

But imejitly there come the crack of a pistol and another yell which warn't subdued like the first. It was lusty and energetic. I run towards the thicket, but before I could get into the open trail, old Bill come piling out of the back side of the clump with his hands to the seat of his britches.

"You planned this a-purpose, you snake in the grass!" he yelped. "Git outa my way!"

"Why, Bill," I says. "What happened?"

"I bet you knowed she had a derringer in her stockin'," he snarled as he run past me. "It's all yore fault! When I whooped, she pulled it and shot into the bresh! Don't speak to me! I'm lucky to be alive. I'll git even with you for this if it takes a hundred years!"

He headed on into the deep bresh, and I run around the thicket and seen Dolly Rixby peering into it with her gun smoking in her hand. She looked up as I come onto the trail, and I taken off my hat and said, perlite: "Howdy, miss; can I be of no assistance to you?"

"I jest shot a Injun," she said. "I heard him holler. You might go in there and git the sculp, if you don't mind. I'd like to have it for a soovenir."

"I'll be glad to, miss," I says heartily. "I'll likewise cure and tan it for you myself."

"Oh, thank you!" she says, dimpling when she smiled. "It's a pleasure to meet a real gent like you."

"The pleasure is all mine," I assured her, and went into the bresh and stomped around a little, and then come out and says: "I'm awful sorry, miss, but the critter ain't nowheres to be found. You must of jest winged him. If you want me to I'll take his trail and foller it till I catch up with him, though."

"Oh, I wouldn't think of puttin' you to no sech trouble," she says much to my relief, because I was jest thinking that if she did demand a sculp, the only thing I could do would be to catch old Bill and sculp him, and I'd hate awful bad to have to do that.

But she looked me over with admiration in her eyes, and said: "I'm Dolly Rixby. Who're you?"

"I knowed you the minute I seen you," I says. "The fame of yore beauty has reched clean into the Humbolts. I'm Breckinridge Elkins."

Her eyes kind of sparkled, and she said: "I've heard of you, too! You broke Cap'n Kidd, and it was you that cleaned up Wampum!"

"Yes'm," I says, and jest then I seen the stagecoach fogging it down the road from the east, and I says: "Say, I got to meet that there stage, but I'd like to call on you at yore convenience."

"Well," she says, "I'll be back at the cabin in about a hour. What's the matter with then? I live about ten rods north of The Red Rooster gamblin' hall."

"I'll be there," I promised, and she gimme a dimply smile and went on down the trail with her old man's bucket of beer, and I hustled back to where I left Cap'n Kidd. My head was in a whirl, and my heart was pounding. And here, thinks I, is where I show Glory McGraw what kind of stuff a Elkins is made of. Jest wait till I ride back to Bear Creek with Dolly Rixby as my bride!

I rode into War Paint just as the stage pulled up at the stand, which was also the post office and a saloon. They was three passengers, and they warn't none of 'em tenderfeet. Two was big hard-looking fellers, and t'other'n was a wiry oldish kind of a bird with red whiskers, so I knowed right off it was Uncle Esau Grimes. They was going into the saloon as I dismounted, the big men first, and the older feller follering 'em. Thinks I, I'll start him on his way to Bear Creek, and then I'll come back and start sparking Dolly Rixby.

I touched him on the shoulder, and he whirled most amazing quick with a gun in his hand, and he looked at me very suspicious, and said: "What you want?"

"I'm Breckinridge Elkins," I said. "I want you to come with me. I recognized you as soon as I seen you--"

I then got a awful surprise, but not as sudden as it would have been if pap hadn't warned me that Uncle Esau was pecooliar. He hollered: "Bill! Jim! Help!" And swung his six-shooter agen my head with all his might.

The other two fellers whirled and their hands streaked for their guns, so I knocked Uncle Esau flat to keep him from getting hit by a stray slug, and shot one of 'em through the shoulder before he could unlimber his artillery. T'other'n grazed my neck with a bullet, so I perforated him in the arm and the hind laig and he fell down acrost the other'n. I was careful not to shoot 'em in no vital parts, because I seen they was friends of Uncle Esau; but when guns is being drawn it ain't no time to argy or explain.

Men was hollering and running out of saloons, and I stooped and started to lift Uncle Esau, who was kind of groggy because he'd hit his head agen a hitching post. He was crawling around on his all-fours cussing something terrible, and trying to find his gun which he'd dropped. When I laid hold onto him he commenced biting and kicking and hollering, and I said: "Don't ack like that, Uncle Esau. Here comes a lot of fellers, and the sheriff may be here any minute and 'rest me for shootin' them idjits. We got to git goin'. Pap's waitin' for you, up on Bear Creek."

But he jest fit that much harder and hollered that much louder, so I scooped him up bodily and jumped onto Cap'n Kidd and throwed Uncle Esau face down acrost the saddle-bow, and headed for the hills. A lot of men yelled at me to stop, and some of 'em started shooting at me, but I give no heed.

I give Cap'n Kidd the rein and we went tearing down the road and around the first bend, and I didn't even take time to change Uncle Esau's position, because I didn't want to get arrested. A fat chance I had of keeping my date with Dolly Rixby. I wonder if anybody ever had sech cussed relatives as me.

Jest before we reched the p'int where the Bear Creek trail runs into the road, I seen a man on the road ahead of me, and he must have heard the shooting and Uncle Esau yelling because he whirled his hoss and blocked the road. He was a wiry old cuss with grey whiskers.

"Where you goin' with that man?" he yelled as I approached at a thundering gait.

"None of yore business," I retorted. "Git outa my way."

"Help! Help!" hollered Uncle Esau. "I'm bein' kidnapped and murdered!"

"Drop that man, you derned outlaw!" roared the stranger, suiting his actions to his words.

Him and me drawed simultaneous, but my shot was a split-second quicker'n his'n. His slug fanned my ear, but his hat flew off and he pitched out of his saddle like he'd been hit with a hammer. I seen a streak of red along his temple as I thundered past him.

"Let that larn you not to interfere in family affairs!" I roared, and turned up the trail that switched off the road and up into the mountains.

"Don't never yell like that," I said irritably to Uncle Esau. "You like to got me shot. That feller thought I was a criminal."

I didn't catch what he said, but I looked back and down over the slopes and shoulders, and seen men boiling out of town full tilt, and the sun glinted on six-shooters and rifles, so I urged on Cap'n Kidd and we covered the next few miles at a fast clip.

Uncle Esau kept trying to talk, but he was bouncing up and down so all I could understand was his cuss words, which was free and fervent. At last he gasped: "For God's sake lemme git off this cussed saddle-horn; it's rubbin' a hole in my belly."

So I pulled up and seen no sign of my pursuers, so I said: "All right, you can ride in the saddle and I'll set on behind. I was goin' to hire you a hoss at the livery stable, but we had to leave so quick they warn't no time."

"Where you takin' me?" he demanded.

"To Bear Creek," I said. "Where you think?"

"I don't wanta go to Bear Creek," he said fiercely. "I ain't goin' to Bear Creek."

"You are, too," I said. "Pap said not to take no for a answer. I'm goin' to slide over behind the saddle, and you can set in it."

So I pulled my feet outa the stirrups and moved over the cantle, and he slid into the seat--and the first thing I knowed he had a knife out of his boot and was trying to kyarve my gizzard.

Now I likes to humor my relatives, but they is a limit to everything. I taken the knife away from him, but in the struggle, me being handicapped by not wanting to hurt him, I lost hold of the reins and Cap'n Kidd bolted and run for several miles through the pines and bresh. What with me trying to grab the reins and keep Uncle Esau from killing me at the same time, and neither one of us in the stirrups, finally we both fell off, and if I hadn't managed to catch hold of the bridle as I went off, we'd had a long walk ahead of us.

I got Cap'n Kidd stopped, after being drug for about seventy-five yards, and then I went back to where Uncle Esau was laying on the ground trying to get his wind back, because I had kind of fell on him.

"Is that any way to ack, tryin' to stick a knife in a man which is doin' his best to make you comfortable?" I said reproachfully. All he done was gasp, so I said: "Well, pap told me you was a cranky old duck, so I reckon the only thing to do is to jest not notice yore pecooliarities."

I looked around to get my bearings, because Cap'n Kidd had got away off the trail. We was west of it, in very wild country, but I seen a cabin off through the trees, and I said: "We'll go over there and see can I buy or hire a hoss for you to ride. That'll be more convenient for both of us."

I h'isted him back into the saddle, and he said kind of dizzily: "This here's a free country. I don't have to go to Bear Creek if'n I don't want to."

"Well," I said severely, "you oughta want to, after all the trouble I've went to, comin' and invitin' you, and passin' up a date with the purtiest gal in War Paint on account of you. Set still now. I'm settin' on behind but I'm holdin' the reins."

"I'll have yore life for this," he promised blood-thirstily, but I ignored it, because pap had said Uncle Esau was pecooliar.

Purty soon we hove up to the cabm I'd glimpsed through the trees. Nobody was in sight, but I seen a hoss tied to a tree in front of the cabin. I rode up to the door and knocked, but nobody answered. But I seen smoke coming out of the chimney, so I decided I'd go in.

I dismounted and lifted Uncle Esau off, because I seen from the gleam in his eye that he was intending to run off on Cap'n Kidd if I give him half a chance. I got a firm grip onto his collar, because I was determined that he was going to visit us up on Bear Creek if I had to tote him on my shoulder all the way, and I went into the cabin with him.

They warn't nobody in there, though a big pot of beans was simmering over some coals in the fireplace, and I seen some rifles in racks on the wall and a belt with two pistols hanging on a peg.

Then I heard somebody walking behind the cabin, and the back door opened and there stood a big, black-whiskered man with a bucket of water in his hand and a astonished glare on his face. He didn't have no guns on.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, but Uncle Esau give a kind of gurgle, and said: "Grizzly Hawkins!"

The big man jumped and glared at Uncle Esau, and then his black whiskers bristled in a ferocious grin, and he said: "Oh, it's you, is it? Who'd of thunk I'd ever meet you here?"

"Grizzly Hawkins, hey?" I said, realizing that I'd stumbled onto the hideout of the wust outlaw in them mountains. "So you-all know each other?"

"I'll say we do!" rumbled Hawkins, looking at Uncle Esau like a wolf looks at a fat yearling.

"I'd heard you was from Arizona," I said, being naturally tactful. "Looks to me like they's enough cow-thieves in these hills already without outsiders buttin' in. But yore morals ain't none of my business. I want to buy or hire or borrer a hoss for this here gent to ride."

"Oh, no, you ain't!" said Grizzly. "You think I'm goin' to let a fortune slip through my fingers like that? Tell you what I'll do, though: I'll split with you. My gang had business over towards Chawed Ear this momin', but they're due back soon. Me and you will work him over before they gits back, and we'll nab all the loot ourselves."

"What you mean?" I ast. "My uncle and me is on our way to Bear Creek--"

"Aw, don't ack innercent with me!" he snorted disgustedly. "Uncle! Hell! You think I'm a plumb fool? Cain't I see he's yore prisoner, the way you got him by the neck? Think I don't know what yo're up to? Be reasonable. Two can work this job better'n one. I know lots of ways to make a man talk. I betcha if we kinda massage his hinder parts with a red-hot brandin'

iron he'll tell us quick enough where the money is hid."

Uncle Esau turnt pale under his whiskers, and I said indignantly: "Why, you low-lifed polecat! You got the crust to pertend to think I'm kidnappin' my own uncle for his dough? I got a good mind to shoot you."

"So yo're greedy, hey?" he snarled, showing his teeth. "Want all the loot yoreself, hey? I'll show you!" And quick as a cat he swung that water bucket over his head and let it go at me. I ducked and it hit Uncle Esau in the head and stretched him out all drenched with water, and Hawkins give a roar and dived for a .45-90 on the wall. He wheeled with it and I shot it out of his hands. He then come for me wild-eyed with a bowie out of his boot, and my next cartridge snapped, and he was on top of me before I could cock my gun again.

I dropped it and grappled with him, and we fit all over the cabin and every now and then we would tromple on Uncle Esau which was trying to crawl towards the door, and the way he would holler was pitiful to hear.

Hawkins lost his knife in the melee, but he was as big as me, and a bear-cat at rough-and-tumble. We would stand up and whale away with both fists, and then clinch and roll around the floor, biting and gouging and slugging, and onst we rolled clean over Uncle Esau and kind of flattened him out like a pancake.

Finally Hawkins got hold of the table which he lifted like it was a board and splintered over my head, and this made me mad, so I grabbed the pot off the fire and hit him in the head with it, and about a gallon of red-hot beans went down his back and he fell into a corner so hard he jolted the shelves loose from the logs, and all the guns fell off the walls.

He come up with a gun in his hand, but his eyes was so full of blood and hot beans that he missed me the first shot, and before he could shoot again I hit him on the chin so hard it fractured his jaw bone and sprained both his ankles and laid him out cold.

Then I looked around for Uncle Esau, and he was gone and the front door was open. I rushed out of the cabin and there he was jest climbing aboard Cap'n Kidd. I hollered for him to wait, but he kicked Cap'n Kidd in the ribs and went tearing off through the trees. Only he didn't head north back towards War Paint. He was p'inted south-east, in the general direction of Hideout Mountain. I grabbed my gun up off the floor and lit out after him, though I didn't have much hope of catching him. Grizzly's cayuse was a good hoss, but he couldn't hold a candle to Cap'n Kidd.

I wouldn't have caught him, neither, if it hadn't been for Cap'n Kidd's determination not to be rode by nobody but me. Uncle Esau was a crack hossman to stay on as long as he did.

But finally Cap'n Kidd got tired of sech foolishness, and about the time he crossed the trail we'd been follerin' when he first bolted, he bogged his head and started busting hisself in two, with his snoot rubbing the grass and his heels scraping the clouds offa the sky.

I could see mountain peaks between Uncle Esau and the saddle, and when Cap'n Kidd start sunfishing it looked like the wrath of Jedgment Day, but somehow Uncle Esau managed to stay with him till Cap'n Kidd plumb left the earth like he aimed to aviate from then on, and Uncle Esau left the saddle with a shriek of despair and sailed head-on into a blackjack thicket.

Cap'n Kidd give a snort of contempt and trotted off to a patch of grass and started grazing, and I dismounted and went and ontangled Uncle Esau from amongst the branches. His clothes was tore and he was scratched so he looked like he'd been fighting with a drove of wildcats, and he left a right smart bunch of his whiskers amongst the bresh.

But he was full of pizen and hostility.

"I understand this here treatment," he said bitterly, like he blamed me for Cap'n Kidd pitching him into the thicket, "but you'll never git a penny. Nobody but me knows whar the dough is, and you can pull my toe nails out by the roots before I tells you."

"I know you got money hid away," I said, deeply offended, "but I don't want it."

He snorted skeptical and said sarcastic: "Then what're you draggin' me over these cussed hills for?"

"'Cause pap wants to see you," I said. "But they ain't no use in askin' me a lot of fool questions. Pap said for me to keep my mouth shet."

I looked around for Grizzly's hoss, and seen he had wandered off. He sure hadn't been trained proper.

"Now I got to go look for him," I said disgustedly. "Will you stay here till I git back?"

"Sure," he said. "Sure. Go on and look for the hoss. I'll wait here."

But I give him a searching look, and shook my head.

"I don't want to seem like I mistrusts you," I said, "but I see a gleam in yore eye which makes me believe that you intends to run off the minute my back's turned. I hate to do this, but I got to bring you safe to Bear Creek; so I'll just kinda hawg-tie you with my lariat till I git back."

Well, he put up a awful holler, but I was firm, and when I rode off on Cap'n Kidd I was satisfied that he couldn't untie them knots by hisself. I left him laying in the grass beside the trail, and his language was painful to listen to.

That derned hoss had wandered farther'n I thought. He'd moved north along the trail for a short way, and then turned off and headed in a westerly direction, and after a while I heard hosses galloping somewheres behind me, and I got nervous, thinking what if Hawkins's gang had got back to their hangout and he'd told 'em about us, and sent 'em after us, to capture pore Uncle Esau and torture him to make him tell where his savings was hid. I wished I'd had sense enough to shove Uncle Esau back in the thicket so he wouldn't be seen by anybody riding along the trail, and I'd just decided to let the hoss go and turn back, when I seen him grazing amongst the trees ahead of me.

I caught him and headed back for the trail, aiming to hit it a short piece north of where I'd left Uncle Esau, and before I got in sight of it, I heard hosses and saddles creaking ahead of me.

I pulled up on the crest of a slope, and looked down onto the trail, and there I seen a gang of men riding north, and they had Uncle Esau amongst 'em. Two of the men was ridin' double, and they had him on a hoss in the middle of 'em. They'd took the ropes off'n him, but he didn't look happy. Instantly I realized that my premonishuns was correct. The Hawkins gang had follered us, and now pore Uncle Esau was in their clutches.

I let go of Hawkins's hoss and reched for my gun, but I didn't dare fire for fear of hitting Uncle Esau, they was clustered so clost about him. I reched up and tore a limb off a oak tree as big as my arm, and I charged down the slope yelling: "I'll save you, Uncle Esau!"

I come so sudden and onexpected them fellers didn't have time to do nothing but holler before I hit 'em. Cap'n Kidd ploughed through their hosses like a avalanche through saplings, and he was going so hard I couldn't check him in time to keep him from knocking Uncle Esau's hoss sprawling. Uncle Esau hit the turf with a shriek.

All around me men was yelling and surging and pulling guns and I riz in my stirrups and laid about me right and left, and pieces of bark and oak leaves and blood flew in showers and in a second the ground was littered with writhing figgers, and the hollering and cussing was awful to hear. Knives was flashing and pistols was banging, but them outlaws' eyes was too full of bark and stars and blood for them to aim, and right in the middle of the brawl, when the guns was roaring and hosses was neighing and men yelling and my oak-limb going crack! crack! crack! on their skulls, down from the north swooped another gang, howling like hyeners!

"There he is!" one of 'em yelled. "I see him crawlin' around under them hosses! After him, boys! We got as much right to his dough as anybody!"

The next minute they'd dashed in amongst us and embraced the members of the other gang and started hammering 'em over the heads with their pistols, and in a second there was the damndest three-cornered war you ever seen, men fighting on the ground and on the hosses, all mixed and tangled up, two gangs trying to exterminate each other, and me whaling hell out of both of 'em.

Meanwhile Uncle Esau was on the ground under us, yelling bloody murder and being stepped on by the hosses, but finally I cleared me a space with a devastating sweep of my club, and leaned down and scooped him up with one hand and hung him over my saddle horn and started battering my way clear.

But a big feller which was one of the second gang come charging through the melee yelling like a Injun, with blood running down his face from a cut in his scalp. He snapped a empty ca'tridge at me, and then leaned out from his saddle and grabbed Uncle Esau by the foot.

"Leggo!" he howled. "He's my meat!"

"Release Uncle Esau before I does you a injury!" I roared, trying to jerk Uncle Esau loose, but the outlaw hung on, and Uncle Esau squalled like a catamount in a wolf-trap. So I lifted what was left of my club and splintered it over the outlaw's head, and he give up the ghost with a gurgle. I then wheeled Cap'n Kidd and rode off like the wind. Them fellers was too busy fighting each other to notice my flight. Somebody did let bam at me with a Winchester, but all it done was to nick Uncle Esau's ear.

The sounds of carnage faded out behind us as I headed south along the trail. Uncle Esau was belly-aching about something. I never seen sech a cuss for finding fault, but I felt they was no time to be lost, so I didn't slow up for some miles. Then I pulled Cap'n Kidd down and said: "What did you say, Uncle Esau?"

"I'm a broken man!" he gasped. "Take my secret, and lemme go back to the posse. All I want now is a good, safe prison term."

"What posse?" I ast, thinking he must be drunk, though I couldn't figger where he could of got any booze.

"The posse you took me away from," he said. "Anything's better'n bein' dragged through these hellish mountains by a homicidal maneyack."

"Posse?" I gasped wildly. "But who was the second gang?"

"Grizzly Hawkins's outlaws," he said, and added bitterly: "Even they'd be preferable to what I been goin' through. I give up. I know when I'm licked. The dough's hid in a holler oak three miles west of Gunstock."

I didn't pay no attention to his remarks, because my head was in a whirl. A posse! Of course; the sheriff and his men had follered us from War Paint, along the Bear Creek trail, and finding Uncle Esau tied up, had thought he'd been kidnapped by a outlaw instead of merely being invited to visit his relatives. Probably he was too cussed ornery to tell 'em any different. I hadn't rescued him from no bandits; I'd took him away from a posse which thought they was rescuing him.

Meanwhile Uncle Esau was clamoring: "Well, why'n't you lemme go? I've told you whar the dough is. What else you want?"

"You got to go on to Bear Creek with me--" I begun; and Uncle Esau give a shriek and went into a kind of convulsion, and the first thing I knowed he'd twisted around and jerked my gun out of its scabbard and let bam! right in my face so close it singed my hair. I grabbed his wrist and Cap'n Kidd bolted like he always does whenever he gets the chance.

"They's a limit to everything!" I roared. "A hell of a relative you be, you old maneyack!"

We was tearing over slopes and ridges at breakneck speed and fighting all over Cap'n Kidd's back--me to get the gun away from him, and him to commit murder. "If you warn't kin to me, Uncle Esau," I said wrathfully, "I'd plumb lose my temper!"

"What you keep callin' me that fool name for?" he yelled, frothing at the mouth. "What you want to add insult to injury--" Cap'n Kidd swerved sudden and Uncle Esau tumbled over his neck. I had him by the shirt and tried to hold him on, but the shirt tore. He hit the ground on his head and Cap'n Kidd run right over him. I pulled up as quick as I could and hove a sigh of relief to see how close to home I was.

"We're nearly there, Uncle Esau," I said, but he made no comment. He was out cold.

A short time later I rode up to the cabin with my eccentric relative slung over my saddle-bow, and I taken him off and stalked into where pap was laying on his b'ar-skin, and slung my burden down on the floor in disgust. "Well, here he is," I said.

Pap stared and said: "Who's this?"

"When you wipe the blood off," I said, "you'll find it's yore Uncle Esau Grimes. And," I added bitterly, "the next time you wants to invite him to visit us, you can do it yoreself. A more ungrateful cuss I never seen. Pecooliar ain't no name for him; he's as crazy as a locoed jackass."

"But that ain't Uncle Esau!" said pap.

"What you mean?" I said irritably. "I know most of his clothes is tore off, and his face is kinda scratched and skint and stomped outa shape, but you can see his whiskers is red, in spite of the blood."

"Red whiskers turn grey, in time," said a voice, and I wheeled and pulled my gun as a man loomed in the door.

It was the grey-whiskered old feller I'd traded shots with on the edge of War Paint. He didn't go for his gun, but stood twisting his moustache and glaring at me like I was a curiosity or something.

"Uncle Esau!" said pap.

"What?" I hollered. "Air you Uncle Esau?"

"Certainly I am!" he snapped.

"But you warn't on the stagecoach--" I begun.

"Stagecoach!" he snorted, taking pap's jug and beginning to pour licker down the man on the floor. "Them things is for wimmen and childern. I travel hoss-back. I spent last night in War Paint, and aimed to ride on up to Bear Creek this mornin'. In fact, Bill," he addressed pap, "I was on the way here when this young maneyack creased me." He indicated a bandage on his head.

"You mean Breckinridge shot you?" ejaculated pap.

"It seems to run in the family," grunted Uncle Esau.

"But who's this?" I hollered wildly, pointing at the man I'd thought was Uncle Esau, and who was jest coming to.

"I'm Badger Chisom," he said, grabbing the jug with both hands. "I demands to be pertected from this lunatick and turned over to the sheriff."

"Him and Bill Reynolds and Jim Hopkins robbed a bank over at Gunstock three weeks ago," said Uncle Esau; the real one, I mean. "A posse captured them, but they'd hid the loot somewhere and wouldn't say where. They escaped several days ago, and not only the sheriffs was lookin' for 'em, but all the outlaw gangs too, to find out where they'd hid their plunder. It was a awful big haul. They must of figgered that escapin' out of the country by stagecoach would be the last thing folks would expect 'em to do, and they warn't known around War Paint.

"But I recognized Billy Reynolds when I went back to War Paint to have my head dressed, after you shot me, Breckinridge. The doctor was patchin' him and Hopkins up, too. I knowed Reynolds back in Arizona. The sheriff and a posse lit out after you, and I follered 'em when I'd got my head fixed. 'Course, I didn't know who you was. I come up while the posse was fightin' with the Hawkins gang, and with my help we corralled the whole bunch. Then I took up yore trail again. Purty good day's work, wipin' out two of the wust gangs in the West. One of Hawkins's men said Grizzly was laid up in his cabin, and the posse was going to drop by for him."

"What you goin' to do about me?" clamored Chisom.

"Well," said pap, "we'll bandage you up good, and then I'll let Breckinridge here take you back to War Paint--hey, what's the matter with him?"

Badger Chisom had fainted.

Chapter VIII - THE SCALP HUNTER

MY RETURN to War Paint with Badger Chisom was plumb uneventful. He was awful nervous all the way and every time I spoke to him he jumped and ducked like he expected to be shot at, and he hove a distinct sigh of relief when the sheriff taken charge of him. He said something like, "Safe at last, thank God!" and seemed in a sweat to get into a good, strong cell. Criminals is pecooliar people.

Well, to my surprise I found that I had become a kind of personage in War Paint account of shooting Chisom's pards and bringing him in. It warn't a narrer-minded town at all, like the folks over to Chawed Ear had led me to believe. Things was free and easy, big gambling games running all the time, bars open all day and all night, and pistols popping every hour of the day. They had a sheriff but he was a sensible man which didn't interfere with the business of honest citizens. He 'lowed it was his job to see that the town warn't overrun by thieving, murdering outlaws, not to go butting into folks' affairs. He told me that if I had occasion to shoot another gent he'd take it as a personal favor if I'd be careful not to hit no innercent bystander by mistake, and when I said I would, he said I was a credit to the community, and we had a drink.

I was about half scairt to go see Dolly Rixby, but I screwed up my courage by thinking of what Glory McGraw would say if I didn't get me a gal soon, and called on her. She warn't as peeved as I thought, though she did say: "Well, yo're a mite late, ain't you? About two days, I believe! But better late than never, I reckon."

She was broad-minded enough to understand my position, and we got along fine. Well, we did after I persuaded them young bucks which was mooning around her that I wasn't going to stand for no claim-jumping. I had to be kind of subtle about this, because it always made Dolly mad for me to disable any of her admirers. She liked me, but she also seemed to like a lot of other fellers, especially young Blink Wiltshaw, which was a good-looking young miner. Sometimes I wondered whether Dolly's interest in me was really for myself, or on account of the glory which was reflected onto her by me calling on her regular. Because by this time I'd made quite a name for myself around over the country, jest like I told Glory McGraw I would. But it didn't make much difference to me, as long as Dolly let me spark her, and I figgered that in a little time more I'd have her roped and hawg-tied and branded, and I drempt of the day when I'd take her back to Bear Creek and interjuice her to everybody as my wife. I plumb gloated over how Glory McGraw'd look then, and got to feeling kind of sorry for her, and decided I wouldn't rub it in on her too raw. I'd jest be dignified and tolerant, as become a man of my importance.

And then my money give out. Things had run remarkable smooth since I come back to War Paint, and my luck had suited it. The first night I was there I sot into a poker game in The Rebel Captain saloon with ten dollars and run it up to five hundred before I riz--more money than I'd ever knowed they was in the world. I had a remarkable run of luck at gambling for maybe three weeks, and lived high, wide and handsome, and spent money on Dolly right and left. Then my streak broke, and the first thing I knowed, I was busted.

Well, it taken money to live in a fast-stepping town like War Paint, and go with a gal like Dolly Rixby, so I cast about for something to do to get me some dough. About the time I was about ready to start working somebody's claim for day-wages, I got wind of a big jamboree which was going to be staged in Yavapai, a cowcountry town about a hundred miles north of War Paint. They was going to be hoss-races and roping and bull-dogging and I seen where it was a good chance to pick up me some easy prize money. I knowed, of course, that all them young bucks which I'd cut out could be counted on to start shining up to Dolly the minute my back was turnt, but I didn't look for no serious competition from them, and Blink Wiltshaw had pulled out for Teton Gulch a week before. I figgered he'd decided I was too much for him.

So I went and told Dolly that I was heading for Yavapai, and urged her not to pine away in my absence, because I'd be back before many days with plenty of dough. She 'lowed she could bear up under it till I got back, so I kissed her heartily, and sallied forth into the starlit evening where I got a onpleasant surprise. I run into Blink Wiltshaw jest coming up onto the stoop. I was so overcome by irritation that I started to sweep the street with him, when Dolly come out and stopped me and made us shake hands. Blink swore that he was going back to Teton Gulch next morning, and had jest stopped by to say hello, so I was mollified and pulled out for Yavapai without no more delay.

Well, a couple of days later I pulled into Yavapai, which was plumb full of wild cowboys and drunk Injuns, and everybody was full of licker and rambunctiousness, so it taken 'em a whole day to get things into shape enough and everybody sober enough to get the races started. I started entering Cap'n Kidd in every race that was run, me riding him, of course, and he won the first three races, one after another, and everybody cussed something terrible, and then the jedges said they'd have to bar me from entering any more races. So I said all right I will now lick the jedges and they turnt pale and gimme fifty dollars to agree not to run Cap'n Kidd in any more of their races.

What with that, and the prizes, and betting on Cap'n Kidd myself, I had about a thousand dollars, so I decided I wouldn't stay for the roping and bull-dogging contests next day, but would hustle back to War Paint. I'd been gone three days and was beginning to worry about them young bucks which was sweet on Dolly. I warn't scairt of 'em, but they warn't no use givin' 'em too much chance.

But I thought I'd have a little hand of poker before I pulled out, and that was a mistake. My luck warn't holding. When I ariz at midnight I had exactly five dollars in my pants. But I thinks, to hell with it; I ain't going to stay away from Dolly no longer. Blink Wiltshaw might not have went back to Teton Gulch after all. They is plenty of dough in the world, but not many gals like Dolly.

So I headed back for War Paint without waiting for morning. After all, I was five bucks to the good, and by playing clost to my shirt I might run them up to several hundred, when I got back amongst men whose style of play I knowed.

About the middle of the next morning I run head-on into a snag on the path of progress in the shape of Tunk Willoughby.

And right here lemme say that I'm sick and tired of these lies which is being circulated about me terrorizing the town of Grizzly Claw. They is always more'n one side to anything. These folks which is going around telling about me knocking the mayor of Grizzly Claw down a flight of steps with a kitchen stove ain't yet added that the mayor was trying to blast me with a sawed-off shotgun. If I was a hot-headed man like some I know, I could easy lose my temper over them there slanders, but being shy and retiring by nature, I keeps my dignity and merely remarks that these gossipers is blamed liars which I'll kick the ears off of if I catch 'em.

I didn't have no intention whatever of going to Grizzly Claw, in the first place. It lay a way off my road.

But as I passed the place where the trail from Grizzly Claw comes into the road that runs from War Paint to Yavapai, I seen Tunk Willoughby setting on a log in the fork of the trails. I knowed him at War Paint. Tunk ain't got no more sense'n the law allows anyway, and now he looked plumb discouraged. He had a mangled ear, a couple of black eyes, and a lump onto his head so big his hat wouldn't fit. From time to time he spit out a tooth.

I pulled up Cap'n Kidd and said: "What kind of a brawl have you been into?"

"I been to Grizzly Claw," he said, jest like that explained it. But I didn't get the drift, because I hadn't never been to Grizzly Claw.

"That's the meanest town in these mountains," he says. "They ain't got no real law there, but they got a feller which claims to be a officer, and if you so much as spit, he says you busted a law and has got to pay a fine. If you puts up a holler, the citizens comes to his assistance. You see what happened to me. I never found out jest what law I was supposed to have broke," Tunk said, "but it must of been one they was particular fond of. I give 'em a good fight as long as they confined theirselves to rocks and gun butts, but when they interjuiced fence rails and wagon-tongues into the fray, I give up the ghost."

"What you go there for, anyhow?" I ast.

"Well," he said, mopping off some dried blood, "I was lookin' for you. Three days ago I met yore cousin Jack Gordon, and he told me somethin' to tell you."

Him showing no signs of going on, I says: "Well, what was it?"

"I cain't remember," he said. "That lammin' they give me in Grizzly Claw has plumb addled my brains. Jack told me to tell you to keep a sharp look-out for somebody, but I cain't remember who, or why. But somebody had did somethin' awful to somebody on Bear Creek--seems like it was yore Uncle Jeppard Grimes."

"But what did you go to Grizzly Claw for?" I demanded. "I warn't there."

"I dunno," he said. "Seems like the feller which Jack wanted you to git was from Grizzly Claw, or was supposed to go there, or somethin'."

"A great help you be!" I said in disgust. "Here somebody has went and wronged one of my kinfolks, maybe, and you forgits the details. Try to remember the name of the feller, anyway. If I knew who he was, I could lay him out, and then find out what he done later on. Think, cain't you?"

"Did you ever have a wagon-tongue busted over yore head?" he said. "I tell you, it's jest right recent that I remembered my own name. It was all I could do to rekernize you jest now. If you'll come back in a couple of days, maybe by then I'll remember what all Jack told me."

I give a snort of disgust and turned off the road and headed up the trail for Grizzly Claw. I thought maybe I could learn something there. Anyway, it was up to me to try. Us Bear Creek folks may fight amongst ourselves, but we stands for no stranger to impose on anyone of us. Uncle Jeppard was about as old as the Humbolt Mountains, and he'd fit Injuns for a

living in his younger days. He was still a tough old knot. Anybody that could do him a wrong and get away with it sure wasn't no ordinary man, so it warn't no wonder that word had been sent out for me to get on his trail. And now I hadn't no idee who to look for, or why, jest because of Tunk Willoughby's weak skull. I despise these here egg-headed weaklings.

I arrove in Grizzly Claw late in the afternoon and went first to the wagon-yard and seen that Cap'n Kidd was put in a good stall and fed proper, and warned the feller there to keep away from him if he didn't want his brains kicked out. Cap'n Kidd has got a disposition like a shark and he don't like strangers. There was only five other hosses in the wagon-yard, besides me and Cap'n Kidd--a pinto, a bay, a piebald, and a couple of pack-hosses.

I then went back into the business part of the village, which was one dusty street with stores and saloons on each side, and I didn't pay much attention to the town, because I was trying to figger out how I could go about trying to find out what I wanted to know, and couldn't think of no questions to ask nobody about nothing.

Well, I was approaching a saloon called the Apache Queen, and was looking at the ground in meditation, when I seen a silver dollar laying in the dust clost to a hitching rack. I immejitly stooped down and picked it up, not noticing how clost it was to the hind laigs of a mean-looking mule. When I stooped over he hauled off and kicked me in the head. Then he let out a awful bray and commenced jumping around holding up his hind hoof, and some men come running out of the saloon, and one of 'em hollered: "He's tryin' to kill my mule! Call the law!"

Quite a crowd gathered and the feller which owned the mule hollered like a catamount. He was a mean-looking cuss with mournful whiskers and a cock-eye. He yelled like somebody was stabbing him, and I couldn't get in a word aidge-ways. Then a feller with a long skmny neck and two guns come up and said: "I'm the sheriff. What's goin' on here? Who is this giant? What's he did?"

The whiskered cuss hollered: "He kicked hisself in the head with my mule and crippled the pore critter for life! I demands my rights! He's got to pay me three hundred and fifty dollars for my mule!"

"Aw, heck," I said, "that mule ain't hurt none; his laig's jest kinda numbed. Anyway, I ain't got but six bucks, and whoever gets them will take 'em offa my dead corpse." I then hitched my six-shooters for'ards, and the crowd kinda fell away.

"I demands that you 'rest him!" howled Drooping-whiskers. "He tried to 'ssassinate my mule!"

"You ain't got no star," I told the feller which said he was the law. "You ain't goin' to arrest me."

"Does you dast resist arrest?" he says, fidgeting with his belt.

"Who said anything about resistin' arrest?" I retorted. "All I aim to do is see how far yore neck will stretch before it breaks."

"Don't you dast lay hands onto a officer of the law!" he squawked, backing away in a hurry.

I was tired of talking, and thirsty, so I merely give a snort and turned away through the crowd towards a saloon pushing 'em right and left out of my way. I seen 'em gang up in the street behind me, talking low and mean, but I give no heed.

They warn't nobody in the saloon except the barman and a gangling cowpuncher which had draped hisself over the bar. I ordered whisky, and when I had drunk a few fingers of the rottenest muck I believe I ever tasted, I give it up in disgust and throwed the dollar on the bar which I had found, and was starting out when the bartender hollered: "Hey!"

I turned around and said courteously: "Don't you yell at me like that, you bat-eared buzzard! What you want?"

"This here dollar ain't no good!" says he, banging it on the bar.

"Well, neither is yore whisky!" I snarled, because I was getting mad. "So that makes us even!"

I am a long-suffering man, but it looked like everybody in Grizzly Claw was out to gyp the stranger in their midst.

"You cain't run no blazer over me!" he hollered. "You gimme a real dollar, or else--"

He ducked down behind the bar and come up with a shotgun so I taken it away from him and bent the barrel double acrost my knee and throwed it after him as he run out the back door hollering help, murder.

The cowpuncher had picked up the dollar and bit on it, and then he looked at me very sharp, and said: "Where did you get this?"

"I found it, if it's any of yore derned business," I snapped, and strode out the door, and the minute I hit the street somebody let bam! at me from behind a rain-barrel acrost the street and shot my hat off. So I slammed a bullet back through the barrel and the feller hollered and fell out in the open yelling blue murder. It was the feller which called hisself the sheriff and he was drilled through the hind laig. I noticed a lot of heads sticking up over winder sills and around doors, so I roared: "Let that be a warnin' to you Grizzly Claw coyotes! I'm Breckinridge Elkins from Bear Creek up in the Humbolts, and I shoot better in my sleep than most men does wide awake!"

I then lent emphasis to my remarks by punctuating a few signboards and knocking out a few winder panes and everybody hollered and ducked. So I shoved my guns back in their scabbards and went into a restaurant. The citizens come out from their hiding-places and carried off my victim, and he made more noise over a broke laig than I thought was possible for a grown man.

They was some folks in the restaurant but they stampeded out the back door as I come in at the front, all except the cook which tried to take refuge somewheres else.

"Come outa there and fry me some bacon!" I commanded, kicking a few slats out of the counter to add p'int to my request. It disgusts me to see a grown man trying to hide under a stove. I am a very patient and mild-mannered human, but Grizzly Claw was getting under my hide. So the cook come out and fried me a mess of bacon and ham and aigs and pertaters and sourdough bread and beans and coffee, and I et three cans of cling peaches. Nobody come into the restaurant whilst I was eating but I thought I heard somebody sneaking around outside.

When I got through I ast the feller how much, and he told me, and I planked down the cash, and he commenced to bite it. This lack of faith in his feller humans so enraged me that I drawed my bowie knife and said: "They is a limit to any man's patience! I been insulted onst tonight and that's enough! You jest dast to say that coin's phoney and I'll slice off yore whiskers plumb at the roots!"

I brandished my bowie under his nose, and he hollered and stampeded back into the stove and upsot it and fell over it, and the coals went down the back of his shirt, so he riz up and run for the creek yelling bloody murder. And that's how the story got started that I tried to burn a cook alive, Injun-style, because he fried my bacon too crisp. Matter of fact, I kept his shack from catching fire and burning down, because I stomped out the coals before they done no more than burn a big hole through the floor, and I throwed the stove out the back door.

It ain't my fault if the mayor of Grizzly Claw was sneaking up the back steps with a shotgun jest at that moment. Anyway, I hear he was able to walk with a couple of crutches after a few months.

I emerged suddenly from the front door, hearing a suspicious noise, and I seen a feller crouching clost to a side winder peeking through a hole in the wall. It was the cowboy I seen in the Apache Queen. He whirled when I come out, but I had him covered.

"Air you spyin' on me?" I demanded. "'Cause if you air--"

"No, no!" he says in a hurry. "I was jest leanin' up agen that wall restin'."

"You Grizzly Claw folks is all crazy," I said disgustedly, and looked around to see if anybody else tried to shoot me, but they wam't nobody in sight, which was suspicious, but I give no heed. It was dark by that time so I went to the wagon-yard, and they warn't nobody there. I reckon the man which run it was off somewheres drunk, because that seemed to be the main occupation of most of them Grizzly Claw devils.

The only place for folks to sleep was a kind of double log-cabin. That is, it had two rooms, but they warn't no door between 'em; and in each room they wasn't nothing but a fireplace and a bunk, and jest one outside door. I seen Cap'n Kidd was fixed for the night, and then I went into the cabin and brought in my saddle and bridle and saddle blanket because I didn't trust the people thereabouts. I taken off my boots and hat and hung 'em on the wall, and hung my guns and bowie on the end of the bunk, and then spread my saddle-blanket on the bunk and laid down glumly.

I dunno why they don't build them dern things for ordinary sized humans. A man six and a half foot tall like me can't never find one comfortable for him. You'd think nobody but pigmies ever expected to use one. I laid there and was disgusted at the bunk, and at myself too, because I hadn't learnt who it was done something to Uncle Jeppard, or what he done. It looked like I'd have to go clean to Bear Creek to find out, and then maybe have to come clean back to Grizzly Claw again to get the critter. By that time Dolly Rixby would be plumb wore out of patience with me, and I wouldn't blame her none.

Well, as I lay there contemplating, I heard a man come into the wagon-yard, and purty soon I heard him come towards the cabin, but I thought nothing of it. Then the door begun to open, and I riz up with a gun in each hand and said: "Who's there? Make yoreself knowed before I blasts you down!"

Whoever it was mumbled some excuse about being on the wrong side, and the door closed. But the voice sounded kind of familiar, and the feller didn't go into the other room. I heard his footsteps sneaking off, and I riz and went to the door, and looked over towards the row of stalls. So purty soon a man led the pinto out of his stall, and swung aboard him and rode off. It was purty dark, but if us folks on Bear Creek didn't have eyes like a hawk, we'd never live to get grown. I seen it was the cowboy I'd seen in the Apache Queen and outside the restaurant. Onst he got clear of the wagon-yard, he slapped in the spurs and went racing through the village like they was a red war-party on his trail. I could hear the beat of his hoss's hoofs fading south down the rocky trail after he was out of sight.

I knowed he must of follered me to the wagon-yard, but I couldn't make no sense out of it, so I went and laid down on the bunk again. I was jest about to go to sleep when I was woke by the sounds of somebody coming into the other room of the cabin, and I heard somebody strike a match. The bunk was built agen the partition wall, so they was only a few feet from me, though with the log wall betwixt us.

They was two of them, from the sounds of their talking.

"I tell you," one of them was saying, "I don't like his looks. I don't believe he's what he pertends to be. We better take no chances, and clear out. After all, we cain't stay here forever. These people air beginning to git suspicious, and if they find out for shore, they'll be demandin' a cut in the profits, to pertect us. The stuff's all packed and ready to jump at a second's notice. Let's run for it tonight. It's a wonder nobody ain't never stumbled onto that hide-out before now."

"Aw," said the other'n, "these Grizzly Claw yaps don't do nothin' but swill licker and gamble and think up swindles to work on sech strangers as is unlucky enough to wander in here. They don't never go into the hills southwest of the village whar our cave is. Most of 'em don't even know there's a path past that big rock to the west."

"Well, Bill," said t'other'n, "we've done purty well, countin' that job up in the Bear Creek country."

At that I was wide awake and listening with both ears.

Bill laughed. "That was kind of funny, warn't it, Jim?" says he.

"You ain't never told me the particulars," says Jim. "Did you have any trouble?"

"Well," said Bill. "T'warn't to say easy. That old Jeppard Grimes was a hard old nut. If all Injun fighters was like him, I feel plumb sorry for the Injuns."

"If any of them Bear Creek devils ever catches you--" begun Jim.

Bill laughed again.

"Them hillbillies never strays more'n ten miles from Bear Creek," says he. "I had the sculp and was gone before they knowed what was up. I've collected bounties for wolves and b'ars, but that's the first time I ever got money for a human sculp!"

A icy chill run down my spine. Now I knowed what had happened to pore old Uncle Jeppard! Scalped! After all the Injun sculps he'd lifted! And them cold-blooded murderers could set there and talk about it like it was the ears of a coyote or a rabbit!

"I told him he'd had the use of that there sculp long enough," Bill was saying. "A old cuss like him--"

I waited for no more. Everything was red around me. I didn't stop for my boots, guns nor nothing. I was too crazy mad even to know sech things existed. I riz up from that bunk and put my head down and rammed that partition wall like a bull going through a rail fence.

The dried mud poured out of the chinks and some of the logs give way, and a howl went up from the other side.

"What's that?" hollered one, and t'other'n yelled: "Lookout! It's a b'ar!"

I drawed back and rammed the wall again. It caved inwards and I crashed headlong through it in a shower of dry mud and splinters, and somebody shot at me and missed. They was a lighted lantern setting on a hand-hewn table, and two men about six feet tall each that hollered and let bam at me with their six-shooters. But they was too dumbfounded to shoot straight. I gathered 'em to my bosom and we went backwards over the table, taking it and the lantern with us, and you ought to of heard them critters howl when the burning ile splashed down their necks.

It was a dirt floor so nothing caught on fire, and we was fighting in the dark, and they was hollering: "Help! Murder! We are bein' 'sassinated! Ow! Release go my ear!" And then one of 'em got his boot heel wedged in my mouth, and whilst I was twisting it out with one hand, the other'n tore out of his shirt which I was gripping with t'other hand, and run out the door. I had hold of the other feller's foot and commenced trying to twist it off, when he wrenched his laig outa the boot, and took it on the run. When I started to foller him I fell over the table in the dark and got all tangled up in it.

I broke off a laig for a club and rushed to the door, and jest as I got to it a whole mob of folks come surging into the wagon-yard with torches and guns and dogs and a rope, and they hollered: "There he is, the murderer, the outlaw, the counterfeiter, the house-burner, the mule-killer!"

I seen the man that owned the mule, and the restaurant feller, and the bar-keep, and a lot of others. They come roaring and bellering up to the door, hollering: "Hang him! Hang him! String up the murderer!" And they begun shooting at me, so I fell amongst 'em with my table-laig and laid right and left till it busted. They was packed so clost together I laid out three or four at a lick, and they hollered something awful. The torches was all knocked down and trompled out except them which was held by fellers which danced around on the aidge of the mill, hollering: "Lay hold on him! Don't be scairt of the big hillbilly! Shoot him! Knife him! Knock him in the head!" The dogs having more sense than the men, they all run off except one big mongrel that looked like a wolf, and he bit the mob often'ern he did me.

They was a lot of wild shooting and men hollering: "Oh, I'm shot! I'm kilt! I'm dyin'!" and some of them bullets burnt my hide they come so clost, and the flashes singed my eye-lashes, and somebody broke a knife agen my belt buckle. Then I seen the torches was all gone except one, and my club was broke, so I bust right through the mob, swinging right and left with my fists and stomping on them that tried to drag me down. I got clear of everybody except the man with the torch who was so excited he was jumping up and down trying to shoot me without cocking his gun. That blame dog was snapping at my heels, so I swung him by the tail and hit the man over the head with him. They went down in a heap and the torch went out, and the dog clamped onto the feller's ear, and he let out a squall like a steam-whistle.

They was milling in the dark behind me, and I run straight to Cap'n Kidd's stall and jumped on him bareback with nothing but a hackamore on him. Jest as the mob located where I went, we come storming out of the stall like a hurricane and knocked some of 'em galley-west and run over some more, and headed for the gate. Somebody shet the gate but Cap'n Kidd took it in his stride, and we was gone into the darkness before they knowed what hit 'em.

Cap'n Kidd decided then was a good time to run away, like he usually does, so he taken to the hills and run through bushes and clumps of trees trying to scrape me off. When I finally pulled him up we was maybe a mile south of the village, with Cap'n Kidd no bridle nor saddle nor blanket, and me with no guns, knife, boots nor hat. And what was wuss, them devils which sculped Uncle Jeppard had got away from me, and I didn't know where to look for 'em.

I sot meditating whether to go back and fight the whole town of Grizzly Claw for my boots and guns, or what to do, when all to onst I remembered what Bill and Jim had said about a cave and a path running to it. I thought I bet them fellers will go back and get their hosses and pull out, jest like they was planning, and they had stuff in the cave, so that's the place to look for 'em. I hoped they hadn't already got the stuff, whatever it was, and gone.

I knowed where that rock was, because I'd saw it when I come into town that afternoon--a big rock that jutted up above the trees about a mile to the west of Grizzly Claw. So I started out through the bresh, and before long I seen it looming up agen the stars, and I made straight for it. Sure enough, they was a narrer trail winding around the base and leading off to the southwest. I follered it, and when I'd went nearly a mile, I come to a steep mountainside, all clustered with bresh.

When I seen that I slipped off and led Cap'n Kidd off the trail and tied him back amongst the trees. Then I crope up to the cave which was purty well masked with bushes. I listened, but everything was dark and still, but all to onst, away down the trail, I heard a burst of shots, and what sounded like hosses running. Then everything was still again, and I quick ducked into the cave, and struck a match.

They was a narrer entrance that broadened out after a few feet, and the cave run straight like a tunnel for maybe thirty steps, about fifteen foot wide, and then it made a bend. After that it widened out and got purty big--about fifty feet wide, and I couldn't tell how far back into the mountain it run. To the left the wall was very broken and notched with ledges, mighty nigh like stair-steps, and when the match went out, away up above me I seen some stars which meant that they was a cleft in the wall or roof away up on the mountain somewheres.

Before the match went out, I seen a lot of junk over in a corner covered up with a tarpaulin, and when I was fixing to strike another match I heard men coming up the trail outside. So I quick clumb up the broken wall and laid on a ledge about ten feet up and listened.

From the sounds as they arriv at the cave mouth, I knowed it was two men on foot, running hard and panting loud. They rushed into the cave and made the turn, and I heard 'em fumbling around. Then a light flared up and I seen a lantern being lit and hung up on a spur of rock.

In the light I seen them two murderers, Bill and Jim, and they looked plumb dilapidated. Bill didn't have no shirt on and the other'n was wearing jest one boot and limped. Bill didn't have no gun in his belt neither, and both was mauled and bruised, and scratched, too, like they'd been running through briars.

"Look here," said Jim, holding his head which had a welt on it which was likely made by my fist. "I ain't sartain in my mind as to jest what all has happened. Somebody must of hit me with a club some time tonight, and things is happened too fast for my addled wits. Seems like we been fightin' and runnin' all night. Listen, was we settin' in the wagon-yard shack talkin' peaceable, and did a grizzly b'ar bust through the wall and nigh slaughter us?"

"That's plumb correct," said Bill. "Only it warn't no b'ar. It was some kind of a human critter--maybe a escaped maneyack. We ought to of stopped for hosses--"

"I warn't thinkin' 'bout no hosses," broke in Jim. "When I found myself outside that shack my only thought was to kiver ground, and I done my best, considerin' that I'd lost a boot, and that critter had nigh onhinged my hind laig. I'd lost you in the dark, so I made for the cave knowin' you'd come there eventual, if you was still alive, and it seemed like I was forever gittin' through the woods, crippled like I was. I hadn't no more'n hit the path when you come up it on the run."

"Well," says Bill, "as I went over the wagon-yard wall a lot of people come whoopin' through the gate, and I thought they was after us, but it must of been the feller we fit, because as I run I seen him layin' into 'em right and left. After I'd got over my panic, I went back after our hosses, but I run right into a gang of men on hossback, and one of 'em was that derned feller which passed hisself off as a cowboy. I didn't need no more. I taken out through the woods as hard as I could pelt, and they hollered, 'There he goes!' and hot-foot after me."

"And was them the fellers I shot at back down the trail?" ast Jim.

"Yeah," says Bill. "I thought I'd shooken 'em off, but jest as I seen you on the path, I heard hosses comin' behind us, so I hollered to let 'em have it, and you did."

"Well, I didn't know who it was," said Jim. "I tell you, my head's buzzin' like a circle-saw."

"Well," said Bill, "we stopped 'em and scattered 'em. I dunno if you hit anybody in the dark, but they'll be mighty keerful about comin' up the trail. Let's clear out."

"On foot?" says Jim. "And me with jest one boot?"

"How else?" says Bill. "We'll have to hoof it till we can steal us some cayuses. We'll have to leave all this stuff here. We don't dare go back to Grizzly Claw after our hosses. I told that derned cowboy would do to watch. He ain't no cowpoke at all. He's a blame detective."

"What's that?" broke in Jim.

"Hosses' hoofs!" exclaimed Bill, turning pale. "Here, blow out that lantern! We'll climb the ledges and git out through the cleft, and take out over the mountain whar they cain't foller with hosses, and then--"

It was at that instant that I launched myself offa the ledge on top of 'em. I landed with all my two hundred and ninety pounds square on jim's shoulders and when he hit the ground under me he kind of spread out like a toad when you tromp on him. Bill give a scream of astonishment and tore off a hunk of rock about the size of a man's head and lammed me over the ear with it as I riz. This irritated me, so I taken him by the neck, and also taken away a knife which he was trying to hamstring me with, and begun sweeping the floor with his carcass.

Presently I paused and kneeling on him, I strangled him till his tongue lolled out, whilst hammering his head fervently agen the rocky floor.

"You murderin' devil!" I gritted betwixt my teeth. "Before I varnishes this here rock with yore brains, tell me why you taken my Uncle jeppard's sculp!"

"Let up!" he gurgled, being purple in the face where he warn't bloody. "They was a dude travellin' through the country and collectin' souvenirs, and he heard about that sculp and wanted it. He hired me to go git it for him."

I was so shocked at that cold-bloodedness that I forgot what I was doing and choked Bill nigh to death before I remembered to ease up on him.

"Who was he?" I demanded. "Who is the skunk which hires old men murdered so's he can colleck their sculps? My God, these Eastern dudes is wuss'n Apaches! Hurry up and tell me, so I can finish killin' you."

But he was unconscious; I'd squoze his neck too hard. I riz up and looked around for some water or whisky or something to bring him to so he could tell who hired him to sculp Uncle Jeppard, before I twisted his head off, which was my earnest intention of doing, when somebody said: "Han's up!"

I whirled and there at the crook of the cave stood that there cowboy which had spied on me in Grizzly Claw, and ten other men. They all had their Winchesters p'inted at me, and the cowboy had a star on his buzum.

"Don't move!" he said. "I'm a Federal detective, and I'm arrestin' you for manufactorin' counterfeit money!"

"What you mean?" I snarled, backing up to the wall.

"You know," he said, kicking the tarpaulin off the junk in the corner. "Look here, men! All the stamps and dyes he used to make phoney coins and bills! All packed up, ready to light out. I been hangin' around Grizzly Claw for days, knowin' that whoever was passin' this stuff made his, or their headquarters here somewheres. Today I spotted that dollar you give the barkeep, and I went pronto for my men which was camped back in the hills a few miles. I thought you was settled in the wagon-yard for the night, but it seems you give us the slip. Put the cuffs on him, men!"

"No, you don't!" I snarled, bounding back. "Not till I've finished these devils on the floor--and maybe not then! I dunno what yo're talkin' about, but--"

"Here's a couple of corpses!" hollered one of the men. "He's kilt a couple of fellers!"

One of them stooped over Bill, but he had recovered his senses, and now he riz up on his elbows and give a howl. "Save me!" he bellered. "I confesses! I'm a counterfeiter, and so is Jim there on the floor! We surrenders, and you got to pertect us!"

"Yo're the counterfeiters?" ejaculated the detective, took aback as it were. "Why, I was follerin' this giant! I seen him pass fake money myself. We got to the wagon-yard awhile after he'd run off, but we seen him duck in the woods not far from there, and we been chasin' him. He shot at us down the trail while ago--"

"That was us," said Bill. "It was me you was chasin'. If he was passin' fake stuff, he musta found it somewheres. I tell you, we're the men you're after, and you got to pertect us! I demands to be put in the strongest jail in this state, which even this here devil cain't bust into!"

"And he ain't no counterfeiter?" said the detective.

"He ain't nothin' but a man-eater," said Bill. "Arrest us and take us outa his rech."

"No!" I roared, clean beside myself. "They belongs to me! They sculped my uncle! Give 'em knives or guns or somethin', and let us fight it out."

"Cain't do that," said the detective. "They're Federal prisoners. If you got any charge agen 'em, they'll have to be indicted in the proper form."

His men hauled 'em up and handcuffed 'em and started to lead 'em out.

"Blast yore cussed souls!" I raved. "You low-down, mangy, egg-suckin' coyotes! Does you mean to perteck a couple of dirty sculpers? I'll--"

I started for 'em and they all p'inted their Winchesters at me.

"Keep back!" said the detective. "I'm grateful for you leadin' us into this den, and layin' out these criminals for us, but I don't hanker after no battle in a cave with a human grizzly like you."

Well, what could I do? If I'd had my guns, or even my knife, I'd of took a chance with the whole eleven men, officers or not, but even I can't fight eleven .45-90's with my bare hands. I stood speechless with rage whilst they filed out, and then I went for Cap'n Kidd in a kind of a daze. I felt wuss'n a hoss-thief. Them fellers would be put in the pen safe out of my rech, and Uncle Jeppard's sculp was unavenged! It was awful. I felt like bawling.

Time I got my hoss back onto the trail, the posse with their prisoners was out of sight and hearing. I seen the only thing to do was to go back to Grizzly Claw and get my outfit, and then foller 'em and try to take their prisoners away from 'em some way.

Well, the wagon-yard was dark and still. The wounded had been carried away to have their injuries bandaged, and from the groaning that was still coming from the shacks and cabins along the street, the casualities had been plenteous. The citizens of Grizzly Claw must have been shook up something terrible, because they hadn't even stole my guns and saddle and things yet; everything was in the cabin jest like I'd left 'em.

I put on my boots, hat and belt, saddled and bridled Cap'n Kidd and sot out on the road I knowed the posse had took. But they had a long start on me, and when daylight come I hadn't overtook 'em, though I knowed they couldn't be far ahead of me. But I did meet somebody else. It was Tunk Willoughby riding up the trail, and when he seen me he grinned all over his battered features.

"Hey, Breck!" he hailed me. "After you left I sot on that there log and thunk, and thunk, and I finally remembered what Jack Gordon told me, and I started out to find you again and tell you. It was this: he said to keep a close lookout for a feller from Grizzly Claw named Bill Croghan, because he'd gypped yore Uncle Jeppard in a deal."

"What?" I said.

"Yeah," said Tunk. "He bought somethin' from Jeppard and paid him in counterfeit money. Jeppard didn't know it was phoney till after the feller had got plumb away," said Tunk, "and bein' as he was too busy kyorin' some b'ar meat to go after him, he sent word for you to git him."

"But the sculp--" I said wildly.

"Oh," said Tunk, "that was what Jeppard sold the feller. It was the sculp Jeppard taken offa old Yeller Eagle, the Comanche war-chief forty years ago, and been keepin' for a souvenear. Seems like a Eastern dude heard about it and wanted to buy it, but this Croghan feller must of kept the money he give him to git it with, and give Jeppard phoney cash. So you see everything's all right, even if I did forgit a little, and no harm did--"

And that's why Tunk Willoughby is going around saying I'm a homicidal maneyack, and run him five miles down a mountain and tried to kill him--which is a exaggeration, of course. I wouldn't of kilt him if I could of caught him--which I couldn't when he taken to the thick bresh. I would merely of raised a few knots on his head and tied his hind laigs in a bow-knot around his fool neck, and did a few other little things that might of improved his memory.

Chapter IX - CUPID FROM BEAR CREEK

WHEN I reined my hoss towards War Paint again, I didn't go back the way I'd come. I was so far off my route that I knowed it would be nearer to go through the mountains by the way of Teton Gulch than it would be to go clean back to the Yavapai-War Paint road. So I headed out.

I aimed to pass right through Teton Gulch without stopping, because I was in a hurry to get back to War Paint and Dolly Rixby, but my thirst got the best of me, and I stopped in the camp. It was one of them new mining towns that springs up overnight like mushrooms. I was drinking me a dram at the bar of the Yaller Dawg Saloon and Hotel, when the barkeep says, after studying me a spell, he says: "You must be Breckinridge Elkins, of Bear Creek."

I give the matter due consideration, and 'lowed as how I was.

"How come you knowed me?" I inquired suspiciously, because I hadn't never been in Teton Gulch before, and he says: "Well, I've heard tell of Breckinridge Elkins, and when I seen you, I figgered you must be him, because I don't see how they can be two men in the world that big. By the way, there's a friend of yore'n upstairs--Blink Wiltshaw, from War Paint. I've heered him brag about knowin' you personal. He's upstairs now, fourth door from the stair-head, on the left."

So Blink had come back to Teton, after all. Well, that suited me fine, so I thought I'd go up and pass the time of day with him, and find out if he had any news from War Paint, which I'd been gone from for about a week. A lot of things can happen in a week in a fast-moving town like War Paint.

I went upstairs and knocked on the door, and bam! went a gun inside and a .45 slug ripped through the door and taken a nick out of my off-ear. Getting shot in the ear always did irritate me, so without waiting for no more exhibitions of hospitality, I give voice to my displeasure in a deafening beller and knocked the door off'n its hinges and busted into the room over its rooins.

For a second I didn't see nobody, but then I heard a kind of gurgle going on, and happened to remember that the door seemed kind of squishy underfoot when I tromped over it, so I knowed that whoever was in the room had got pinned under the door when I knocked it down.

So I reched under it and got him by the collar and hauled him out, and sure enough it was Blink Wiltshaw. He was limp as a lariat, and glassy-eyed and pale, and was still trying to shoot me with his six-shooter when I taken it away from him.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" I demanded sternly, dangling him by the collar with one hand, whilst shaking him till his teeth rattled. "Didn't Dolly make us shake hands? What you mean by tryin' to 'sasserinate me through a hotel door?"

"Lemme down, Breck," he gasped. "I didn't know it was you. I thought it was Rattlesnake Harrison comin' after my gold."

So I sot him down. He grabbed a jug of licker and taken him a swig, and his hand shook so he spilt half of it down his neck.

"Well?" I demanded. "Ain't you goin' to offer me a snort, dern it?"

"Excuse me, Breckinridge," he apolergized. "I'm so derned jumpy I dunno what I'm doin'. You see them buckskin pokes?" says he, p'inting at some bags on the bed. "Them is plumb full of nuggets. I got a claim up the Gulch, and the day I got back from War Paint I hit a regular bonanza. But it ain't doin' me no good."

"What you mean?" I ast.

"The mountains around Teton is full of outlaws," says he. "They robs and murders every man which makes a strike. The stagecoach has been stuck up so often nobody sends their dust out on it no more. When a man makes a pile he sneaks out through the mountains at night, with his gold on pack-mules. I aimed to do that last night. But them outlaws has got spies all over the camp, and I know they got me spotted. Rattlesnake Harrison's their chief, and he's a ring-tailed he-devil. I been squattin' over this here gold with my pistol in fear and tremblin', expectin' 'em to come right into camp after me. I'm dern nigh loco!"

And he shivered and cussed kind of whimpery, and taken another dram, and cocked his pistol and sot there shaking like he'd saw a ghost or two.

"You got to help me, Breckinridge," he said desperately. "You take this here gold out for me, willya? The outlaws don't know you. You could hit the old Injun path south of the camp and foller it to Hell-Wind Pass. The Chawed Ear-Wahpeton stage goes there about sundown. You could put the gold on the stage there, and they'd take it on to Wahpeton. Harrison wouldn't never think of holdin' it up after it left Hell-Wind. They always holds it up this side of the Pass."

"What I want to risk my neck for you for?" I demanded bitterly, memories of Dolly Rixby rising up before me. "If you ain't got the guts to tote out yore own gold--"

"Tain't altogether the gold, Breck," says he. "I'm tryin' to git married, and--"

"Married?" says I. "Here? In Teton Gulch? To a gal in Teton Gulch?"

"Maried to a gal in Teton Gulch," he avowed. "I was aimin' to git hitched tomorrer, but they ain't a preacher or a justice of the peace in camp to tie the knot. But her uncle the Reverant Rembrandt Brockton is a circuit rider, and he's due to pass through Hell-Wind Pass on his way to Wahpeton today. I was aimin' to sneak out last night, hide in the hills till the stage come through, and then put the gold on it and bring Brother Rembrandt back with me. But yesterday I learnt Harrison's spies was watchin' me, and I'm scairt to go. Now Brother Rembrandt will go on to Wahpeton, not knowin' he's needed here, and no tellin' when I'll be able to git married--"

"Hold on," I said hurriedly, doing some quick thinking. I didn't want this here wedding to fall through. The more Blink was married to some gal in Teton, the less he could marry Dolly Rixby.

"Blink," I said, grasping his hand warmly, "never let it be said that a Elkins ever turned down a friend in distress. I'll take yore gold to Hell-Wind Pass and bring back Brother Rembrandt."

Blink fell onto my neck and wept with joy. "I'll never forgit this, Breckinridge," says he, "and I bet you won't neither! My hoss and pack-mule are in the stables behind the saloon."

"I don't need no pack-mule," I says. "Cap'n Kidd can pack the dust easy."

Cap'n Kidd was getting fed out in the corral next to the hotel. I went out there and got my saddle-bags, which is a lot bigger'n most saddle-bags, because all my plunder has to be made to fit my size. They're made outa three-ply elkskin, stitched with rawhide thongs, and a wildcat couldn't claw his way out of 'em.

I noticed quite a bunch of men standing around the corral looking at Cap'n Kidd, but thunk nothing of it, because he is a hoss which naturally attracks attention. But whilst I was getting my saddle-bags, a long lanky cuss with long yaller whiskers come up and said, says he: "Is that yore hoss in the corral?"

I says: "If he ain't he ain't nobody's."

"Well, he looks a whole lot like a hoss that was stole off my ranch six months ago," he said, and I seen ten or fifteen hard-looking hombres gathering around me. I laid down my saddle-bags sudden-like and reched for my guns, when it occurred to me that if I had a fight I there I might get arrested and it would interfere with me bringing Brother Rembrandt in for the wedding.

"If that there is yore hoss," I said, "you ought to be able to lead him out of that there corral."

"Shore I can," he says with a oath. "And what's more, I aim'ta."

"That's right, Jake," says another feller. "Stand up for yore rights. Us boys is right behind you."

"Go ahead," I says. "If he's yore hoss, prove it. Go git him!"

He looked at me suspiciously, but he taken up a rope and clumb the fence and started towards Cap'n Kidd which was chawing on a block of hay in the middle of the corral. Cap'n Kidd throwed up his head and laid back his ears and showed his teeth, and Jake stopped sudden and turned pale.

"I--I don't believe that there is my hoss, after all!" says he.

"Put that lasso on him!" I roared, pulling my right-hand gun. "You say he's yore'n; I say he's mine. One of us is a liar and a hoss-thief and I aim to prove which. Gwan, before I festoons yore system with lead polka-dots!"

"He looked at me and he looked at Cap'n Kidd, and he turned bright green all over. He looked again at my .45 which I now had cocked and p'inted at his long neck, which his adam's apple was going up and down like a monkey on a pole, and he begun to aidge towards Cap'n Kidd again, holding the rope behind him and sticking out one hand.

"Whoa, boy," he says, kind of shudderingly. "Whoa--good old feller--nice hossie--whoa, boy--ow!"

He let out a awful howl as Cap'n Kidd made a snap and bit a chunk out of his hide. He turned to run but Cap'n Kidd wheeled and let fly both heels which catched Jake in the seat of the britches, and his shriek of despair was horrible to hear as he went head-first through the corral-fence into a hoss-trough on the other side. From this he ariz dripping water, blood and profanity, and he shook a quivering fist at me and croaked: "You derned murderer! I'll have yore life for this!"

"I don't hold no conversation with hoss-thieves," I snorted, and picked up my saddle-bags and stalked through the crowd which give back in a hurry and take care to cuss under their breath when I tromped on their fool toes.

I taken the saddle-bags up to Blink's room, and told him about Jake, thinking he'd be amoosed, but he got a case of the aggers again, and said: "That was one of Harrison's men! He aimed to take yore hoss. It's a old trick, and honest folks don't dare interfere. Now they got you spotted! What'll you do?"

"Time, tide and a Elkins waits for no man!" I snorted, dumping the gold into the saddle-bags. "If that yaller-whiskered coyote wants any trouble, he can git a bellyfull! Don't worry, yore gold will be safe in my saddle-bags. It's as good as in the Wahpeton stage right now. And by midnight I'll be back with Brother Rembrandt Brockton to hitch you up with his niece."

"Don't yell so loud," begged Blink. "The cussed camp's full of spies. Some of 'em may be downstairs right now, lissenin'."

"I warn't speakin' above a whisper," I said indignantly.

"That bull's beller may pass for a whisper on Bear Creek," says he, wipin' off the sweat, "but I bet they can hear it from one end of the Gulch to the other'n, at least."

It's a pitable sight to see a man with a case of the scairts. I shook hands with him and left him pouring red licker down his gullet like it was water, and I swung the saddle-bags over my shoulder and went downstairs, and the barkeep leaned over the bar and whispered to me: "Look out for Jake Roman! He was in here a minute ago, lookin' for trouble. He pulled out jest before you come down, but he won't be forgittin' what yore hoss done to him."

"Not when he tries to set down, he won't," I agreed, and went out to the corral, and they was a crowd of men watching Cap'n Kidd eat his hay, and one of 'em seen me and hollered: "Hey, boys, here comes the giant! He's goin' to saddle that man-eatin' monster! Hey, Bill! Tell the boys at the bar."

And here come a whole passel of fellers running out of all the saloons, and they lined the corral fence solid, and started laying bets whether I'd get the saddle onto Cap'n Kidd, or get my brains kicked out. I thought miners must all be crazy. They ought've knowed I was able to saddle my own hoss.

Well, I saddled him and throwed on the saddle-bags and clumb aboard, and he pitched about ten jumps like he always does when I first fork him--'twarn't nothing, but them miners hollered like wild Injuns. And when he accidentally bucked hisself and me through the fence and knocked down a section of it along with fifteen men which was setting on the top rail, the way they howled you'd of thought something terrible had happened. Me and Cap'n Kidd don't bother about gates. We usually makes our own through whatever happens to be in front of us. But them miners is a weakly breed. As I rode out of town I seen the crowd dipping nine or ten of 'em into a hoss-trough to bring 'em to, on account of Cap'n Kidd having accidentally tromped on 'em.

Well, I rode out of the Gulch and up the ravine to the south and come out into the high-timbered country, and hit the old Injun trail Blink had told me about. It warn't traveled much. I didn't meet nobody after I left the Gulch. I figgered to hit Hell-Wind Pass at least a hour before sundown which would give me plenty of time. Blink said the stage passed through there about sundown. I'd have to bring back Brother Rembrandt on Cap'n Kidd, I reckoned, but that there hoss can carry double and still out-run and out-last any other hoss in the State of Nevada. I figgered on getting back to Teton about midnight or maybe a little later.

After I'd went several miles I come to Apache Canyon, which was a deep, narrer gorge, with a river at the bottom which went roaring and foaming along betwixt rock walls a hundred and fifty feet high. The old trail hit the rim at a place where the canyon warn't only about seventy foot wide, and somebody had felled a whopping big pine tree on one side so it fell acrost and made a foot-bridge, where a man could walk acrost. They'd onst been a gold strike in Apache Canyon, and a big camp there, but now it was plumb abandoned and nobody lives anywheres near it.

I turned east and follered the rim for about half a mile. Here I come into a old wagon road which was jest about growed up with saplings now, but it run down into a ravine into the bed of the canyon, and they was a bridge acrost the river which had been built during the days of the gold rush. Most of it had done been washed away by head-rises, but a man could still ride a hoss acrost what was left. So I done so, and rode up a ravine on the other side, and come out on high ground again.

I'd rode a few hundred yards past the mouth of the ravine when somebody said: "Hey!" and I wheeled with both guns in my hands. Out of the bresh sa'ntered a tall gent in a long frock tail coat and broad-brimmed hat.

"Who air you and what the hell you mean by hollerin' 'Hey!' at me?" I demanded courteously, p'inting my guns at him. A Elkins is always perlite.

"I am the Reverant Rembrandt Brockton, my good man," says he. "I am on my way to Teton Gulch to unite my niece and a young man of that camp in the bonds of holy matrimony."

"The he--you don't say!" I says. "Afoot?"

"I alit from the stagecoach at--ah--Hades-Wind Pass," says he. "Some very agreeable cowboys happened to be awaiting the stage there, and they offered to escort me to Teton."

"How come you knowed yore niece was wantin' to be united in acrimony?" I ast.

"The cowpersons informed me that such was the case," says he.

"Where-at are they now?" I next inquore.

"The mount with which they supplied me went lame a little while ago," says he. "They left me here while they went to procure another from a nearby ranch-house."

"I dunno who'd have a ranch anywheres around near here," I muttered. "They ain't got much sense leavin' you here by yore high lonesome."

"You mean to imply there is danger?" says he, blinking mildly at me.

"These here mountains is lousy with outlaws which would as soon kyarve a preacher's gullet as anybody's," I said, and then I thought of something else. "Hey!" I says. "I thought the stage didn't come through the Pass till sundown?"

"Such was the case," says he. "But the schedule has been altered."

"Heck!" I says. "I was aimin' to put this here gold on it which my saddle-bags is full of. Now I'll have to take it back to Teton with me. Well, I'll bring it out tomorrer and catch the stage then. Brother Rembrandt, I'm Breckinridge Elkins of Bear Creek, and I come out here to meet you and escort you back to the Gulch, so's you can unite yore niece and Blink Wiltshaw in the holy bounds of alimony. Come on. We'll ride double."

"But I must await my cowboy friends!" he said. "Ah, here they come now!"

I looked over to the east, and seen about fifteen men ride into sight and move towards us. One was leading a hoss without no saddle onto it.

"Ah, my good friends!" beamed Brother Rembrandt. "They have procured a mount for me, even as they promised."

He hauled a saddle out of the bresh, and says: "Would you please saddle my horse for me when they get here? I should be delighted to hold your rifle while you did so."

I started to hand him my Winchester, when the snap of a twig under a hoss's hoof made me whirl quick. A feller had jest rode out of a thicket about a hundred yards south of me, and he was raising a Winchester to his shoulder. I recognized him instantly. If us Bear Creek folks didn't have eyes like a hawk, we'd never live to get growed. It was Jake Roman!

Our Winchesters banged together. His lead fanned my ear and mine knocked him end-ways out of his saddle.

"Cowboys, hell!" I roared. "Them's Harrison's outlaws! I'll save you, Brother Rembrandt!"

I swooped him up with one arm and gouged Cap'n Kidd with the spurs and he went from there like a thunderbolt with its tail on fire. Them outlaws come on with wild yells. I ain't in the habit of running from people, but I was afeared they might do the Reverant harm if it come to a close fight, and if he stopped a chunk of lead, Blink might not get to marry his niece, and might get disgusted and go back to War Paint and start sparking Dolly Rixby again.

I was heading for the canyon, aiming to make a stand in the ravine if I had to, and them outlaws was killing their hosses trying to get to the bend of the trail ahead of me, and cut me off. Cap'n Kidd was running with his belly to the ground, but I'll admit Brother Rembrandt warn't helping me much. He was laying acrost my saddle with his arms and laigs waving wildly because I hadn't had time to set him comfortable, and when the horn jobbed him in the belly he uttered some words I wouldn't of expected to hear spoke by a minister of the gospel.

Guns begun to crack and lead hummed past us, and Brother Rembrandt twisted his head around and screamed: "Stop that--shootin', you--sons of--! You'll hit me!"

I thought it was kind of selfish from Brother Rembrandt not to mention me, too, but I said: "'Tain't no use to remonstrate with them skunks, Reverant. They ain't got no respeck for a preacher even."

But to my amazement, the shooting did stop, though them bandits yelled louder'n ever and flogged their cayuses harder. But about that time I seen they had me cut off from the lower canyon crossing, so I wrenched Cap'n Kidd into the old Injun track and headed straight for the canyon rim as hard as he could hammer, with the bresh lashing and snapping around us, and slapping Brother Rembrandt in the face when it whipped back. Them outlaws yelled and wheeled in behind us, but Cap'n Kidd drawed away from them with every stride, and the canyon rim loomed jest ahead of us.

"Pull up, you jack-eared son of Baliol!" howled Brother Rembrandt. "You'll go over the edge!"

"Be at ease, Reverant," I reassured him. "We're goin' over the log."

"Lord have mercy on my soul!" he squalled, and shet his eyes and grabbed a stirrup leather with both hands, and then Cap'n Kidd went over that log like thunder rolling on Jedgment Day.

I doubt if they is another hoss west of the Pecos, or east of it either, which would bolt out onto a log foot-bridge acrost a canyon a hundred and fifty foot deep like that, but they ain't nothing in this world Cap'n Kidd's scairt of except maybe me. He didn't slacken his speed none. He streaked acrost that log like it was a quarter-track, with the bark and splinters flying from under his hoofs, and if one foot had slipped a inch, it would of been Sally bar the door. But he didn't slip, and we was over and on the other side almost before you could catch yore breath.

"You can open yore eyes now, Brother Rembrandt," I said kindly, but he didn't say nothing. He'd fainted. I shaken him to wake him up, and in a flash he come to and give a shriek and grabbed my laig like a b'ar trap. I reckon he thought we was still on the log. I was trying to pry him loose when Cap'n Kidd chose that moment to run under a low-hanging oak tree limb. That's his idee of a joke. That there hoss has got a great sense of humor.

I looked up jest in time to see the limb coming, but not in time to dodge it. It was as big around as my thigh, and it took me smack acrost the wish-bone. We was going full-speed, and something had to give way. It was the girths--both of 'em. Cap'n Kidd went out from under me, and me and Brother Rembrandt and the saddle hit the ground together.

I jumped up but Brother Rembrandt laid there going: "Wug wug wug!" like water running out of a busted jug. And then I seen them cussed outlaws had dismounted off of their hosses and was coming acrost the bridge single file on foot, with their Winchesters in their hands.

I didn't waste no time shooting them misguided idjits. I run to the end of the foot-bridge, ignoring the slugs they slung at me. It was purty pore shooting, because they warn't shore of their footing, and didn't aim good. So I only got one bullet in the hind laig and was creased three or four other unimportant places--not enough to bother about.

I bent my knees and got hold of the end of the tree and heaved up with it, and them outlaws hollered and fell along it like ten pins, and dropped their Winchesters and grabbed holt of the log. I given it a shake and shook some of 'em off like persimmons off a limb after a frost, and then I swung the butt around clear of the rim and let go, and it went down end over end into the river a hundred and fifty feet below, with a dozen men still hanging onto it and yelling blue murder.

A regular geyser of water splashed up when they hit, and the last I seen of 'em they was all swirling down the river together in a thrashing tangle of arms and laigs and heads.

I remembered Brother Rembrandt and run back to where he'd fell, but he was already on his feet. He was kind of pale and wild-eyed and his laigs kept bending under him, but he had hold of the saddle-bags, and was trying to drag 'em into a thicket, mumbling kind of dizzily to hisself.

"It's all right now, Brother Rembrandt," I said kindly. "Them outlaws is all horse-de-combat now, as the French say. Blink's gold is safe."

"--" says Brother Rembrandt, pulling two guns from under his coat tails, and if I hadn't grabbed him, he would of ondoubtedly shot me. We rassled around and I protested: "Hold on, Brother Rembrandt! I ain't no outlaw. I'm yore friend, Breckinridge Elkins. Don't you remember?"

His only reply was a promise to eat my heart without no seasoning, and he then sunk his teeth into my ear and started to chaw it off, whilst gouging for my eyes with both thumbs, and spurring me severely in the hind laigs. I seen he was out of his head from fright and the fall he got, so I said sorrerfully: "Brother Rembrandt, I hates to do this. It hurts me more'n it does you, but we cain't waste time like this. Blink is waitin' to git married." And with a sigh I busted him over the head with the butt of my six-shooter, and he fell over and twitched a few times and then lay limp.

"Pore Brother Rembrandt," I sighed sadly. "All I hope is I ain't addled yore brains so's you've forgot the weddin' ceremony."

So as not to have no more trouble with him when, and if, he come to, I tied his arms and laigs with pieces of my lariat, and taken his weppins which was most surprising arms for a circuit rider. His pistols had the triggers out of 'em, and they was three notches on the butt of one, and four on t'other'n. Moreover he had a bowie knife in his boot, and a deck of marked kyards and a pair of loaded dice in his hip-pocket. But that warn't none of my business.

About the time I finished tying him up, Cap'n Kidd come back to see if he'd kilt me or jest crippled me for life. To show him I could take a joke too, I give him a kick in the belly, and when he could get his breath again, and ondouble hisself, I throwed the saddle on him. I spliced the girths with the rest of my lariat, and put Brother Rembrandt in the saddle and clumb on behind and we headed for Teton Gulch.

After a hour or so Brother Rembrandt come to and says kind of dizzily: "Was anybody saved from the typhoon?"

"Yo're all right, Brother Rembrandt," I assured him. "I'm takin' you to Teton Gulch."

"I remember," he muttered. "It all comes back to me. Damn Jake Roman! I thought it was a good idea, but it seems I was mistaken. I thought we had an ordinary human being to deal with. I know when I'm licked. I'll give you a thousand dollars to let me go."

"Take it easy, Brother Rembrandt," I soothed, seeing he was still delirious. "We'll be to Teton in no time."

"I don't want to go to Teton!" he hollered.

"You got to," I told him. "You got to unite yore niece and Blink Wiltshaw in the holy bums of parsimony."

"To hell with Blink Wiltshaw and my--niece!" he yelled.

"You ought to be ashamed usin' sech langwidge, and you a minister of the gospel," I reproved him sternly. His reply would of curled a Piute's hair.

I was so scandalized I made no reply. I was jest fixing to untie him, so's he could ride more comfortable, but I thought if he was that crazy, I better not. So I give no heed to his ravings which growed more and more unbearable as we progressed. In all my born days I never seen sech a preacher.

It was sure a relief to me to sight Teton at last. It was night when we rode down the ravine into the Gulch, and the dance halls and saloons was going full blast. I rode up behind the Yaller Dawg Saloon and hauled Brother Rembrandt off with me and sot him onto his feet, and he said, kind of despairingly: "For the last time, listen to reason. I've got fifty thousand dollars cached up in the hills. I'll give you every cent if you'll untie me."

"I don't want no money," I said. "All I want is for you to marry yore niece and Blink Wiltshaw. I'll untie you then."

"All right," he said. "All right! But untie me now!"

I was jest fixing to do it, when the bar-keep come out with a lantern, and he shone it on our faces and said in a startled tone: "Who the hell is that with you, Elkins?"

"You wouldn't never suspect it from his langwidge," I says, "but it's the Reverant Rembrandt Brockton."

"Are you crazy?" says the bar-keep. "That's Rattle snake Harrison!"

"I give up," said my prisoner. "I'm Harrison. I'm licked. Lock me up somewhere away from this lunatic!"

I was standing in a kind of daze, with my mouth open, but now I woke up and bellered: "What? Yo're Harrison? I see it all now! Jake Roman overheard me talkin' to Blink Wiltshaw, and rode off and fixed it with you to fool me like you done, so's to git Blink's gold! That's why you wanted to hold my Winchester whilst I saddled yore cayuse."

"How'd you ever guess it?" he sneered. "We ought to have shot you from ambush like I wanted to, but Jake wanted to catch you alive and torture you to death account of your horse bitin' him. The fool must have lost his head at the last minute and decided to shoot you after all. If you hadn't recognized him we'd had you surrounded and stuck up before you knew what was happening."

"But now the real preacher's gone on to Wahpeton!" I hollered. "I got to foller him and bring him back--"

"Why, he's here," said one of the men which was gathering around us. "He come in with his niece a hour ago on the stage from War Paint."

"War Paint?" I howled, hit in the belly by a premonishun. I run into the saloon, where they was a lot of people, and there was Blink and a gal holding hands in front of a old man with a long white beard, and he had a book in his hand, and the other'n lifted in the air. He was saying: "--And I now pernounces you-all man and wife. Them which God has j'ined togither let no snake-hunter put asunder."

"Dolly!" I yelled. Both of 'em jumped about four foot and whirled, and Dolly jumped in front of Blink and spread her arms like she was shooing chickens.

"Don't you tech him, Breckinridge!" she hollered. "I jest married him and I don't aim for no Humbolt grizzly to spile him!"

"But I don't sabe all this--" I said dizzily, nervously fumbling with my guns which is a habit of mine when upsot.

Everybody in the wedding party started ducking out of line, and Blink said hurriedly: "It's this way, Breck. When I made my pile so onexpectedly quick, I sent for Dolly to come and marry me, like she'd promised that night, jest after you pulled out for Yavapai. I was aimin' to take my gold out today, like I told you, so me and Dolly could go to San Francisco on our honeymoon, but I learnt Harrison's gang was watchin' me, jest like I told you. I wanted to git my gold out, and I wanted to git you out of the way before Dolly and her uncle got here on the War Paint stage, so I told you that there lie about Brother Rembrandt bein' on the Wahpeton stage. It was the only lie."

"You said you was marryin' a gal in Teton," I accused fiercely.

"Well," says he, "I did marry her in Teton. You know, Breck, all's fair in love and war."

"Now, now, boys," says Brother Rembrandt--the real one, I mean. "The gal's married, yore rivalry is over, and they's no use holdin' grudges. Shake hands and be friends."

"All right," I said heavily. No man can't say I ain't a good loser. I was cut deep, but I concealed my busted heart.

Leastways I concealed it all I was able to. Them folks which says I crippled Blink Wiltshaw with malice aforethought is liars which I'll sweep the road with when I catches 'em. I didn't aim to break his cussed arm when we shaken hands. It was jest the convulsive start I give when I suddenly thought of what Glory McGraw would say when she heard about this mess. And they ain't no use in folks saying that what imejitly follered was done in revenge for Dolly busting me in the head with that cuspidor. When I thought of the rawhiding I'd likely get from Glory McGraw I kind of lost my head and stampeded like a loco bull. When something got in my way I removed it without stopping to see what it was. How was I to know it was Dolly's Uncle Rembrandt which I absent-mindedly throwed through a winder. And as for them fellers which claims they was knocked down and trompled on, they ought to of got outa my way, dern 'em.

As I headed down the trail on Cap'n Kidd I wondered if I ever really loved Dolly, after all, because I was less upsot over her marrying another feller than I was about what Glory McGraw would say.

Chapter X - THE HAUNTED MOUNTAIN

THEY SAY when a critter is mortally wounded he generally heads for his den, so maybe that's why I headed for Bear Creek when I rode out of Teton Gulch that night; I'd had about as much civilization as I could stand for awhile.

But the closer I got to Bear Creek the more I thought about Glory McGraw and I bust into profuse sweat every time I thought about what she'd say to me, because I'd sent her word by one of the Braxton boys that I aimed to bring Dolly Rixby to Bear Creek as Miz Breckinridge Elkins.

I thought about this so much that when I cut the Chawed Ear road I turned aside and headed up it. I'd met a feller a few miles back which told me about a rodeo which was going to take place at Chawed Ear, so I thought it was a good way to pick up some easy money whilst avoiding Glory at the same time. But I forgot I had to pass by the cabin of one of my relatives.

The reason I detests tarantulas, stinging lizards, and hydrophobia skunks is because they reminds me so much of Aunt Lavaca Grimes, which my Uncle Jacob Grimes married in a absent-minded moment, when he was old enough to know better.

That there woman's voice plumb puts my teeth on aidge, and it has the same effect on Cap'n Kidd, which don't otherwise shy at nothing less'n a cyclone. So when she stuck her head out of her cabin as I was riding by and yelled: "Breck-in-ri-i-idge!" Cap'n Kidd jumped like he was shot, and then tried to buck me off.

"Stop tormentin' that pore animal and come here," commanded Aunt Lavaca, whilst I was fighting for my life agen Cap'n Kidd's spine-twisting sunfishing. "Always showin' off! I never see such a inconsiderate, worthless, no-good--"

She kept on yapping away till I had wore him down and reined up alongside the cabin-stoop, and said: "What you want, Aunt Lavaca?"

She give me a scornful stare, and put her hands onto her hips and glared at me like I was something she didn't like the smell of.

"I want you to go git yore Uncle Jacob and bring him home," she said at last. "He's off on one of his idjiotic prospectin' sprees again. He snuck out before daylight with the bay mare and a pack mule--I wisht I'd woke up and caught him. I'd of fixed him! If you hustle you can catch him this side of Haunted Mountain Gap. You bring him back if you have to lasso him and tie him to his saddle. Old fool! Off huntin' gold when they's work to be did in the alfalfa fields. Says he ain't no farmer. Huh! I 'low I'll make a farmer outa him yet. You git goin'."

"But I ain't got time to go chasin' Uncle Jacob all over Haunted Mountain," I protested. "I'm headin' for the rodeo over to Chawed Ear. I'm goin' to winme a prize bull-doggin' some steers--"

"Bull-doggin'!" she snapped. "A fine ockerpashun! Gwan, you worthless loafer! I ain't goin' to stand here all day argyin' with a big ninny like you be. Of all the good-for-nothin', triflin', lunk-headed--"

When Aunt Lavaca starts in like that you might as well travel. She can talk steady for three days and nights without repeating herself, with her voice getting louder and shriller all the time till it nigh splits a body's ear drums. She was still yelling at me as I rode up the trail towards Haunted Mountain Gap, and I could hear her long after I couldn't see her no more.

Pore Uncle Jacob! He never had much luck prospecting, but trailing around with a jackass is a lot better'n listening to Aunt Lavaca. A jackass's voice is mild and soothing alongside of her'n.

Some hours later I was climbing the long rise that led up to the gap and I realized I had overtook the old coot when something went ping! up on the slope, and my hat flew off. I quick reined Cap'n Kidd behind a clump of bresh, and looked up towards the Gap, and seen a pack-mule's rear end sticking out of a cluster of boulders.

"You quit that shootin' at me, Uncle Jacob!" I roared.

"You stay whar you be," his voice come back rambunctious and warlike. "I know Lavacky sent you after me, but I ain't goin' home. I'm onto somethin' big at last, and I don't aim to be interfered with."

"What you mean?" I demanded.

"Keep back or I'll ventilate you," he promised. "I'm goin' after the Lost Haunted Mine."

"You been huntin' that thing for fifty years," I snorted.

"This time I finds it," he says. "I bought a map off'n a drunk Mexican down to Perdition. One of his ancestors was a Injun which helped pile up the rocks to hide the mouth of the cave whar it is."

"Why didn't he go find it and git the gold?" I ast.

"He's scairt of ghosts," said Uncle Jacob. "All Mexes is awful superstitious. This 'un'd ruther set and drink, anyhow. They's millions in gold in that there mine. I'll shoot you before I'll go home. Now will you go on back peacable, or will you throw in with me? I might need you, in case the pack-mule plays out."

"I'll come with you," I said, impressed. "Maybe you have got somethin', at that. Put up yore Winchester, I'm comin'."

He emerged from his rocks, a skinny, leathery old cuss, and he said: "What about Lavacky? If you don't come back with me, she'll foller us herself, she's that strong-minded."

"You can write, cain't you, Uncle Jacob?" I said, and he said, "Yeah, I always carries me a pencil-stub in my saddle-bags. Why?"

"We'll write her a note," I said. "Joe Hopkins always comes down through the Gap onst a week on his way to Chawed Ear. He's due through here today. We'll stick the note on a tree, where he'll see it and take it to her."

So I tore a piece of wrapping paper off'n a can of tomatoes Uncle Jacob had in his pack, and he got out his pencil stub, and writ as I told him, as follers:

"Dere Ant Lavaca: I am takin uncle Jacob way up in the mountins don't try to foler us it wont do no good gold is what Im after. Breckinridge."

We folded it and I told Uncle Jacob to write on the outside:

"Dere Joe: pleeze take this here note to Miz Lavaca Grimes on the Chawed Ear rode."

It was lucky Joe knowed how to read. I made Uncle Jacob read me what he had writ to be sure he had got it right. Education is a good thing in its place, but it never taken the place of common hoss-sense.

But he had got it right for a wonder, so I stuck the note on a spruce limb, and me and Uncle Jacob sot out for the higher ranges. He started telling me all about the Lost Haunted Mine again, like he'd already did about forty times before. Seems like they was onst a old prospector which stumbled onto a cave about sixty years before then, which the walls was solid gold and nuggets all over the floor till a body couldn't walk, as big as mushmelons. But the Injuns jumped him and run him out and he got lost and nearly starved in the desert, and went crazy. When he come to a settlement and finally got his mind back, he tried to lead a party back to it, but never could find it. Uncle Jacob said the Injuns had took rocks and bresh and hid the mouth of the cave so nobody could tell it was there. I ast him how he knowed the Injuns done that, and he said it was common knowledge. He said any fool ought a know that's jest what they done.

"This here mine," says Uncle Jacob, "is located in a hidden valley which lies away up amongst the high ranges. I ain't never seen it, and I thought I'd explored these mountains plenty. Ain't nobody more familiar with 'em than me, except old Joshua Braxton. But it stands to reason that the cave is awful hard to find, or somebody'd already found it. Accordin' to this here map, that lost valley must lie jest beyond Wildcat Canyon. Ain't many white men know whar that is, even. We're headin' there."

We had left the Gap far behind us, and was moving along the slanting side of a sharp-angled crag whilst he was talking. As we passed it we seen two figgers with hosses emerge from the other side, heading in the same direction we was, so our trails converged. Uncle Jacob glared and reched for his Winchester.

"Who's that?" he snarled.

"The big 'un's Bill Glanton," I said. "I never seen t'other'n."

"And nobody else, outside of a freak show," growled Uncle Jacob.

The other feller was a funny-looking little maverick, with laced boots and a cork sun-helmet and big spectacles. He sot his hoss like he thought it was a rocking-chair, and held his reins like he was trying to fish with 'em. Glanton hailed us. He was from Texas, original, and was rough in his speech and free with his weppins, but me and him had always got along together very well.

"Where you-all goin'?" demanded Uncle Jacob.

"I am Professor Van Brock, of New York," said the tenderfoot, whilst Bill was getting rid of his terbaccer wad. "I have employed Mr. Glanton, here, to guide me up into the mountains. I am on the track of a tribe of aborigines, which according to fairly well substantiated rumor, have inhabited the haunted Mountains since time immemorial."

"Lissen here, you four-eyed runt," said Uncle Jacob in wrath, "air you givin' me the hoss-laugh?"

"I assure yon that equine levity is the furthest thing from my thoughts," says Van Brock. "Whilst touring the country in the interests of science, I heard the rumors to which I have referred. In a village possessing the singular appellation of Chawed Ear, I met an aged prospector who told me that he had seen one of the aborigines, clad in the skin of a wild animal and armed with a bludgeon. The wild man, he said, emitted a most peculiar and piercing cry when sighted, and fled into the recesses of the hills. I am confident that it is some survivor of a pre-Indian race, and I am determined to investigate."

"They ain't no sech critter in these hills," snorted Uncle Jacob. "I've roamed all over 'em for fifty year, and I ain't seen no wild man."

"Well," says Glanton, "they's somethin' onnatural up there, because I been hearin' some funny yarns myself. I never thought I'd be huntin' wild men," he says, "but since that hash-slinger in Perdition turned me down to elope with a travelin' salesman, I welcomes the chance to lose myself in the mountains and forgit the perfidy of women-kind. What you-all doin' up here? Prospectin'?" he said, glancing at the tools on the mule.

"Not in earnest," said Uncle Jacob hurriedly. "We're jest whilin' away our time. They ain't no gold in these mountains."

"Folks says that Lost Haunted Mine is up here somewheres," said Glanton.

"A pack of lies," snorted Uncle Jacob, busting into a sweat. "Ain't no sech mine. Well, Breckinridge, le's be shovin'. Got to make Antelope Peak before sundown."

"I thought we was goin' to Wildcat Canyon," I says, and he give me a awful glare, and said: "Yes, Breckinridge, that's right, Antelope Peak, jest like you said. So long, gents."

"So long," says Glanton.

So we turned off the trail almost at right angles to our course, me follering Uncle Jacob bewilderedly. When we was out of sight of the others, he reined around again.

"When Nature give you the body of a giant, Breckinridge," he said, "she plumb forgot to give you any brains to go along with yore muscles. You want everybody to know what we're lookin' for, and whar?"

"Aw," I said, "them fellers is jest lookin' for wild men."

"Wild men!" he snorted. "They don't have to go no further'n Chawed Ear on payday night to find more wild men than they could handle. I ain't swallerin' no sech tripe. Gold is what they're after, I tell you. I seen Glanton talkin' to that Mex in Perdition the day I bought that map from him. I believe they either got wind of that mine, or know I got that map, or both."

"What you goin' to do?" I ast him.

"Head for Wildcat Canyon by another trail," he said.

So we done so and arriv there after night, him not willing to stop till we got there. It was deep, with big high cliffs cut with ravines and gulches here and there, and very wild in appearance. We didn't descend into the canyon that night, but camped on a plateau above it. Uncle Jacob 'lowed we'd begin exploring next morning. He said they was lots of caves in the canyon, and he'd been in all of 'em. He said he hadn't never found nothing except b'ars and painters and rattlesnakes, but he believed one of them caves went on through into another hidden canyon, and that was where the gold was at.

Next morning I was awoke by Uncle Jacob shaking me, and his whiskers was curling with rage.

"What's the matter?" I demanded, setting up and pulling my guns.

"They're here!" he squalled. "Dawgone it, I suspected 'em all the time! Git up, you big lunk! Don't set there gawpin' with a gun in each hand like a idjit! They're here, I tell you!"

"Who's here?" I ast.

"That dern tenderfoot and his cussed Texas gunfighter," snarled Uncle Jacob. "I was up jest at daylight, and purty soon I seen a wisp of smoke curlin' up from behind a big rock t'other side of the flat. I snuck over there, and there was Glanton fryin' bacon, and Van Brock was pertendin' to be lookin' at some flowers with a magnifyin' glass--the blame fake. He ain't no perfessor. I bet he's a derned crook. They're follerin' us. They aim to murder us and take my map."

"Aw, Glanton wouldn't do that," I said, and Uncle Jacob said: "You shet up! A man will do anything whar gold's consarned. Dang it all, git up and do somethin'! Air you goin' to set there, you big lummox, and let us git murdered in our sleep?"

That's the trouble of being the biggest man in yore clan; the rest of the family always dumps all the onpleasant jobs onto yore shoulders. I pulled on my boots and headed acrost the flat with Uncle Jacob's war-songs ringing in my ears, and I didn't notice whether he was bringing up the rear with his Winchester or not.

They was a scattering of trees on the flat, and about halfway acrost a figger emerged from amongst it and headed my direction with fire in his eye. It was Glanton.

"So, you big mountain grizzly," he greeted me rambunctiously, "you was goin' to Antelope Peak, hey? Kinda got off the road, didn't you? Oh, we're on to you, we air!"

"What you mean?" I demanded. He was acting like he was the one which ought a feel righteously indignant instead of me.

"You know what I mean!" he says, frothing slightly at the mouth. "I didn't believe it when Van Brock first said he suspicioned you, even though you hombres did act funny yesterday when he met you on the trail. But this momin' when I glimpsed yore fool Uncle Jacob spyin' on our camp, and then seen him sneakin' off through the bresh, I knowed Van Brock was right. Yo're after what we're after, and you-all resorts to dirty, onderhanded tactics. Does you deny yo're after the same thing we air?"

"Naw, I don't," I said. "Uncle Jacob's got more right to it than you-all has. And when you says we uses onderhanded tricks, yo're a liar."

"That settles it!" gnashed he. "Go for yore gun!"

"I don't want to perforate you," I growled.

"I ain't hankerin' to conclude yore mortal career," he admitted. "But Haunted Mountain ain't big enough, for both of us. Take off yore guns, and I'll maul the livin' daylights out you, big as you be."

I unbuckled my gun-belt, and hung it on a limb, and he laid off his'n, and hit me in the stummick and on the ear and in the nose, and then he busted me in the jaw and knocked out a tooth. This made me mad, so I taken him by the neck and throwed him agen the ground so hard it jolted all the wind outa him. I then sot on him and started banging his head agen a convenient boulder, and his cussing was terrible to hear.

"If you-all had acted like white men," I gritted, "we'd of give you a share in that there mine."

"What the hell air you talkin' about?" he gurgled, trying to haul his bowie out of his boot which I had my knee on.

"The Lost Haunted Mine, what you think?" I snarled, getting a fresh grip on his ears.

"Hold on!" he protested. "You mean you-all air jest lookin' for gold? Is that on the level?"

I was so astonished I quit hammering his skull agen the rock.

"Why, what else?" I demanded. "Ain't you-all follerin' us to steal Uncle jacob's map which shows where at the mine is hid?"

"Git offa me!" he snorted disgustfully, taking advantage of my surprise to push me off. "Hell!" says he, starting to knock the dust offa his britches. "I might of knowed that tenderfoot was wool-gatherin'. After we seen you-all yesterday, and he heard you mention Wildcat Canyon, he told me he believed you was follerin' us. He said that yarn about prospectin' was jest a blind. He said he believed you was workin' for a rival scientific society to git ahead of us and capture that there wild man yoreselves."

"What?" I said. "You mean that wild man yarn is straight goods?"

"Far as we're consarned," said Bill. "Prospectors is been tellin' some onusual stories about Wildcat Canyon. Well, I laughed at him at first, but he kept on usin' so many .45 calibre words that he got me to believin' it might be so. 'Cause, after all, here was me guidin' a tenderfoot on the trail of a wild man, and they warn't no reason to think that you and Jacob Grimes was any more sensible than me.

"Then, this mornin' when I seen Jacob peekin' at me from the bresh, I decided Van Brock must be right. You-all hadn't never went to Antelope Peak. The more I thought it over, the more sartain I was that you was follerin' us to steal our wild man, so I started over to have a show-down."

"Well," I said, "we've reched a understandin'. You don't want our mine, and we sure don't want yore wild man. They's plenty of them amongst my relatives on Bear Creek. Le's git Van Brock and lug him over to our camp and explain things to him and my weak-minded uncle."

"All right," said Glanton, buckling on his guns. "Hey, what's that?"

From down in the canyon come a yell: "Help! Aid! Assistance!"

"It's Van Brock!" yelped Glanton. "He's wandered down into the canyon by hisself! Come on!"

Right nigh their camp they was a ravine leading down to the floor of the canyon. We pelted down that at full speed and emerged nigh the wall of the cliffs. They was the black mouth of a cave showing nearby, in a kind of cleft, and jest outside this cleft Van Brock was staggering around, yowling like a hound-dawg with his tail caught in the door.

His cork helmet was laying on the ground all bashed outa shape, and his specs was lying nigh it. He had a knot on his head as big as a turnip and he was doing a kind of ghost-dance or something all over the place.

He couldn't see very good without his specs, 'cause when he sighted us he give a shriek and started legging it up the canyon, seeming to think we was more enemies. Not wanting to indulge in no sprinting in that heat, Bill shot a heel offa his boot, and that brung him down squalling blue murder.

"Help!" he shrieked. "Mr. Glanton! Help! I am being attacked! Help!"

"Aw, shet up," snorted Bill. "I'm Glanton. Yo're all right. Give him his specs, Breck. Now, what's the matter?"

He put 'em on, gasping for breath, and staggered up, wild-eyed, and p'inted at the cave, and hollered: "The wild man! I saw him, as I descended into the canyon on a private exploring expedition! A giant with a panther's skin about his waist, and a club in his hand. When I sought to apprehend him he dealt me a murderous blow with the bludgeon and fled into that cavern. He should be arrested!"

I looked into the cave. It was too dark to see anything except for a hoot-owl.

"He must of saw somethin', Breck," said Glanton, hitching his gun-harness. "Somethin' shore cracked him on the conk. I've been hearin' some queer tales about this canyon, myself. Maybe I better sling some lead in there--"

"No, no, no!" broke in Van Brock. "We must capture him alive!"

"What's goin' on here?" said a voice, and we turned to see Uncle Jacob approaching with his Winchester in his hands.

"Everything's all right, Uncle Jacob," I said. "They don't want yore mine. They're after the wild man, like they said, and we got him cornered in that there cave."

"All right, huh?" he snorted. "I reckon you thinks it's all right for you to waste yore time with sech dern foolishness when you oughta be helpin' me look for my mine. A big help you be!"

"Where was you whilst I was argyin' with Bill here?" I demanded.

"I knowed you could handle the situation, so I started explorin' the canyon," he said. "Come on, we got work to do."

"But the wild man!" cried Van Brock. "Your nephew would be invaluable in securing the specimen. Think of science! Think of progress! Think of--"

"Think of a striped skunk!" snorted Uncle Jacob. "Breckinridge, air you comin'?"

"Aw, shet up," I said disgustedly. "You both make me tired. I'm goin' in there and run that wild man out, and Bill, you shoot him in the hind-laig as he comes out, so's we can catch him and tie him up."

"But you left yore guns hangin' onto that limb up on the plateau," objected Glanton.

"I don't need 'em," I said. "Didn't you hear Van Brock say we was to catch him alive? If I started shootin' in the dark I might rooin him."

"All right," says Bill, cocking his six-shooters. "Go ahead. I figger yo're a match for any wild man that ever come down the pike."

So I went into the cleft and entered the cave and it was dark as all get-out. I groped my way along and discovered the main tunnel split in two, so I taken the biggest one. It seemed to get darker the further I went, and purty soon I bumped into something big and hairy and it went "Wump!" and grabbed me.

Thinks I, it's the wild man, and he's on the war-path. So I waded into him and he waded into me, and we tumbled around on the rocky floor in the dark, biting and mauling and tearing. Bear Creek is famed far and wide for its ring-tailed scrappers, and I don't have to repeat I'm the fightin'est of 'em all, but that cussed wild man sure give me my hands full. He was the biggest, hairiest critter I ever laid hands on, and he had more teeth and talons than I thought a human could possibly have. He chawed me with vigor and enthusiasm, and he walzed up and down my frame free and hearty, and swept the floor with me till I was groggy.

For a while I thought I was going to give up the ghost, and I thought with despair of how humiliated my relatives on Bear Creek would be to hear their champeen battler had been clawed to death by a wild man in a cave.

This thought maddened me so I redoubled my onslaughts, and the socks I give him ought to of laid out any man, wild or tame, to say nothing of the pile-driver kicks in his belly, and butting him with my head so he gasped. I got what felt like a ear in my mouth and commenced chawing on it, and presently, what with this and other mayhem I committed on him, he give a most inhuman squall and bust away and went lickety-split for the outside world.

I riz up and staggered after him, hearing a wild chorus of yells break forth, but no shots. I bust out into the open, bloody all over, and my clothes hanging in tatters.

"Where is he?" I hollered. "Did you let him git away?"

"Who?" said Glanton, coming out from behind a boulder, whilst Van Brock and Uncle Jacob dropped down out of a tree nearby.

"The wild man, damn it!" I roared.

"We ain't seen no wild man," said Glanton.

"Well, what was that thing I jest run outa the cave?" I hollered.

"That was a grizzly b'ar," said Glanton.

"Yeah," sneered Uncle Jacob, "and that was Van Brock's 'wild man'! And now, Breckinridge, if yo're through playin', we'll--"

"No, no!" hollered Van Brock, jumping up and down. "It was indubitably a human being which smote me and fled into the cavern. Not a bear! It is still in there somewhere, unless there is another exit to the cavern."

"Well, he ain't in there now," said Uncle Jacob, peering into the mouth of the cave. "Not even a wild man would run into a grizzly's cave, or if he did, he wouldn't stay long--ooomp!"

A rock come whizzing out of the cave and hit Uncle Jacob in the belly, and he doubled up on the ground.

"Aha!" I roared, knocking up Glanton's ready six-shooter. "I know! They's two tunnels in there. He's in that smaller cave. I went into the wrong one! Stay here, you-all, and gimme room! This time I gits him!"

With that I rushed into the cave mouth again, disregarding some more rocks which emerged, and plunged into the smaller opening. It was dark as pitch, but I seemed to be running along a narrer tunnel, and ahead of me I heard bare feet pattering on the rock. I follered 'em at full lope, and presently seen a faint hint of light. The next minute I rounded a turn and come out into a wide place, which was lit by a shaft of light coming in through a cleft in the wall, some yards up. In the light I seen a fantastic figger climbing up on a ledge, trying to rech that cleft.

"Come down offa that!" I thundered, and give a leap and grabbed the ledge by one hand and hung on, and reched for his laigs with t'other hand. He give a squall as I grabbed his ankle and splintered his club over my head. The force of the lick broke off the lip of the rock ledge I was holding on to, and we crashed to the floor together, because I didn't let loose of him. Fortunately, I hit the rock floor headfirst which broke my fall and kept me from fracturing any of my important limbs, and his head hit my jaw, which rendered him unconscious.

I riz up and picked up my limp captive and carried him out into the daylight where the others was waiting. I dumped him on the ground and they stared at him like they couldn't believe it. He was a ga'nt old cuss with whiskers about a foot long and matted hair, and he had a mountain lion's hide tied around his waist.

"A white man!" enthused Van Brock, dancing up and down. "An unmistakable Caucasian! This is stupendous! A pre-historic survivor of a pre-Indian epoch! What an aid to anthropology! A wild man! A veritable wild man!"

"Wild man, hell!" snorted Uncle Jacob. "That there's old Joshua Braxton, which was trying to marry that old maid schoolteacher down at Chawed Ear all last winter."

"I was tryin' to marry her!" said Joshua bitterly, setting up suddenly and glaring at all of us. "That there is good, that there is! And me all the time fightin' for my life agen it. Her and all her relations was tryin' to marry her to me. They made my life a curse. They was finally all set to kidnap me and marry me by force. That's why I come away off up here, and put on this rig to scare folks away. All I crave is peace and quiet and no dern women."

Van Brock begun to cry because they warn't no wild man, and Uncle Jacob said: "Well, now that this dern foolishness is settled, maybe I can git to somethin' important. Joshua, you know these mountains even better'n I do. I want ya to help me find the Lost Haunted Mine."

"There ain't no sech mine," said Joshua. "That old prospector imagined all that stuff whilst he was wanderin' around over the desert crazy."

"But I got a map I bought from a Mexican in Perdition!" hollered Uncle Jacob.

"Lemme see that map," said Glanton. "Why, hell," he said, "that there is a fake. I seen that Mexican drawin' it, and he said he was goin' to try to sell it to some old jassack for the price of a drunk."

Uncle Jacob sot down on a rock and pulled his whiskers. "My dreams is bust. I'm goin' to go home to my wife," he said weakly.

"You must be desperate if it's come to that," said old Joshua acidly. "You better stay up here. If they ain't no gold, they ain't no women to torment a body, neither."

"Women is a snare and a delusion," agreed Glanton. "Van Brock can go back with these fellers. I'm stayin' with Joshua."

"You all oughta be ashamed talkin' about women that way," I reproached 'em. "I've suffered from the fickleness of certain women more'n either of you snake-hunters, but I ain't let it sour me on the sex. What," I says, waxing oratorical, "in this lousy and troubled world of six-shooters and centipedes, what, I asts you-all, can compare to women's gentle sweetness--"

"There the scoundrel is!" screeched a familiar voice like a rusty buzzsaw. "Don't let him git away! Shoot him if he tries to run!"

We turned sudden. We'd been argying so loud amongst ourselves we hadn't noticed a gang of folks coming down the ravine. There was Aunt Lavaca and the sheriff of Chawed Ear with ten men, and they all p'inted sawed-off shotguns at me.

"Don't git rough, Elkins," warned the sheriff nervously. "They're loaded with buckshot and ten-penny nails. I knows yore repertation and I takes no chances. I arrests you for the kidnappin' of Jacob Grimes."

"Air you plumb crazy?" I demanded.

"Kidnappin'!" hollered Aunt Lavaca, waving a piece of paper. "Abductin' yore pore old uncle! Aimin' to hold him for ransom! It's all writ down over yore name right here on this here paper! Sayin' yo're takin' Jacob away off into the mountains--warnin' me not to try to foller! Same as threatenin' me! I never heered of sech doin's! Soon as that good-for-nothin' Joe Hopkins brung me that there imperdent letter, I went right after the sheriff.... Joshua Braxton, what air you doin' in them ondecent togs? My land, I dunno what we're a-comin' to! Well, sheriff, what you standin' there for like a ninny? Why'n't you put some handcuffs and chains and shackles onto him? Air you scairt of the big lunkhead?"

"Aw, heck," I said. "This is all a mistake. I warn't threatenin' nobody in that there letter--"

"Then where's Jacob?" she demanded. "Perjuice him imejitly, or--"

"He ducked into the cave," said Glanton.

I stuck my head in and roared: "Uncle Jacob! You come outa there and explain before I come in after you!"

He snuck out looking meek and down-trodden, and I says: "You tell these idjits that I ain't no kidnapper."

"That's right," he said. "I brung him along with me."

"Hell!" said the sheriff disgustedly. "Have we come all this way on a wild goose chase? I should of knew better'n to lissen to a woman--"

"You shet yore fool mouth!" squalled Aunt Lavaca. "A fine sheriff you be. Anyway--what was Breckinridge doin' up here with you, Jacob?"

"He was helpin' me look for a mine, Lavacky," he said.

"Helpin' you?" she screeched. "Why, I sent him to fetch you back! Breckinridge Elkins, I'll tell yore pap about this, you big, lazy, good-for-nothin', low-down, ornery--"

"Aw, SHET UP!" I roared, exasperated beyond endurance. I seldom lets my voice go its full blast. Echoes rolled through the canyon like thunder, the trees shook and pine cones fell like hail, and rocks tumbled down the mountain sides. Aunt Lavaca staggered backwards with a outraged squall.

"Jacob!" she hollered. "Air you goin' to 'low that ruffian to use that there tone of voice to me? I demands that you flail the livin' daylights outa the scoundrel right now!"

"Now, now, Lavacky," he started soothing her, and she give him a clip under the ear that changed ends with him, and the sheriff and his posse and Van Brock took out up the ravine like the devil was after 'em.

Glanton bit hisself off a chaw of terbaccer and says to me, he says: "Well, what was you fixin' to say about women's gentle sweetness?"

"Nothin'," I snarled. "Come on, let's git goin'. I yearns to find a more quiet and secluded spot than this here'n. I'm stayin' with Joshua and you and the grizzly."

Chapter XI - EDUCATE OR BUST

Me and Bill Glanton and Joshua Braxton stood on the canyon rim and listened to the orations of Aunt Lavaca Grimes fading in the distance as she herded Uncle Jacob for the home range.

"There," says Joshua sourly, "goes the most hen-pecked pore critter in the Humbolts. For sech I has only pity and contempt. He's that scairt of a woman he don't dast call his soul his own."

"And what air we, I'd like to know?" says Glanton, slamming his hat down on the ground. "What right has we to criticize Jacob, when it's on account of women that we're hidin' in these cussed mountains? Yo're here, Joshua, because yo're scairt of that old maid schoolteacher. Breck's here because a gal in War Paint give him the gate. And I'm here sourin' my life because a hash-slinger done me wrong!"

"I'm tellin' you gents," says Bill, "no woman is goin' to rooin my life! Lookin' at Jacob Grimes has teached me a lesson. I ain't goin' to eat my heart out up here in the mountains in the company of a soured old hermit and a love-lorn human grizzly. I'm goin' to War Paint, and bust the bank at the Yaller Dawg's Tail gamblin' hall, and then I'm goin' to head for San Francisco and a high-heeled old time! The bright lights calls me, gents, and I heeds the summons! You-all better take heart and return to yore respective corrals."

"Not me," I says. "If I go back to Bear Creek without no gal, Glory McGraw will rawhide the life outa me."

"As for me returnin' to Chawed Ear," snarls old Joshua, "whilst that old she-mudhen is anywhere in the vicinity, I haunts the wilds and solitudes, if it takes all the rest of my life. You 'tend to yore own business, Bill Glanton."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," says Bill. "So dern many things is been happenin' I ain't had time to tell you. But that old maid schoolteacher ain't to Chawed Ear no more. She pulled out for Arizona three weeks ago."

"That's news!" says Joshua, straightening up and throwing away his busted club. "Now I can return and take my place among men--Hold on!" says he, reching for his club again. "Likely they'll be gittin' some other old harridan to take her place! That new-fangled schoolhouse they got at Chawed Ear is a curse and a blight. We'll never be rid of female school-shooters. I better stay up here, after all."

"Don't worry," says Bill. "I seen a pitcher of the gal that's comin' to take Miss Stark's place, and I can assure you right now, that a gal as young and purty as her wouldn't never try to sot her brand on no old buzzard like you."

I come alive suddenly.

"Young and purty, you says?" I says.

"As a pitcher," he says. "First time I ever knowed a schoolteacher could be less'n forty and have a face that didn't look like the beginnin's of a long drought. She's due into Chawed Ear tomorrer, on the stage from the East, and the whole town's goin' to turn out to welcome her. The mayor aims to make a speech, if he's sober enough, and they've got together a band to play."

"Damn foolishness!" snorted Joshua. "I don't take no stock in eddication."

"I dunno," I said. "They's times when I wish I could read and write."

"What would you read outside of the labels on whisky bottles?" snorted old Joshua.

"Everybody ought to know how," I said defiantly. "We ain't never had no school on Bear Creek."

"Funny how a purty face changes a man's views," says Bill. "I remember onst Miss Stark ast you how you folks up on Bear Creek would like for her to come up there and teach yore chillern, and you taken one look at her face, and told her that it was agen the principles of Bear Creek to have their peaceful innercence invaded by the corruptin' influences of education, and the folks was all banded together to resist sech corruption."

I ignored him and says: "It's my duty to Bear Creek to pervide culture for the risin' generation. We ain't never had a school, but by golly, we're goin' to, if I have to lick every old moss-back in the Humbolts. I'll build the cabin for the schoolhouse myself."

"And where'll you git a teacher?" ast old Joshua. "This gal that's comin' to teach at Chawed Ear is the only one in the county. Chawed Ear ain't goin' to let you have her."

"Chawed Ear is, too," I says. "If they won't give her up peaceful, I resorts to vi'lence. Bear Creek is goin' to have education and culture, if I have to wade ankle-deep in gore to pervide it. Come on, le's go! I'm r'arin' to start the ball for arts and letters. Air you all with me?"

"Till hell freezes!" acclaimed Bill. "My shattered nerves needs a little excitement, and I can always count on you to pervide sech. How about it, Joshua?"

"Yo're both crazy," growls old Joshua. "But I've lived up here eatin' nuts and wearin' a painter-hide till I ain't shore of my own sanity. Anyway, I know the only way to disagree successfully with Elkins is to kill him, and I got strong doubts of bein' able to do that, even if I wanted to. Lead on! I'll do anything in reason to keep eddication out of Chawed Ear. 'Tain't only my own feelin's in regard to schoolteachers. It's the principle of the thing."

"Git yore clothes then," I said, "and le's hustle."

"This painter hide is all I got," he said.

"You cain't go down into the settlements in that garb," I says.

"I can and will," says he. "I look about as civilized as you do, with yore clothes all tore to rags account of that b'ar. I got a hoss down in that canyon. I'll git him."

So Joshua got his hoss, and Glanton got his'n, and I got Cap'n Kidd, and then the trouble started. Cap'n Kidd evidently thought Joshua was some kind of a varmint, because every time Joshua come near him he taken in after him and run him up a tree. And every time Joshua tried to come down, Cap'n Kidd busted loose from me and run him back up again.

I didn't get no help from Bill; all he done was laugh like a spotted hyener, till Cap'n Kidd got irritated at them guffaws and kicked him in the belly and knocked him clean through a clump of spruces. Time I got him ontangled he looked about as disreputable as what I did, because his clothes was tore most off of him. We couldn't find his hat, neither, so I tore up what was left of my shirt and he tied the pieces around his head like a Apache. We was sure a wild-looking bunch.

But I was so disgusted thinking about how much time we was wasting while all the time Bear Creek was wallering in ignorance, so the next time Cap'n Kidd went for Joshua I took and busted him betwixt the ears with my six-shooter, and that had some effect on him.

So we sot out, with Joshua on a ga'nt old nag he rode bare-back with a hackamore, and a club he toted not having no gun. I had Bill to ride betwixt him and me, so's to keep that painter hide as far from Cap'n Kidd as possible, but every time the wind shifted and blowed the smell to him, Cap'n Kidd reched over and taken a bite at Joshua, and sometimes he bit Bill's hoss instead, and sometimes he bit Bill, and the langwidge Bill directed at that pore dumb animal was shocking to hear.

But between rounds, as you might say, we progressed down the trail, and early the next morning we come out onto the Chawed Ear Road, some miles west of Chawed Ear. And there we met our first human--a feller on a pinto mare, and when he seen us he give a awful squall and took out down the road towards Chawed Ear like the devil had him by the seat of the britches.

"Le's catch him and find out if the teacher's got there yet!" I hollered, and we taken out after him, yelling for him to wait a minute, but he spurred his hoss that much harder, and before we'd gone any piece, hardly, Joshua's fool hoss jostled agen Cap'n Kidd, which smelt that painter skin and got his bit betwixt his teeth and run Joshua and his hoss three miles through the bresh before I could stop him. Glanton follered us, and of, course, time we got back to the road, the feller on the pinto mare was out of sight long ago.

So we headed for Chawed Ear, but everybody that lived along the road had run into their cabins and bolted the doors, and they shot at us through their winders as we rode by. Glanton said irritably, after having his off-ear nicked by a buffalo rifle, he says: "Dern it, they must know we aim to steal their schoolteacher."

"Aw, they couldn't know that," I said. "I bet they is a war on between Chawed Ear and War Paint."

"Well, what they shootin' at me for, then?" demanded old Joshua. "I don't hang out at War Paint, like you fellers. I'm a Chawed Ear man myself."

"I doubt if they rekernizes you with all them whiskers and that rig you got on," I said. "Anyway--what's that?"

Ahead of us, away down the road, we seen a cloud of dust, and here come a gang of men on hosses, waving their guns and yelling.

"Well, whatever the reason is," says Glanton, "we better not stop to find out! Them gents is out for blood!"

"Pull into the bresh," says I. "I'm goin' to Chawed Ear today in spite of hell, high water, and all the gunmen they can raise!"

So we taken to the bresh, leaving a trail a blind man could of follered, but we couldn't help it, and they lit into the bresh after us, about forty or fifty of 'em, but we dodged and circled and taken short cuts old Joshua knowed about, and when we emerged into the town of Chawed Ear, our pursuers warn't nowheres in sight. They warn't nobody in sight in the town, neither. All the doors was closed and the shutters up on the cabins and saloons and stores and everything. It was pecooliar.

As we rode into the clearing somebody let bam at us with a shotgun from the nearest cabin, and the load combed old Joshua's whiskers. This made me mad, and I rode at the cabin and pulled my foot out'n the stirrup and kicked the door in, and while I was doing this, the feller inside hollered and jumped out the winder, and Glanton grabbed him by the neck and taken his gun away from him. It was Esau Barlow, one of Chawed Ear's confirmed citizens.

"What the hell does you Chawed Ear buzzards mean by this here hostility?" roared Bill.

"Is that you, Glanton?" gasped Barlow, blinking his eyes.

"Yes, it's me!" bellered Bill wrathfully. "Do I look like a Injun?"

"Yes--ow! I mean, I didn't know you in that there turban," says Barlow. "Am I dreamin', or is that Joshua Braxton and Breckinridge Elkins?"

"Shore it's us!" snorted Joshua. "Who you think?"

"Well," says Esau, rubbing his neck, "I didn't know!" He stole a glance at Joshua's painter-hide and he batted his eyes again, and kind of shaken his head like he warn't sure of hisself, even then.

"Where is everybody?" Joshua demanded.

"Well," says Esau, "a little while ago Dick Lynch rode into town with his hoss all of a lather, and swore he'd jest out-run the wildest war-party that ever come down from the hills!

"'Boys,' says Dick, 'they ain't neither Injuns nor white men! They're them cussed wild men that New York perfessor was talkin' about! One of 'em's big as a grizzly b'ar, with no shirt on, and he's ridin' a hoss bigger'n a bull moose. One of the others is as ragged and ugly as him, but not so big, and wearin' a Apache head-dress. T'other'n's got nothin' on but a painter's hide, and a club, and his hair and whiskers falls to his shoulders! When they seen me,' says Dick, 'they sot up the awfullest yells I ever heard and come for me like so many wild Injuns. I fogged it for town,' says Dick, warnin' everybody along the road to fort theirselves in their cabins."

"Well," says Esau, "when he says that, sech men as was left in town got their hosses and guns--except me which cain't ride account of a risin' I got in a vital spot--and they taken out up the road to meet the war-party before it got into town."

"Well, of all the cussed fools!" I snorted. "Lissen, where-at's the new schoolteacher?"

"She ain't arriv yet," says he. "She's due on the next stage, and the mayor and the band rode out to meet her at the Yaller Creek crossin' and escort her into town in honor. They pulled out before Dick Lynch brung news of the war-party."

"Well, come on!" I says to my warriors. "I aims to meet that stage too!"

So we pulled out and fogged it down the road, and purty soon we heard music blaring ahead of us, and men yipping and shooting off their pistols like they does when they're celebrating, so we jedged the stage had already arriv.

"What you goin' to do now?" ast Glanton, and about that time a noise bust out behind us, and I looked back and seen that gang of Chawed Ear maniacs which had been chasing us dusting down the road after us, waving their Winchesters. I seen it warn't no use to try to stop and argy with 'em. They'd fill us full of lead before we could get clost enough to make 'em hear what we was saying. So I hollered: "Come on! If they git her into town they'll fort theirselves agen us, and we'll never git her! We'll have to take her by force! Foller me!"

So we swept down the road and around the bend, and there was the stagecoach coming up the road with the mayor riding alongside with his hat in his hand, and a whisky bottle sticking out of each saddle-bag and his hip pocket. He was orating at the top of his voice to make hisself heard above the racket the band was making. They was blowing horns of every kind, and banging drums, and twanging on Jews harps, and the hosses was skittish and shying and jumping. But we heard the mayor say: "--And so we welcomes you, Miss Devon, to our peaceful little community, where life runs smooth and tranquil, and men's souls is overflowing with milk and honey--" And jest then we stormed around the the bend and come tearing down on 'em with the mob right behind us yelling and cussing and shooting free and fervent.

The next minute they was the damndest mix-up you ever seen, what with the hosses bucking their riders off, and men yelling and cussing, and the hosses hitched to the stage running away and knocking the mayor off his hoss. We hit 'em like a cyclone and they shot at us and hit us over the head with their derned music horns, and right in the middle of the fray the mob behind us rounded the bend and piled up amongst us before they could check theirselves, and everybody was so confused they started fighting everybody else. Old Joshua was laying right and left with his club, and Glanton was beating the band over their heads with his six-shooter, and I was trompling everybody in my rush for the stage.

Because the fool hosses had whirled around and started in the general direction of the Atlantic Ocean, and neither the driver nor the shotgun guard could stop 'em. But Cap'n Kidd overtook it in maybe a dozen strides, and I left the saddle in a flying leap and landed on it. The guard tried to shoot me with his shotgun so I throwed it into a alder clump and he didn't let go of it quick enough so he went along with it.

I then grabbed the reins out of the driver's hands and swung them fool hosses around, and the stage kind of revolved on one wheel for a dizzy instant and then settled down again and we headed back up the road lickety-split and in a instant was right amongst the melee that was going on around Bill and Joshua.

About that time I realized that the driver was trying to stab me with a butcher knife, so I kind of tossed him off the stage, and there ain't no sense in him going around saying he's going to have me arrested account of him landing headfirst in the bass horn so it take seven men to pull his head out of it. He ought to watch where he falls, when he gets throwed off a stage going at a high run.

I feels, moreover, that the mayor is prone to carry petty grudges, or he wouldn't be belly-aching about me accidentally running over him with all four wheels. And it ain't my fault he was stepped on by Cap'n Kidd, neither. Cap'n Kidd was jest follering the stage, because he knowed I was on it. And it naturally irritates any well-trained hoss to stumble over somebody, and that's why Cap'n Kidd chawed the mayor's ear.

As for them fellers which happened to get knocked down and run over by the stage, I didn't have nothing personal agen 'em. I was jest rescuing Joshua and Bill which I seen was outnumbered about twenty to one. I was doing them idjits a favor, if they only knowed it, because in about another minute Bill would of started using the front ends of his six-shooters instead of the butts, and the fight would of turnt into a massacre. Glanton has got a awful temper.

Him and Joshua had laid out a remarkable number of the enemy, but the battle was going agen 'em when I arriv on the field of carnage. As the stage crashed through the mob I reched down and got Joshua by the neck and pulled him out from under about fifteen men which was beating him to death with their gun butts and pulling out his whiskers, and I slung him up on top of the other luggage. About that time we was rushing past the melee which Bill was the center of, and I reched down and snared him as we went by, but three of the men which had hold of him wouldn't let go, so I hauled all four of 'em up into the stage. I then handled the team with one hand whilst with the other'n I pulled them idjits loose from Bill like pulling ticks off a cow's hide, and throwed 'em at the mob which was chasing us.

Men and hosses piled up in a stack on the road which was further complicated by Cap'n Kidd's actions as he come busting along after the stage, and by the time we sighted Chawed Ear again, our enemies was far behind us down the road.

We busted right through Chawed Ear in a fog of dust, and the women and chillern which had ventured out of their cabins, squalled and run back in again, though they warn't in no danger at all. But Chawed Ear folks is pecooliar that way.

When we was out of sight of Chawed Ear on the road to War Paint I give the lines to Bill and swung down on the side of the stage and stuck my head in.

They was one of the purtiest gals I ever seen in there, all huddled up in a corner as pale as she could be, and looking so scairt I thought she was going to faint, which I'd heard Eastern gals had a habit of doing.

"Oh, spare me!" she begged, clasping her hands in front of her. "Please don't scalp me! I cannot speak your language, but if you can understand English, please have mercy on me--"

"Be at ease, Miss Devon," I reassured her. "I ain't no Injun, nor wild man neither. I'm a white man, and so is my friends here. We wouldn't none of us hurt a flea. We're that refined and tender-hearted you wouldn't believe it--" About that time a wheel hit a stump and the stage jumped into the air and I bit my tongue, and roared in some irritation: "Bill, you--son of a--polecat! Stop them hosses before I comes up there and breaks yore--neck!"

"Try it and see what you git, you beefheaded lummox!" he retorted, but he pulled the hosses to a stop, and I taken off my hat and opened the stage door. Bill and Joshua clumb down and peered over my shoulder.

"Miss Devon," I says, "I begs yore pardon for this here informal welcome. But you sees before you a man whose heart bleeds for the benighted state of his native community. I'm Breckinridge Elkins from Bear Creek, where hearts is pure and motives is noble, but education is weak.

"You sees before you," I says, "a man which has growed up in ignorance. I cain't neither read nor write my own name. Joshua here, in the painter-skin, he cain't neither, and neither can Bill--"

"That's a lie," says Bill. "I can read and--oomp!" Because I'd kind of stuck my elbow in his stummick. I didn't want Bill Glanton to spile the effeck of my speech.

"They is some excuse for men like us," I says. "When we was cubs schools was unknown in these mountains, and keepin' a sculpin' knife from betwixt yore skull and yore hair was more important than makin' marks onto a slate.

"But times has changed. I sees the young 'uns of my home range growin' up in the same ignorance as me," I said, "and my heart bleeds for 'em. They is no sech excuse for them as they was for me. The Injuns has went, mostly, and a age of culture is due to be ushered in.

"Miss Devon," I says, "will you please come up to Bear Creek and be our schoolteacher?"

"Why," says she, bewilderedly, "I came West expecting to teach school at a place called Chawed Ear, but I haven't signed any contract--"

"How much was them snake-hunters goin' to pay you?" I ast.

"Ninety dollars a month," says she.

"We pays you a hundred on Bear Creek," I says. "Board and lodgin' free."

"But what will the people of Chawed Ear say?" she said.

"Nothin'!" I says heartily. "I done arranged that. They got the interests of Bear Creek so much at heart, that they wouldn't think of interferin' with any arrangements I make. You couldn't drag 'em up to Bear Creek with a team of oxen!"

"It seems all very strange and irregular," says she, "but I suppose--"

So I says: "Good! Fine! Great! Then it's all settled. Le's go!"

"Where?" she ast, grabbing hold of the stage as I clumb into the seat.

"To War Paint, first," I says, "where I gits me some new clothes and a good gentle hoss for you to ride--because nothin' on wheels can git over the Bear Creek road--and then we heads for home! Git up, hosses! Culture is on her way to the Humbolts!"

Well, a few days later me and the schoolteacher was riding sedately up the trail to Bear Creek, with a pack-mule carrying her plunder, and you never seen nothing so elegant--store-bought clothes and a hat with a feather into it, and slippers and everything. She rode in a side-saddle I bought for her--the first that ever come into the Humbolts. She was sure purty. My heart beat in wild enthusiasm for education ever time I looked at her.

I swung off the main trail so's to pass by the spring in the creek where Glory McGraw filled her pail every morning and evening. It was jest about time for her to be there, and sure enough she was. She straightened when she heard the hosses, and started to say something, and then her eyes got wide as she seen my elegant companion, and her purty red mouth stayed open. I pulled up my hoss and taken off my hat with a perlite sweep I learnt from a gambler in War Paint, and I says: "Miss Devon, lemme interjuice you to Miss Glory McGraw, the datter of one of Bear Creek's leadin' citizens. Miss McGraw, this here is Miss Margaret Devon, from Boston, Massachusetts, which is goin' to teach school here."

"How do you do?" says Miss Margaret, but Glory didn't say nothing. She jest stood there, staring, and the pail fell outa her hand and splashed into the creek.

"Allow me to pick up yore pail," I said, and started to lean down from my saddle to get it, but she started like she was stung, and said, in a voice which sounded kind of strained and onnatural: "Don't tech it! Don't tech nothin' I own! Git away from me!"

"What a beautiful girl!" says Miss Margaret as we rode on. "But how peculiarly she acted!"

But I said nothing, because I was telling myself, well, I reckon I showed Glory McGraw something this time. I reckon she sees now that I warn't lying when I said I'd bring a peach back to Bear Creek with me. But somehow I warn't enjoying my triumph nigh as much as I'd thought I would.

Chapter XII - WAR ON BEAR CREEK

PAP DUG the nineteenth buckshot out of my shoulder and said: "Pigs is more disturbin' to the peace of a community than scandal, divorce, and corn-licker put together. And," says pap, pausing to strop his bowie on my sculp where the hair was all burnt off, "when the pig is a razorback hawg, and is mixed up with a lady schoolteacher, a English tenderfoot, and a passle of blood-thirsty relatives, the result is appallin' for a peaceable man to behold. Hold still till Buckner gits yore ear sewed back on."

Pap was right. I warn't to blame for nothing that happened. Breaking Joe Gordon's laig was a mistake, and Erath Elkins is a liar when he says I caved in them five ribs of his'n on purpose. If Uncle Jeppard Grimes had been tending to his own business, he wouldn't have got the seat of his britches filled with bird-shot, and I don't figger it was my fault that cousin Bill Kirby's cabin got burned down. And I don't take no blame for Jim Gordon's ear which Jack Grimes shot off, neither. I figger everybody was more to blame than I was, and I stand ready to wipe up the road with anybody which disagrees with me.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Lemme go back to the days when culture first reared its head amongst the simple inhabitants of Bear Creek.

Jest like I said, I was determined that education should be committed on the rising generation, and I gathered the folks in a clearing too far away for Miss Devon to be stampeded by the noise of argyment and persuasion, and I sot forth my views. Opinions differed vi'lently like they always does on Bear Creek, but when the dust settled and the smoke drifted away, it was found that a substantial majority of folks agreed to see things my way. Some was awful sot agen it, and said no good would come of book larning, but after I had swept the clearing with six or seven of them, they allowed it might be a good thing after all, and agreed to let Miss Margaret take a whack at uplifting the young 'uns.

Then they ast me how much money I'd promised her, and when I said a hundred a month they sot up a howl that they wasn't that much hard money seen on Bear Creek in a year's time. But I settled that. I said each family would contribute whatever they was able--coonskins, honey, b'ar hides, corn-licker, or what not, and I'd pack the load into War Paint each month and turn it into cash money. I added that I'd be more'n glad to call around each month to make sure nobody failed to contribute.

Then we argyed over where to build the cabin for the schoolhouse, and I wanted to build it between pap's cabin and the corral, but he riz up and said he'd be dadgasted he'd have a schoolhouse anywhere nigh his dwelling-house, with a passle of yelling kids scaring off all the eatable varmints. He said if it was built within a mile of his cabin it would be because they was somebody on Bear Creek which had a quicker trigger finger and a better shooting eye than what he did. So after some argyment in the course of which five of Bear Creek's leading citizens was knocked stiff, we decided to build the schoolhouse over nigh the settlement on Apache Mountain. That was the thickest populated spot on Bear Creek anyway. And Cousin Bill Kirby agreed to board her for his part of contributing to her wages.

Well, it would of suited me better to had the schoolhouse built closer to my home-cabin, and have Miss Margaret board with us, but I was purty well satisfied, because this way I could see her any time I wanted to. I done this every day, and she looked purtier every time I seen her. The weeks went by, and everything was going fine. I was calling on Miss Margaret every day, and she was learning me how to read and write, though it was a mighty slow process. But I was progressing a little in my education, and a whole lot--I thought--in my love affair, when peace and romance hit a snag in the shape of a razorback pig named Daniel Webster.

It begun when that there tenderfoot come riding up the trail from War Paint with Tunk Willoughby. Tunk ain't got no more sense than the law allows, but he sure showed good jedgment that time, because having delivered his charge to his destination, he didn't tarry. He merely handed me a note, and p'inted dumbly at the tenderfoot, whilst holding his hat reverently in his hand meanwhile.

"What you mean by that there gesture?" I ast him rather irritably, and he said: "I doffs my sombrero in respect to the departed. Bringin' a specimen like that onto Bear Creek is jest like heavin' a jackrabbit to a pack of starvin' loboes."

He hove a sigh and shook his head, and put his hat back on. "Rassle a cat in pieces," he said.

"What the hell air you talkin' about?" I demanded.

"That's Latin," he said. "It means rest in peace."

And with that he dusted it down the trail and left me alone with the tenderfoot which all the time was setting his cayuse and looking at me like I was a curiosity or something.

I called for my sister Ouachita to come read that there note for me, because she'd learnt how from Miss Margaret, so she did, and it run as follers:

"Dere Breckinridge: This will interjuice Mr. J. Pembroke Pemberton a English sportsman which I met in Frisco recent. He was disapinted because he hadnt found no adventures in America and was fixin to go to Aferker to shoot liuns and elerfants but I perswaded him to come with me because I knowed he would find more hell on Bear Creek in a week than he would find in a yere in Aferker or any other place. But the very day we hit War Paint I run into a old ackwaintance from Texas I will not speak no harm of the ded but I wish the son of a buzzard had shot me somewheres besides in my left laig which already had three slugs in it which I never could get cut out. Anyway I am lade up and not able to come on to Bear Creek with J. Pembroke Pemberton. I am dependin' on you to show him some good bear huntin' and other excitement and pertect him from yore relatives I know what a awful responsibility I am puttin on you but I am askin this as yore friend, William Harrison Glanton, Esqy ."

I looked J. Pembroke over. He was a medium-sized young feller and looked kinda soft in spots. He had yaller hair and very pink cheeks like a gal; and he had on whip-cord britches and tan riding boots which was the first I ever seen. And he had on a funny kinda coat with pockets and a belt which he called a shooting jacket, and a big hat like a mushroom made outa cork with a red ribbon around it. And he had a pack-hoss loaded with all kinds of plunder, and five or six different kinds of shotguns and rifles.

"So yo're J. Pembroke," I says, and he says: "Oh, rahther! And you, no doubt, are the person Mr. Glanton described to me as Breckinridge Elkins?"

"Yeah," I said. "Light and come in. We got b'ar meat and honey for supper."

"I say," he says, climbing down. "Pardon me for being a bit personal, old chap, but may I ask if your--ah--magnitude of bodily stature is not a bit unique?"

"I dunno," I says, not having the slightest idee what he was talking about. "I always votes a straight Democratic ticket, myself."

He started to say something else, but jest then pap and my brothers John and Bill and Jim and Buckner and Garfield come to the door to see what the noise was about, and he turned pale and said faintly: "I beg your pardon; giants seem to be the rule in these parts."

"Pap says men ain't what they was when he was in his prime," I said, "but we manage to git by."

Well, J. Pembroke laid into them b'ar steaks with a hearty will, and when I told him we'd go after b'ar next day, he ast me how many days travel it'd take till we got to the b'ar country.

"Heck!" I says. "You don't have to travel to git b'ar in these parts. If you forgit to bolt yore door at night yo're liable to find a grizzly sharin' yore bunk before mornin'. This here'n we're eatin' was catched by my sister Elinor there whilst tryin' to rob the pig-pen out behind the cabin last night."

"My word!" he says, looking at her pecooliarly. "And may I ask, Miss Elkins, what calibre of firearm you used?"

"I knocked him in the head with a wagon spoke," she said, and he shook his head to hisself and muttered: "Extraordinary!"

J. Pembroke slept in my bunk and I taken the floor that night; and we was up at daylight and ready to start after the b'ar. Whilst J. Pembroke was fussing over his guns, pap come out and pulled his whiskers and shook his head and said: "That there is a perlite young man, but I'm afeared he ain't as hale as he ought a be. I jest give him a pull at my jug, and he didn't gulp but one good snort and like to choked to death."

"Well," I said, buckling the cinches on Cap'n Kidd, "I've done learnt not to jedge outsiders by the way they takes their licker on Bear Creek. It takes a Bear Creek man to swig Bear Creek corn juice."

"I hopes for the best," sighed pap. "But it's a dismal sight to see a young man which cain't stand up to his licker. Whar you takin' him?"

"Over towards Apache Mountain," I said. "Erath seen a exter big grizzly over there day before yesterday."

"Hmmmmm!" says pap. "By a pecooliar coincidence the schoolhouse is over on the side of Apache Mountain, ain't it, Breckinridge?"

"Maybe it is and maybe it ain't," I replied with dignerty, and rode off with J. Pembroke ignoring pap's sourcastic comment which he hollered after me: "Maybe they is a connection betwixt book-larnin' and b'ar-huntin', but who am I to say?"

J. Pembroke was a purty good rider, but he used a funny-looking saddle without no horn nor cantle, and he had the derndest gun I ever seen. It was a double-barrel rifle, and he said it was a elerfant-gun. It was big enough to knock a hill down. He was surprised I didn't tote no rifle and ast me what would I do if we met a b'ar. I told him I was depending on him to shoot it, but I said if it was necessary for me to go into action, my six-shooters was plenty.

"My word!" says he. "You mean to say you can bring down a grizzly with a shot from a pistol?"

"Not always," I said. "Sometimes I have to bust him over the head with the barrel to finish him."

He didn't say nothing for a long time after that.

Well, we rode over on the lower slopes of Apache Mountain, and tied the hosses in a holler and went through the bresh on foot. That was a good place for b'ars, because they come there very frequently looking for Uncle Jeppard Grimes' pigs which runs loose all over the lower slopes of the mountain.

But jest like it always is when yo're looking for something special, we didn't see a cussed b'ar.

The middle of the evening found us around on the side of the mountain where they is a settlement of Kirbys and Grimeses and Gordons. Half a dozen families has their cabins within a mile or so of each other, and I dunno what in hell they want to crowd up together that way for, it would plumb smother me, but pap says they was always pecooliar that way.

We warn't in sight of the settlement, but the schoolhouse warn't far off, and I said to J. Pembroke: "You wait here a spell, and maybe a b'ar will come by. Miss Margaret Devon is teachin' me how to read and write, and it's time for my lesson."

I left J. Pembroke setting on a log hugging his elerfant-gun, and I strode through the bresh and come out at the upper end of the run which the settlement was at the other'n, and school had jest turned out and the chillern was going home, and Miss Margaret was waiting for me in the log schoolhouse.

She was setting at her hand-made desk as I come in, ducking my head so as not to bump it agen the top of the door and perlitely taking off my Stetson. She looked kinda tired and discouraged, and I said: "Has the young'uns been raisin' any hell today, Miss Margaret?"

"Oh, no," she said. "They're very polite--in fact I've noticed that Bear Creek people are always polite when they're not killing each other. I've finally gotten used to the boys wearing their pistols and bowie knives to school. But somehow it seems so futile. This is all so terribly different from everything to which I've always been accustomed. I get discouraged and feel like giving it up."

"You'll git used to it," I consoled her. "It'll be a lot different onst yo're married to some honest reliable young man."

She give me a startled look and said: "Married to someone here on Bear Creek?"

"Shore," I said, involuntarily expanding my chest. "Everybody is jest wonderin' when you'll set the day. But le's git at my readin' lesson. I done learnt the words you writ out for me yesterday."

But she warn't listenin', and she said: "Do you have any idea of why Mr. Joel Grimes and Mr. Esau Gordon quit calling on me? Until a few days ago one or the other was at Mr. Kirby's cabin where I board almost every night."

"Now don't you worry none about them," I soothed her. "Joel'll be about on crutches before the week's out, and Esau can already walk without bein' helped. I always handles my relatives as easy as possible."

"You fought with them?" she exclaimed.

"I jest convinced 'em you didn't want to be bothered with 'em," I reassured her. "I'm easy-goin', but I don't like competition."

"Competition!" Her eyes flared wide open and she looked at me like she hadn't never seen me before. "Do you mean that you--that I--that--"

"Well," I said modestly, "everybody on Bear Creek is jest wonderin' when yo're goin' to set the day for us to git hitched. You see gals don't generally stay single very long in these parts--hey, what's the matter?"

Because she was getting paler and paler like she'd et something which didn't agree with her.

"Nothing," she said faintly. "You--you mean people are expecting me to marry you?"

"Sure," I said.

She muttered something that sounded like "My God!" and licked her lips with her tongue and looked at me like she was about ready to faint. Well, it ain't every gal which has a chance to get hitched to Breckinridge Elkins, so I didn't blame her for being excited.

"You've been very kind to me, Breckinridge," she said feebly. "But I--this is so sudden--so unexpected--I never thought--I never dreamed--"

"I don't want to rush you," I said. "Take yore time. Next week will be soon enough. Anyway, I got to build us a cabin, and--"

Bang! went a gun, too loud for a Winchester.

"Elkins!" It was J. Pembroke yelling for me up the slope. "Elkins! Hurry!"

"Who's that?" she exclaimed, jumping to her feet like she was working on a spring.

"Aw," I said in disgust, "it's a fool tenderfoot Bill Glanton wished on me. I reckon a b'ar is got him by the neck. I'll go see."

"I'll go with you!" she said, but from the way J. Pembroke was yelling I figgered I better not waste no time getting to him, so I couldn't wait for her, and she was some piece behind me when I mounted the lap of the slope and met him running out from amongst the trees. He was gibbering with excitement.

"I winged it!" he squawked. "I'm sure I winged the blighter! But it ran in among the underbrush and I dared not follow it, for the beast is most vicious when wounded. A friend of mine once wounded one in South Africa, and--"

"A b'ar?" I ast.

"No, no!" he said. "A wild boar! The most vicious brute I have ever seen! It ran into that brush there!"

"Aw, they ain't no wild boars in the Humbolts," I snorted. "You wait here, I'll go see jest what you did shoot."

I seen some splashes of blood on the grass, so I knowed he'd shot something. Well, I hadn't gone more'n a few hundred feet and was jest out of sight of J. Pembroke when I run into Uncle Jeppard Grimes.

Uncle Jeppard was one of the first white men to come into the Humbolts, in case I ain't mentioned that before, and he wears fringed buckskins and moccasins jest like he done fifty years ago. He had a bowie knife in one hand and he waved something in the other'n like a flag of revolt, and he was frothing at the mouth.

"The derned murderer!" he shrieked. "You see this? That's the proper tail of Dan'l Webster, the finest derned razorback boar which ever trod the Humbolts! That danged tenderfoot of yore'n tried to 'sassernate him! Shot his tail off, right spang up to the hilt! I'll show him he cain't muterlate my animals like this! I'll have his heart's blood!"

And he done a war-dance waving that pig-tail and his bowie and cussing in American and Spanish and Apache Injun all at onst.

"You ca'm down, Uncle Jeppard," I said sternly. "He ain't got no sense, and he thought Daniel Webster was a wild boar like they have in Aferker and England and them foreign places. He didn't mean no harm."

"No harm," said Uncle jeppard fiercely. "And Dan'l Webster with no more tail onto him than a jackrabbit!"

"Well," I said, "here's a five dollar gold piece to pay for the dern hawg's tail, and you let J. Pembroke alone!"

"Gold cain't satisfy honor," he said bitterly, but nevertheless grabbing the coin like a starving Kiowa grabbing a beefsteak. "I'll let this here outrage pass for the time. But I'll be watchin' that maneyack to see that he don't muterlate no more of my prize livestock."

And so saying he went off muttering in his beard.

I went back to where I left J. Pembroke, and there he was talking to Miss Margaret which had jest come up. She had more color in her face than I'd saw recent.

"Fancy meeting a girl like you here!" J. Pembroke was saying.

"No more surprising than meeting a man like you!" says she with a kind of fluttery laugh.

"Oh, a sportsman wanders into all sorts of out-of-the-way places," says he, and seeing they hadn't noticed me coming up, I says: "Well, J. Pembroke, I didn't find yore wild boar, but I met the owner."

He looked at me kinda blank, and said vaguely: "Wild boar? What wild boar?"

"That 'un you shot the tail off of with that there fool elerfant gun," I said. "Lissen: next time you see a hawg-critter you remember there ain't no wild boars in the Humbolts. They is critters called haverleeners in South Texas, but they ain't even none of them in Nevada. So next time you see a hawg, jest reflect that it's merely one of Uncle Jeppard Grimes' razorbacks and refrain from shootin' at it."

"Oh, quite!" he agreed absently, and started talking to Miss Margaret again.

So I picked up the elerfant gun which he'd absent-mindedly laid down, and said: "Well, it's gittin' late. Let's go. We won't go back to pap's cabin tonight, J. Pembroke. We'll stay at Uncle Saul Garfield's cabin on t'other side of the Apache Mountain settlement."

Like I said, them cabins was awful clost together. Uncle Saul's cabin was below the settlement, but it warnt much over three hundred yards from cousin Bill Kirby's cabin where Miss Margaret boarded. The other cabins was on t'other side of Bill's, mostly, strung out up the run and up and down the slopes.

I told J. Pembroke and Miss Margaret to walk on down to the settlement whilst I went back and got the hosses.

They'd got to the settlement time I catched up with 'em, and Miss Margaret had gone into the Kirby cabin, and I seen a light spring up in her room. She had one, of them new-fangled ile lamps she brung with her, the only one on Bear Creek. Taller candles and pine chunks was good enough for us folks. And she'd hanged rag-things over the winders which she called curtains. You never seen nothing like it. I tell you she was that elegant you wouldn't believe it.

We walked on towards Uncle Saul's, me leading the hosses, and after awhile J. Pembroke says: "A wonderful creature!"

"You mean Dan'l Webster?" I ast.

"No!" he said. "No, no! I mean Miss Devon."

"She sure is," I said. "She'll make me a fine wife."

He hirled like I'd stabbed him and his face looked pale in the dusk.

"You?" he said. "You a fine wife?"

"Well," I said bashfully, "she ain't sot the day yet, but I've sure sot my heart on that gal."

"Oh!" he says. "Oh!" says he, like he had the toothache. Then he said kinda hesitatingly: "Suppose--er, just suppose, you know! Suppose a rival for her affections should appear? What would you do?"

"You mean if some dirty, low-down son of a mangy skunk was to try to steal my gal?" I said, whirling so sudden he staggered backwards.

"Steal my gal?" I roared, seeing red at the mere thought. "Why, I'd--I'd--"

Words failing me I grabbed a big sapling and tore it up by the roots and broke it acrost my knee and throwed the pieces clean through a rail fence on the other side of the road.

"That there is a faint idee!" I said, panting with passion.

"That gives me a very vivid conception," he said faintly, and he said nothing more till we reched the cabin and seen Uncle Saul Garfield standing in the light of the door combing his black beard with his fingers.

Next morning J. Pembroke seemed like he'd kinda lost interest in b'ars. He said all that walking he done over the slopes of Apache Mountain had made his laig muscles sore. I never heard of sech a thing, but nothing that gets the matter with these tenderfeet surprises me much, they is sech a effemernate race, so I ast him would he like to go fishing down the run and he said all right.

But we hadn't been fishing more'n a hour when he said he believed he'd go back to Uncle Saul's cabin and take him a nap, and he insisted on going alone, so I stayed where I was and catched me a nice string of trout.

I went back to the cabin about noon, and ast Uncle Saul if J. Pembroke had got his nap out.

"Why, heck," said Uncle Saul, "I ain't seen him since you and him started down the run this mornin'. Wait a minute--yonder he comes from the other direction."

Well, J. Pembroke didn't say where he'd been all morning, and I didn't ast him, because a tenderfoot don't generally have no reason for anything he does.

We et the trout I catched, and after dinner he perked up a right smart and got his shotgun and said he'd like to hunt some wild turkeys. I never heard of anybody hunting anything as big as a turkey with a shotgun, but I didn't say nothing, because tenderfeet is like that.

So we headed up the slopes of Apache Mountain, and I stopped by the schoolhouse to tell Miss Margaret I probably wouldn't get back in time to take my reading and writing lesson, and she said: "You know, until I met your friend, Mr. Pembroke, I didn't realize what a difference there was between men like him, and--well, like the men on Bear Creek."

"I know," I said. "But don't hold it agen him. He means well. He jest ain't got no sense. Everybody cain't be smart like me. As a special favor to me, Miss Margaret, I'd like for you to be exter nice to the poor sap, because he's a friend of my friend Bill Glanton down to War Paint."

"I will, Breckinridge," she replied heartily, and I thanked her and went away with my big manly heart pounding in my gigantic bosom.

Me and J. Pembroke headed into the heavy timber, and we hadn't went far till I was convinced that somebody was follering us. I kept hearing twigs snapping, and onst I thought I seen a shadowy figger duck behind a bush. But when I run back there, it was gone, and no track to show in the pine needles. That sort of thing would of made me nervous, anywheres else, because they is a goodly number of people which would like to get a clean shot at my back from the bresh, but I knowed none of them dast come after me in my own territory. If anybody was trailing us it was bound to be one of my relatives and to save my neck I couldn't think of no reason why anyone of 'em would be gunning for me.

But I got tired of it, and left J. Pembroke in a small glade whilst I snuck back to do some shaddering of my own. I aimed to cast a big circle around the clearing and see could I find out who it was, but I'd hardly got out of sight of J. Pembroke when I heard a gun bang.

I turned to run back and here come J. Pembroke yelling: "I got him! I got him! I winged the bally aborigine!"

He had his head down as he busted through the bresh and he run into me in his excitement and hit me in the belly with his head so hard he bounced back like a rubber ball and landed in a bush with his riding boots brandishing wildly in the air.

"Assist me, Breckinridge!" he shrieked. "Extricate me! They will be hot on our trail!"

"Who?" I demanded, hauling him out by the hind laig and setting him on his feet.

"The Indians!" he hollered, jumping up and down and waving his smoking shotgun frantically. "The bally redskins! I shot one of them! I saw him sneaking through the bushes! I saw his legs! I knew it was an Indian instantly because he had on moccasins instead of boots! Listen! That's him now!"

"A Injun couldn't cuss like that," I said. "You've shot Uncle Jeppard Grimes!"

Telling him to stay there, I run through the bresh, guided by the maddened howls which riz horribly on the air, and busting through some bushes I seen Uncle Jeppard rolling on the ground with both hands clasped to the rear bosom of his buckskin britches which was smoking freely. His langwidge was awful to hear.

"Air you in misery Uncle Jeppard?" I inquired solicitously. This evoked another ear-splitting squall.

"I'm writhin' in my death-throes," he says in horrible accents, "and you stands there and mocks my mortal agony! My own blood-kin!" he says "--!" says Uncle Jeppard with passion.

"Aw," I said, "that there bird-shot wouldn't hurt a flea. It cain't be very deep under yore thick old hide. Lie on yore belly, Uncle Jeppard," I says, stropping my bowie on my boot, "and I'll dig out them shot for you."

"Don't tech me!" he said fiercely, painfully climbing onto his feet. "Where's my rifle-gun? Gimme it! Now then, I demands that you bring that British murderer here where I can git a clean lam at him! The Grimes honor is besmirched and my new britches is rooint. Nothin' but blood can wipe out the stain on the family honor!"

"Well," I said, "you didn't have no business sneakin' around after us thataway--"

Here Uncle Jeppard give tongue to loud and painful shrieks.

"Why shouldn't I?" he howled. "Ain't a man got no right to perteck his own property? I war follerin' him to see that he didn't shoot no more tails offa my hawgs. And now he shoots me in the same place! He's a fiend in human form--a monster which stalks ravelin' through these hills bustin' for the blood of the innercent!"

"Aw, J. Pembroke thought you was a Injun," I said.

"He thought Dan'l Webster was a wild wart-hawg," gibbered Uncle Jeppard. "He thought I was Geronimo. I reckon he'll massacre the entire population of Bear Creek under a misapprehension, and you'll uphold and defend him! When the cabins of yore kinfolks is smoulderin' ashes, smothered in the blood of yore own relations, I hope you'll be satisfied--bringin' a foreign assassin into a peaceful community!"

Here Uncle Jeppard's emotions choked him, and he chawed his whiskers and then yanked out the five-dollar gold piece I give him for Daniel Webster's tail, and throwed it at me.

"Take back yore filthy lucre," he said bitterly. "The day of retribution is nigh onto hand, Breckinridge Elkins, and the Lord of battles shall jedge betwixt them which turns agen their kinsfolks in their extremerties!"

"In their which?" I ast, but he merely snarled and went limping off through the trees, calling back over his shoulder: "They is still men on Bear Creek which will see jestice did for the aged and helpless. I'll git that English murderer if it's the last thing I do, and you'll be sorry you stood up for him, you big lunkhead!"

I went back to where J. Pembroke was waiting bewilderedly, and evidently still expecting a tribe of Injuns to bust out of the bresh and sculp him, and I said in disgust: "Let's go home. Tomorrer I'll take you so far away from Bear Creek you can shoot in any direction without hittin' a prize razorback or a antiquated gunman with a ingrown disposition. When Uncle Jeppard Grimes gits mad enough to throw away money, it's time to ile the Winchesters and strap yore scabbard-ends to yore laigs."

"Legs?" he said mistily. "But what about the Indians?"

"They warn't no Injun, gol-dern it!" I howled. "They ain't been none on Bear Creek for four or five year. They--aw, hell! What the hell! Come on. It's gittin' late. Next time you see somethin' you don't understand, ast me before you shoot it. And remember, the more ferocious and woolly it looks, the more likely it is to be a leadin' citizen of Bear Creek."

It was dark when we approached Uncle Saul's cabin, and J. Pembroke glanced back up the road, towards the settlement, and said: "My word, is it a political rally? Look! A torchlight parade!"

I looked, and said: "Quick! Git into the cabin and stay there!"

He turned pale, but said: "If there is danger, I insist on--"

"Insist all you dern please," I said, "but git in that house and stay there. I'll handle this. Uncle Saul, see he gits in there."

Uncle Saul is a man of few words. He taken a firm grip onto his pipe stem and he grabbed J. Pembroke by the neck and the seat of the britches and throwed him bodily into the cabin, and shet the door and sot down on the stoop.

"They ain't no use in you gittin' mixed up in this, Uncle Saul," I said.

"You got yore faults, Breckinridge," he grunted. "You ain't got much sense, but yo're my favorite sister's son--and I ain't forgot that lame mule Jeppard traded me for a sound animal back in '69. Let 'em come!"

They come all right, and surged up in front of the cabin--Jeppard's boys Jack and Buck and Esau and Joash and Polk County. And Erath Elkins, and a mob of Gordons and Buckners and Polks, all more or less kin to me, except Joel Braxton who wasn't kin to none of us, but didn't like me because he was sweet on Miss Margaret. But Uncle jeppard warn't with 'em. Some had torches and Polk County Grimes had a rope with a noose in it.

"Where at air you-all goin' with that there lariat?" I ast them sternly, planting my enormous bulk in their path.

"Perjuice the scoundrel!" commanded Polk County, waving his rope around his head. "Bring out the foreign invader which shoots hawgs and defenceless old men from the bresh!"

"What you aim to do?" I inquired.

"We aim to hang him!" they replied with hearty enthusiasm.

Uncle Saul knocked the ashes out of his pipe and stood up and stretched his arms which looked like knotted oak limbs, and he grinned in his black beard like a old timber wolf, and he says: "Whar is dear cousin Jeppard to speak for hisself?"

"Uncle Jeppard was havin' the shot picked outa his hide when we left," says Jim Gordon. "He'll be along directly. Breckinridge, we don't want no trouble with you, but we aims to have that Englishman."

"Well," I snorted, "you-all cain't. Bill Glanton is trustin' me to return him whole of body and limb, and--"

"What you want to waste time in argyment for, Breckinridge?" Uncle Saul reproved mildly. "Don't you know it's a plumb waste of time to try to reason with the off-spring of a lame-mule trader?"

"What would you sejest, old man?" sneeringly remarked Polk County.

Uncle Saul beamed on him benevolently, and said gently: "I'd try moral suasion--like this!" And he hit Polk County under the jaw and knocked him clean acrost the yard into a rain barrel amongst the rooins of which he reposed till he was rescued and revived some hours later.

But they was no stopping Uncle Saul onst he took the war-path. No sooner had he disposed of Polk County than he jumped seven foot in the air, cracked his heels together three times, give the rebel yell and come down with his arms around the necks of Esau Grimes and Joel Braxton, and started mopping up the cabin yard with 'em.

That started the fight, and they is no scrap in the world where mayhem is committed as free and fervent as in one of these here family rukuses.

Polk County had hardly crashed into the rain-barrel when Jack Grimes stuck a pistol in my face. I slapped it aside jest as he fired and the bullet missed me and taken a ear offa Jim Gordon. I was scairt Jack would hurt somebody if he kept on shooting reckless that way, so I kinda rapped him with my left fist and how was I to know it would dislocate his jaw? But Jim Gordon seemed to think I was to blame about his ear, because he give a maddened howl and jerked up his shotgun and let bam with both barrels. I ducked jest in time to keep from getting my head blowed off, and catched most of the double charge in my shoulder, whilst the rest hived in the seat of Steve Kirby's britches. Being shot that way by a relative was irritating, but I controlled my temper and merely taken the gun away from Jim and splintered the stock over his head.

In the meantime Joel Gordon and Buck Grimes had grabbed one of my laigs apiece and was trying to rassle me to the earth, and Joash Grimes was trying to hold down my right arm, and cousin Pecos Buckner was beating me over the head from behind with a axe-handle, and Erath Elkins was coming at me from the front with a bowie knife. I reched down and got Buck Grimes by the neck with my left hand, and I swung my right and hit Erath with it, but I had to lift Joash clean off his feet and swing him around with the lick, because he wouldn't let go, so I only knocked Erath through the rail fence which was around Uncle Saul's garden.

About this time I found my left laig was free and discovered that Buck Grimes was unconscious, so I let go of his neck and begun to kick around with my left laig, and it ain't my fault if the spur got tangled up in Uncle Jonathan Polk's whiskers and jerked most of 'em out by the roots. I shaken Joash off and taken the axe-handle away from Pecos because I seen he was going to hurt somebody if he kept on swinging it around so reckless, and I dunno why he blames me because his skull got fractured when he hit that tree. He ought a look where he falls when he gets throwed acrost a cabin yard. And if Joel Gordon hadn't been so stubborn trying to gouge me he wouldn't of got his laig broke neither.

I was handicapped by not wanting to kill any of my kinfolks, but they was so mad they all wanted to kill me, so in spite of my carefulness the casualties was increasing at a rate which would of discouraged anybody but Bear Creek folks. But they are the stubbornest people in the world. Three or four had got me around the laigs again, refusing to be convinced that I couldn't be throwed that way, and Erath Elkins, having pulled hisself out of the rooins of the fence, come charging back with his bowie.

By this time I seen I'd have to use vi'lence in spite of myself, so I grabbed Erath Elkins and squoze him with a grizzly-hug and that was when he got them five ribs caved in, and he ain't spoke to me since. I never seen sech a cuss for taking offence over trifles.

For a matter of fact, if he hadn't been wrought up, he'd of realized how kindly and kindredly I felt towards him, even in the heat of battle. If I had dropped him underfoot he might of got fatally tromped on, for I was kicking folks right and left. So I carefully throwed Erath out of range of the melee, and he's a liar when he says I aimed him at Ozark Grimes' pitchfork; I didn't even see the cussed implement.

It was at this moment that somebody swung at me with a axe and ripped a ear offa my head, and I begun to lose my temper. Four or five other relatives was kicking and hitting and biting me all at onst, and they is a limit even to my timid manners and mild nature. I voiced my displeasure with a beller of wrath that shook the leaves offa the trees, and lashed out with both fists, and my misguided relatives fell all over the yard like persimmons after a frost. I grabbed Joash Grimes by the ankles and began to knock them ill-advised idjits in the head with him, and the way he hollered you'd of thought somebody was man-handling him. The yard was beginning to look like a battlefield when the cabin door opened and a deluge of b'iling water descended on us.

I got about a gallon down my neck, but paid very little attention to it, however the others ceased hostilities and started rolling on the ground and hollering and cussing, and Uncle Saul riz up from amongst the rooins of Esau Grimes and Joel Braxton, and bellered: "Woman! Whar air you at?"

Aunt Zavalla Garfield was standing in the doorway with a kettle in her hand, and she said: "Will you idjits stop fightin'? The Englishman's gone. He run out the back door when the fightin' started, and saddled his nag and pulled out. Now will you born fools stop, or will I give you another surge? Land save us! What's that light?"

Somebody was yelling off towards the settlement, and I was aware of a pecooliar glow which didn't come from sech torches as was still burning. And here come Medina Kirby, one of Bill's gals, yelping like a Comanche.

"Our cabin's burnin'!" she squalled. "A stray bullet went through the winder and busted Miss Margaret's ile lamp!"

With a yell of dismay I abandoned the fray and headed for Bill's cabin, follered by everybody which was able to toller me. They had been several wild shots fired during the melee and one of 'em must have hived in Miss Margaret's winder. The Kirbys had dragged most of their belongings into the yard and some was toting water from the creek, but the whole cabin was in a blaze by now.

"Where's Miss Margaret?" I roared.

"She must be still in there," shrilled Miz Kirby. "A beam fell and wedged her door so we couldn't open it, and--"

I grabbed a blanket one of the gals had rescued and plunged it into the rain barrel and run for Miss Margaret's room. They wasn't but one door in it, which led into the main part of the cabin, and was jammed like they said, and I knowed I couldn't never get my shoulders through either winder, so I jest put down my head and rammed the wall full force and knocked four or five logs outa place and made a hole big enough to go through.

The room was so full of smoke I was nigh blinded but I made out a figger fumbling at the winder on the other side. A flaming beam fell outa the roof and broke acrost my head with a loud report and about a bucketful of coals rolled down the back of my neck, but I paid no heed.

I charged through the smoke, nearly fracturing my shin on a bedstead or something, and enveloped the figger in the wet blanket and swept it up in my arms. It kicked wildly and fought and though its voice was muffled in the blanket I catched some words I never would of thought Miss Margaret would use, but I figgered she was hysterical. She seemed to be wearing spurs, too, because I felt 'em every time she kicked.

By this time the room was a perfect blaze and the roof was falling in and we'd both been roasted if I'd tried to get back to the hole I'd knocked in the oppersite wall. So I lowered my head and butted my way through the near wall, getting all my eyebrows and hair burnt off in the process, and come staggering through the rooins with my precious burden and fell into the arms of my relatives which was thronged outside.

"I've saved her!" I panted. "Pull off the blanket! Yo're safe, Miss Margaret!"

"--!" said Miss Margaret.

Uncle Saul groped under the blanket and said: "By golly, if this is the schoolteacher she's growed a remarkable set of whiskers since I seen her last!"

He yanked off the blanket--to reveal the bewhiskered countenance of Uncle Jeppard Grimes!

"Hell's fire!" I bellered. "What you doin' here?"

"I was comin' to jine the lynchin', you blame fool!" he snarled. "I seen Bill's cabin was afire so I clum in through the back winder to save Miss Margaret. She was gone, but they was a note she'd left. I was fixin' to climb out the winder when you grabbed me, you cussed maneyack!"

"Gimme that note!" I bellered, grabbing it. "Medina! Come here and read it for me."

That note run:

"Dear Breckinridge. I am sorry, but I can't stay on Bear Creek any longer. It was tough enough anyway, but being expected to marry you was the last straw. You've been very kind to me, but it would be too much like marrying a grizzly bear. Please forgive me. I am eloping with J. Pembroke Pemberton. We're going out the back window to avoid any trouble, and ride away on his horse. Give my love to the children. We are going to Europe on our honeymoon. With love, Margaret Devon."

"Now what you got to say?" sneered Uncle Jeppard.

"Where's my hoss?" I yelled, gomg temporarily insane. "I'll foller 'em! They cain't do me this way! I'll have his sculp if I have to foller 'em to Europe or to hell! Git outa my way!"

Uncle Saul grabbed me as I plunged through the crowd.

"Now, now, Breckinridge," he expostulated, trying to brace his laigs as he hung on and was dragged down the road. "You cain't do nothin' to him. She done this of her own free will. She made her choice, and--"

"Release go of me!" I roared, jerking loose. "I'm ridin' on their trail, and the man don't live which can stop me! Life won't be worth livin' when Glory McGraw hears about this, and I aim to take it out on that Britisher's hide! Hell hath no fury like a Elkins scorned! Git outa my way!"

Chapter XIII - WHEN BEAR CREEK CAME TO CHAWED EAR

I DUNNO how far I rode that night before the red haze cleared out from around me so's I could even see where I was. I knowed I was follering the trail to War Paint, but that was about all. I knowed Miss Margaret and J. Pembroke would head for War Paint, and I knowed Cap'n Kidd would run 'em down before they could get there, no matter how much start they had. And I must of rode for hours before I come to my senses.

It was like waking up from a bad dream. I pulled up on the crest of a rise and looked ahead of me where the trail dipped down into the holler and up over the next ridge. It was jest getting daylight and everything looked kinda grey and still. I looked down in the trail and seen the hoof prints of J. Pembroke's hoss fresh in the dust, and knowed they couldn't be more'n three or four miles ahead of me. I could run' em down within the next hour.

But thinks I, what the hell? Am I plumb locoed? The gal's got a right to marry whoever she wants to, and if she's idjit enough to choose him instead of me, why, 'tain't for me to stand in her way. I wouldn't hurt a hair onto her head; yet here I been aiming to hurt her the wust way I could, by shooting down her man right before her eyes. I felt so ashamed of myself I wanted to cuss--and so sorry for myself I wanted to bawl.

"Go with my blessin'," I said bitterly, shaking my fist in the direction where they'd went, and then reined Cap'n Kidd around and headed for Bear Creek. I warn't aiming to stay there and endure Glory McGraw's rawhiding, but I had to get me some clothes. Mine was burnt to rags, and I didn't have no hat, and the buckshot in my shoulder was stinging me now and then.

A mile or so on the back-trail I crossed the road that runs from Cougar Paw to Grizzly Run, and I was hungry and thirsty so I turnt up it to the tavern which had been built recent on the crossing at Mustang Creek.

The sun warn't up when I pulled at the hitch-rack and clumb off and went in. The bartender give a holler and fell backwards into a tub of water and empty beer bottles, and started yelling for help, and I seen a man come to one of the doors which opened into the bar, and look at me. They was something familiar about him, but I couldn't place him for the instant.

"Shet up and git outa that tub," I told the bar-keep petulantly. "It's me, and I want a drink."

"Excuse me, Breckinridge," says he, hauling hisself onto his feet. "I rekernize you now, but I'm a nervous man, and you got no idee what a start you gimme when you come through that door jest now, with yore hair and eye-lashes all burnt off, and most of yore clothes, and yore hide all black with soot. What the hell--"

"Cease them personal remarks and gimme some whisky," I snarled, being in no mood for airy repartee. "Likewise wake up the cook and tell him to fry me some ham and aigs."

So he sot the bottle onto the bar and stuck his head into the kitchen and hollered: "Break out a fresh ham and start bustin' aigs. Breckinridge Elkins craves fodder!"

When he come back I said: "Who was that lookin' through that door there while ago?"

"Oh, that?" says he. "Why, that was a man nigh as famous as what you be--Wild Bill Donovan. You-all ever met?"

"I'll say we has," I grunted, pouring me a drink. "He tried to take Cap'n Kidd away from me when I was a ignorant kid. I was forced to whup him with my bare fists before he'd listen to reason."

"He's the only man I ever seen which was as big as you," said the bar-keep. "And at that he ain't quite as thick in the chest and arms as you be. I'll call him in and you-all can chin about old times."

"Save yore breath," I growled. "The thing I craves to do about chins with that coyote is to bust his'n with a pistol butt."

This seemed to kinda intimidate the bartender. He got behind the bar and started shining beer mugs whilst I et my breakfast in gloomy grandeur, halting only long enough to yell for somebody to feed Cap'n Kidd. Three or four menials went out to do it, and being afeared to try to lead Cap'n Kidd to the trough, they filled it and carried it to him, so only one of them got kicked in the belly. It's awful hard for the average man to dodge Cap'n Kidd.

Well, I finished my breakfast whilst they was dipping the stable-hand in a hoss-trough to bring him to, and I said to the bar-keep, "I ain't got no money to pay for what me and Cap'n Kidd et, but I'll be headin' for War Paint late this evenin' or tonight, and when I git the money I'll send it to you. I'm broke right now, but I ain't goin' to be broke long."

"All right," he said, eyeing my scorched skull in morbid fascination. "You got no idee how pecoolier you look, Breckinridge, with that there bald dome--"

"Shet up!" I roared wrathfully. A Elkins is sensitive about his personal appearance. "This here is merely a temporary inconvenience which I cain't help. Lemme hear no more about it. I'll shoot the next son of a polecat which calls attention to my singed condition!"

I then tied a bandanner around my head and got on Cap'n Kidd and pulled for home.

I arriv at pap's cabin about the middle of the afternoon and my family rallied around to remove the buckshot from my hide and repair other damages which had been did.

Maw made each one of my brothers lend me a garment, and she let 'em out to fit me.

"Though how much good it'll do you," said she, "I don't know. I never seen any man so hard on his clothes as you be, in my life. If it ain't fire it's bowie knives, and if it ain't bowie knives, it's buckshot."

"Boys will be boys, maw," soothed pap. "Breckinridge is jest full of life and high spirits, ain't you, Breckinridge?"

"From the whiff I got of his breath," snorted Elinor, "I'd say they is no doubt about the spirits."

"Right now I'm full of gloom and vain regrets," I says bitterly. "Culture is a flop on Bear Creek, and my confidence has been betrayed. I have tooken a sarpent with a British accent to my bosom and been bit. I stands knee-deep in the rooins of education and romance. Bear Creek lapses back into ignorance and barbarism and corn-licker, and I licks the wounds of unrequited love like a old wolf after a tussle with a pack of hound dawgs!"

"What you goin' to do?" ast pap, impressed.

"I'm headin' for War Paint," I said gloomily. "I ain't goin' to stay here and have the life rawhided outa me by Glory McGraw. It's a wonder to me she ain't been over already to gloat over my misery."

"You ain't got no money," says pap.

"I'll git me some," I said. "And I ain't particular how. I'm going now. I ain't goin' to wait for Glory McGraw to descend onto me with her derned sourcasm."

So I headed for War Paint as soon as I could wash the soot off of me. I had a Stetson I borrowed from Garfield and I jammed it down around my ears so my bald condition warn't evident, because I was awful sensitive about it.

Sundown found me some miles from the place where the trail crossed the Cougar Paw-Grizzly Run road, and jest before the sun dipped I was hailed by a pecooliar-looking gent.

He was tall and gangling--tall as me, but didn't weigh within a hundred pounds as much. His hands hung about three foot out of his sleeves, and his neck with a big adam's apple riz out of his collar like a crane's, and he had on a plug hat instead of a Stetson, and a long-tailed coat. He moreover sot his hoss like it was a see-saw, and his stirrups was so short his bony knees come up almost level with his shoulders. He wore his pants laigs down over his boots, and altogether he was the funniest-looking human I ever seen. Cap'n Kidd give a disgusted snort when he seen him and wanted to kick his bony old sorrel nag in the belly, but I wouldn't let him.

"Air you," said this apparition, p'inting a accusing finger at me, "air you Breckinridge Elkins, the bearcat of the Humbolts?"

"I'm Breckinridge Elkins," I replied suspiciously.

"I dedooced as much," he says ominously. "I have come a long ways to meet you, Elkins. They can be only one sun in the sky, my roarin' grizzly from the high ranges. They can be only one champeen in the State of Nevada. I'm him!"

"Oh, be you?" I says, scenting battle afar. "Well, I feels the same way about one sun and one champeen. You look a mite skinny and gantlin' to be makin' sech big talk, but far be it from me to deny you a tussle after you've come so far to git it. Light down from yore hoss whilst I mangles yore frame with a free and joyful spirit! They is nothin' I'll enjoy more'n uprootin' a few acres of junipers with yore carcass and festoonin' the crags with yore innards."

"You mistakes my meanin', my bloodthirsty friend," says he. "I warn't referrin' to mortal combat. Far as I'm consarned, yo're supreme in that line. Nay, nay, B. Elkins, esquire! Reserve yore personal ferocity for the b'ars and knife-fighters of yore native mountains. I challenges you in another department entirely.

"Look well, my bowie-wieldin' orang-outang of the high peaks. Fame is shakin' her mane. I am Jugbelly Judkins, and my talent is guzzlin'. From the live-oak grown coasts of the Gulf to the sun-baked buttes of Montana," says he oratorical, "I ain't yet met the gent I couldn't drink under the table betwixt sundown and sunup. I have met the most celebrated topers of plain and mountain, and they have all went down in inglorious and rum-soaked defeat. Afar off I heard men speak of you, praisin' not only yore genius in alterin' the features of yore feller man, but also laudin' yore capacity for corn-licker. So I have come to cast the ga'ntlet at yore feet, as it were."

"Oh," I says, "you wants a drinkin' match."

"'Wants' is a weak word, my murderous friend," says he. "I demands it."

"Well, come on," I said. "Le's head for War Paint then. They'll be plenty of gents there willin' to lay heavy bets--"

"To hell with filthy lucre!" snorted Jugbelly. "My mountainous friend, I am an artist. I cares nothin' for money. My reputation is what I upholds."

"Well, then," I said, "they's a tavern on Mustang Creek--"

"Let it rot," says he. "I scorns these vulgar displays in low inns and cheap taverns, my enormous friend. I supplies the sinews of war myself. Foller me!"

So he turnt his hoss off the trail, and I follered him through the bresh for maybe a mile, till he come to a small cave in a bluff with dense thickets all around. He reched into the cave and hauled out a gallon jug of licker.

"I hid a goodly supply of the cup that cheers in that cave," says he. "This is a good secluded spot where nobody never comes. We won't be interrupted here, my brawny but feeble-minded gorilla of the high ridges!"

"But what're we bettin'?" I demanded. "I ain't got no money. I was goin' down to War Paint and git me a job workin' somebody's claim for day-wages till I got me a stake and built it up playin' poker, but--"

"You wouldn't consider wagerin' that there gigantic hoss you rides?" says he, eyeing me very sharp.

"Never in the world," I says with a oath.

"Very well," says he. "Let the bets go. We battles for honor and glory alone! Let the carnage commence!"

So we started. First he'd take a gulp, and then me, and the jug was empty about the fourth gulp I taken, so he dragged out another'n, and we emptied it, and he hauled out another. They didn't seem to be no limit to his supply. He must of brought it there on a whole train of pack mules. I never seen a man drink like that skinny cuss. I watched the liquor careful, but he lowered it every time he taken a swig, so I knowed he warn't jest pertending. His belly expanded enormous as we went along and he looked very funny, with his skinny frame, and that there enormous belly bulging out his shirt till the buttons flew off of his coat.

I ain't goin' to tell you how much we drunk, because you wouldn't believe me. But by midnight the glade was covered with empty jugs and Jugbelly's arms was so tired lifting 'em he couldn't hardly move. But the moon and the glade and everything was dancing around and around to me, and he warn't even staggerring. He looked kind of pale and wan, and onst he says, in a awed voice: "I wouldn't of believed it if I hadn't saw it myself!" But he kept on drinking and so did I, because I couldn't believe a skinny maverick like that could lick me, and his belly kept getting bigger and bigger till I was scairt it was going to bust, and things kept spinning around me faster than ever.

After awhile I heard him muttering to hisself, away off: "This is the last jug, and if it don't fix him, nothin' will. By God, he ain't human."

That didn't make no sense to me, but he passed me the jug and said: "Air you capable, my gulf-bellied friend?"

"Gimme that jug!" I muttered, bracing my laigs and getting a firm hold of myself. I taken a big gulp--and then I didn't know nothing.

When I woke up the sun was high above the trees. Cap'n Kidd was cropping grass nearby, but Jugbelly was gone. So was his hoss and all the empty jugs. There warn't no sign to show he'd ever been there, only the taste in my mouth which I cain't describe because I am a gent and there is words no gent will stoop to use. I felt like kicking myself in the pants. I was ashamed something terrible at being beat by that skinny mutt. It was the first time I'd ever drunk enough to lay me out. I don't believe in a man making a hawg out of hisself, even in a good cause.

I saddled Cap'n Kidd and pulled out for War Paint, and stopped a few rods away and drunk five or six gallons of water at a spring, and felt a lot better. I started on again, but before I come to the trail, I heard somebody bawling and pulled up, and there sot a feller on a stump, crying like his heart would bust.

"What's the trouble?" I ast, and he blinked the tears out of his eyes and looked up mournful and melancholy. He was a scrawny cuss with over-sized whiskers.

"You beholds in me," says he sobfully, "a critter tossed on the crooel tides of fate. Destiny has dealt my hand from the bottom of the deck. Whoa is me!" says he, and wept bitterly.

"Buck up," I said. "Things might well be wuss. Dammit," I said, waxing irritable, "stop that blubberin' and tell me what's the matter. I'm Breckinridge Elkins. Maybe I can help you."

He swallered some sobs, and said: "You air a man of kind impulses and a noble heart. My name is Japhet Jalatin. In my youth I made a enemy of a wealthy, powerful and unscrupulous man. He framed me and sent me to the pen for somethin' I never done. I busted free and under a assumed name, I come West. By hard workin' I accumulated a tidy sum which I aimed to send to my sorrowin' wife and baby datters. But jest last night I learnt that I had been rekernized and the bloodhounds of the law was on my trail. I have got to skip to Mexico. My loved ones won't never git the dough.

"Oh," says he, "if they was only some one I could trust to leave it with till I could write 'em a letter and tell 'em where it was so they could send a trusted man after it! But I trust nobody. The man I left it with might tell where he got it, and then the bloodhounds of the law would be onto my trail again, houndin' me day and night."

He looked at me desperate, and says: "Young man, you got a kind and honest face. Won't you take this here money and hold it for my wife, till she can come after it?"

"Yeah, I'll do that," I said. He jumped up and run to his hoss which was tied nearby, and hauled out a buckskin poke, and shoved it into my hands.

"Keep it till my wife comes for it," says he. "And promise me you won't never breathe a word of how you got it, except to her!"

"A Elkins never broke his word in his life," I said. "Wild hosses couldn't drag it outa me."

"Bless you, young man!" he cries, and grabbed my hand with both of his'n and pumped it up and down like a pump-handle, and then jumped on his hoss and fogged. I thought they is some curious people in the world, as I stuffed the poke in my saddle-bags and headed for War Paint again.

I thought I'd turn off to the Mustang Creek tavern and eat me some breakfast, but I hadn't much more'n hit the trail I'd been follerin' when I met Jugbelly, than I heard hosses behind me, and somebody hollered: "Stop, in the name of the law!"

I turnt around and seen a gang of men riding towards me, from the direction of Bear Creek, and there was the sheriff leading 'em, and right beside him was pap and Uncle John Garfield and Uncle Bill Buckner and Uncle Bearfield Gordon. A tenderfoot onst called them four men the patriarchs of Bear Creek. I dunno what he meant, but they generally decides argyments which has got beyond the public control, as you might say. Behind them and the sheriff come about thirty more men, most of which I rekernized as citizens of Chawed Ear, and therefore definitely not my friends. Also, to my surprise, I rekernized Wild Bill Donovan amongst 'em, with his thick black hair falling down to his shoulders. They was four other hard-looking strangers which rode clost beside him.

All the Chawed Ear men had sawed-off shotguns and that surprised me, because that made it look like maybe they was coming to arrest me, and I hadn't done nothing, except steal their schoolteacher, several weeks before, and if they'd meant to arrest me for that, they'd of tried it before now.

"There he is!" yelped the sheriff, p'inting at me. "Han's up!"

"Don't be a damn' fool!" roared pap, knocking his shotgun out of his hands as he started to raise it. "You want to git you and yore cussed posse slaughtered? Come here, Breckinridge," he said, and I rode up to them, some bewildered. I could see pap was worried. He scowled and tugged at his beard. My uncles didn't have no more expression onto their faces than so many red Injuns.

"What the hell's all this about?" I ast.

"Take off yore hat," ordered the sheriff.

"Look here, you long-legged son of a mangy skunk," I said heatedly, "if yo're tryin' to rawhide me, lemme tell you right now--"

"'Tain't a joke," growled pap. "Take off yore sombrero."

I done so bewilderedly, and instantly four men in the gang started hollering: "That's him! That's the man! He had on a mask, but when he taken his hat off, we seen the hair was all off his head! That's shore him!"

"Elkins," said the sheriff, "I arrests you for the robbery of the Chawed Ear stage!"

I convulsively went for my guns. It was jest a instinctive move which I done without knowing it, but the sheriff hollered and ducked, and the possemen throwed up their guns, and pap spurred in between us.

"Put down them guns, everybody!" he roared, covering me with one six-shooter and the posse with the other'n. "First man that pulls a trigger, I'll salivate him!"

"I ain't aimin' to shoot nobody!" I bellered. "But what the hell is this all about?"

"As if he didn't know!" sneered one of the posse. "Tryin' to ack innercent! Heh heh heh--glup!"

Pap riz in his stirrups and smashed him over the head with his right-hand six-shooter barrel, and he crumpled into the trail and laid there with the blood oozing out of his sculp.

"Anybody else feel humorous?" roared pap, sweeping the posse with a terrible eye. Evidently nobody did, so he turnt around and says to me, and I seen drops of perspiration standing on his face which warn't caused altogether by the heat. Says he: "Breckinridge, early last night the Chawed Ear stage was stuck up and robbed a few miles t'other side of Chawed Ear. The feller which done it not only taken the passengers' money and watches and things, and the mail sack, but he also shot the driver, old Jim Harrigan, jest out of pure cussedness. Old Jim's layin' over in Chawed Ear now with a bullet through his laig.

"These born fools thinks you done it! They was on Bear Creek before daylight--the first time a posse ever dared to come onto Bear Creek, and it was all me and yore uncles could do to keep the boys from massacrein, 'em. Bear Creek was sure wrought up. These mavericks," pap p'inted a finger of scorn at the four men which had claimed to identify me, "was on the stage. You know Ned Ashley, Chawed Ear's leadin' merchant. The others air strangers. They say their names is Hurley, Jackson and Slade. They claim to lost considerable money."

"We done that!" clamored Jackson. "I had a buckskin poke crammed full of gold pieces the scoundrel taken. I tell you, that's the man which done it!" He p'inted at me, and pap turnt to Ned Ashley, and said: "Ned, what do you say?"

"Well, Bill," says Ashley reluctantly, "I hates to say it, but I don't see who else it could of been. The robber was Breckinridge's size, all right, and you know they ain't many men that big. He warn't ridin' Cap'n Kidd, of course; he was ridin' a big bay mare. He had on a mask, but as he rode off he taken off his hat, and we all seen his head in the moonlight. The hair was all off of it, jest like it is Breckinridge's. Not like he was naturally bald, but like it had been burnt off or shaved off recent."

"Well," says the sheriff, "unless he can prove a alibi I'll have to arrest him."

"Breckinridge," says pap, "whar was you last night?"

"I was layin' out in the woods drunk," I says.

I felt a aidge of doubt in the air.

"I didn't know you could drink enough to git drunk," says pap. "It ain't like you, anyway. What made you? Was it thinkin' about that gal?"

"Naw," I said. "I met a gent in a plug hat named Jugbelly Judkins and he challenged me to a drinkin' match."

"Did you win?" ast pap anxiously.

"Naw!" I confessed in bitter shame. "I lost."

Pap muttered disgustedly in his beard, and the sheriff says: "Can you perduice this Judkins hombre?"

"I dunno where he went," I said. "He'd pulled out when I woke up."

"Very inconvenient, I says!" says Wild Bill Donovan, running his fingers lovingly through his long black locks, and spitting.

"Who ast you yore opinion?" I snarled blood-thirstily. "What you doin' in the Humbolts? Come back to try to git even for Cap'n Kidd?"

"I forgot that trifle long ago," says he. "I holds no petty grudge. I jest happened to be ridin' the road this side of Chawed Ear when the posse come by and I come with 'em jest to see the fun."

"You'll see more fun than you can tote home if you fool with me," I promised.

"Enough of this," snorted pap. "Breckinridge, even I got to admit yore alibi sounds kind of fishy. A critter named Jugbelly with a plug hat! It sounds plumb crazy. Still and all, we'll look for this cussed maverick, and if we find him and he establishes whar you was last night, why--"

"He put my gold in his saddle-bags!" clamored Jackson. "I seen him! That's the same saddle! Look in them bags and I bet you'll find it!"

"Go ahead and look," I invited, and the sheriff went up to Cap'n Kidd very gingerly, whilst I restrained Cap'n Kidd from kicking his brains out. He run his hand in the bags and I'll never forget the look on pap's face when the sheriff hauled out that buckskin poke Japhet Jalatin had give me. I'd forgot all about it.

"How you explain this?" exclaimed the sheriff. I said nothing. A Elkins never busts his word, not even if he hangs for it.

"It's mine!" hollered Jackson. "You'll find my initials worked onto it! J.J., for Judah Jackson."

"There they air," announced the sheriff. "J.J. That's for Judah Jackson, all right."

"They don't stand for that!" I roared. "They stand for--" Then I stopped. I couldn't tell him they stood for Japhet Jalatin without breaking my word and giving away Japhet's secret.

"'Tain't his'n," I growled. "I didn't steal it from nobody."

"Then where'd you git it?" demanded the sheriff.

"None of yore business," I said sullenly.

Pap spurred forwards, and I seen beads of sweat on his face.

"Well, say somethin', damn it!" he roared. "Don't jest set there! No Elkins was ever accused of thievin' before, but if you done it, say so! I demands that you tells me whar you got that gold! If you didn't take it off'n the stage, why don't you say so?"

"I cain't tell you," I muttered.

"Hell's fire!" bellered pap. "Then you must of robbed that stage! What a black shame onto Bear Creek this here is! But these town-folks ain't goin' to haul you off to their cussed jail, even if you did turn thief! Jest come out plain and tell me you done it, and we'll lick the whole cussed posse if necessary!"

I seen my uncles behind him drawing in and cocking their Winchesters, but I was too dizzy with the way things was happening to think straight about anything.

"I never robbed the cussed stage!" I roared. "I cain't tell you where I got that gold--but I didn't rob the gol-derned stage."

"So yo're a liar as well as a thief!" says pap, drawing back from me like I was a reptile. "To think it should come to this! From this day onwards," he says, shaking his fist in my face, "you ain't no son of mine! I disowns you! When they lets you out of the pen, don't you come sneakin' back to Bear Creek! Us folks there if is rough and ready; we kyarves and shoots each other free and frequent; but no Bear Creek man ever yet stole nor lied. I could forgive the thievin', maybe, maybe even the shootin' of pore old Jim Harrigan. But I cain't forgive a lie. Come on, boys."

And him and my uncles turnt around and rode back up the trail towards Bear Creek with their eyes straight ahead of 'em and their backs straight as ramrods. I glared after 'em wildly, feeling like the world was falling to pieces. It war the first time in my life I'd ever knowed Bear Creek folks to turn their backs on a Bear Creek man.

"Well, come along," said the sheriff, and started to hand the poke to Jackson, when I come alive. I warn't going to let Japhet Jalatin's wife spend the rest of her life in poverty if I could help it. I made one swoop and grabbed the poke out of his hand and simultaneous drove in the spurs. Cap'n Kidd made one mighty lunge and knocked Jackson and his hoss sprawling and went over them and into the bresh whilst them fool posse-men was fumbling with their guns. They was a lot of cussing and yelling behind me and some shooting, but we was out of sight of them in a instant, and I went crashing on till I hit a creek I knowed was there. I jumped off and grabbed a big rock which was in the bed of the creek, with about three foot of water around it--jest the top stuck out above the water. I grabbed it and lifted it, and stuck the poke down under it, and let the rock back down again. It was safe here. Nobody'd ever suspect it was hid there, and it was a cinch nobody was going to be lifting the rock jest for fun and find the gold accidental. It weighed about as much as the average mule.

Cap'n Kidd bolted off through the woods as the posse come crashing through the bresh, yelling like Injuns, and they throwed down their shotguns on me as I clumb up the bank, dripping wet.

"Catch that hoss!" yelled the sheriff. "The gold's in the saddle-bags!"

"You'll never catch that hoss," opined Wild Bill Donovan. "I know him of old."

"Maybe Elkins is got the gold on him!" hollered Jackson. "Search him!"

I didn't make no resistance as the sheriff taken my guns and snapped a exter heavy pair of hand-cuffs onto my wrists. I was still kind of numb from having pap and my uncles walk out on me like that. All I'd been able to think of up to then was to hide the gold, and when that was hid my brain wouldn't work no further.

"Elkins ain't got it on him!" snarled the sheriff, after slapping my pockets. "Go after that hoss! Shoot him if you cain't catch him."

"No use for that," I says. "It ain't in the saddle-bags. I hid it where you won't never find it."

"Look in all the holler trees!" says Jackson, and added viciously: "We might make him talk."

"Shet up," said the sheriff. "Anything you could do to him would jest make him mad. He's actin' tame and gentle now. But he's got a broodin' gleam in his eye. Le's git him in jail before he gits a change of heart and starts remodellin' the landscape with the posse's carcasses."

"I'm a broken man," I says mournfully. "My own clan has went back on me, and I got no friends. Take me to jail if you wanta! All places is dreary for a man whose kin has disown him."

So we went to Chawed Ear.

One of the fellers who was riding a big strong hoss lemme have his'n, and the posse closed around me with their shotguns p'inting at me, and we headed out.

It was after dark when we got to Chawed Ear, but everybody was out in the streets to see the posse bring me in. They warn't no friendly faces in that crowd. I'd been very onpopular in Chawed Ear ever since I stole their schoolteacher. I looked for old Joshua Braxton, but somebody said he was off on a prospecting trip.

They stopped at a log-hut clost to the jail, and some men was jest getting through working onto it.

"That there," says the sheriff, "is yore private jail. We built it special for you. As soon as word come last night that you'd robbed the stage, I set fifteen men buildin' that jail, and they're jest now gittin' through."

Well, I didn't think anybody could build anything in a night and a day which could hold me, but I didn't have no thought of trying to break out. I didn't have the heart. All I could think of was the way pap and my uncles had rode off and left me disowned and arrested.

I went in like he told me, and sot down on the bunk, and heard 'em barring the door on the outside. They was fellers holding torches outside, and the light come in at the winder so I could see it was a good strong jail. They was jest one room, with a door towards the town and a winder in the other side. It had a floor made out of logs, and the roof and walls was made out of heavy logs, and they was a big log at each corner sot in concrete, which was something new in them mountains, and the concrete wasn't dry yet. The bars in the winder was thick as a man's wrist, and drove clean through the sill and lintel logs and the ends clinched, and chinks betwixt the logs was tamped in with concrete. The door was made outa sawed planks four inches thick and braced with iron, and the hinges was big iron pins working in heavy iron sockets, and they was a big lock onto the door and three big bars made outa logs sot in heavy iron brackets.

Everybody outside was jammed around the winder trying to look in at me, but I put my head in my hands and paid no attention to 'em. I was trying to think but everything kept going round and round. Then the sheriff chased everybody away except them he told off to stay there and guard the jail, and he put his head to the bars and said: "Elkins, it'll go easier with you,

maybe, if you'll tell us where you hid that there gold."

"When I do," I said gloomily, "there'll be ice in hell thick enough for the devil to skate on."

"All right," he snapped. "If you want to be stubborn. You'll git twenty years for this, or I miss my guess."

"Gwan," I said, "and leave me to my misery. What's a prison term to a man which has jest been disowned by his own blood-kin?"

He pulled back from the winder and I heard him say to somebody: "It ain't no use. Them Bear Creek devils are the most uncivilized white men I ever seen in my life. You cain't do nothin' with one of 'em. I'm goin' to send some men back to look for the gold around that creek we found him climbin' out of. I got a idee he hid it in a holler tree somewheres. He's that much like a b'ar. Likely he hid it and then run and got in the creek jest to throw us off the scent. Thought he'd make us think he hid it on t'other side of the creek. I bet he hid it in a tree this side somewheres.

"I'm goin' to git some food and some sleep. I didn't git to bed at all last night. You fellers watch him clost, and if folks git too rambunctious around the jail, call me quick."

"Ain't nobody around the jail now," said a familiar voice.

"I know," says the sheriff. "They're back in town lickerin' up at all the bars. But Elkins is got plenty of enemies here, and they ain't no tellin' what might bust loose before mornin'."

I heard him leave, and then they was silence, except for some men whispering off somewheres nearby but talking too low for me to make out what they was saying. I could hear noises coming from the town, snatches of singing, and a occasional yell, but no pistol-shooting like they usually is. The jail was on the aidge of town, and the winder looked in the other direction, acrost a narrer clearing with thick woods bordering it.

Purty soon a man come and stuck his head up to the winder and I seen by the starlight that it was Wild Bill Donovan.

"Well, Elkins," says he, "you think you've finally found a jail which can hold you?"

"What you doin' hangin' around here?" I muttered.

He patted his shotgun and said: "Me and four of my friends has been app'inted special guards. But I tell you what I'll do. I hate to see a man down and out like you be, and booted out by his own family and shore to do at least fifteen years in the pen. You tell me where you hid that there gold, and give me Cap'n Kidd, and I'll contrive to let you escape before mornin'. I got a fast hoss hid out there in the thickets, right over yonder, see? You can fork that hoss and be gone outa the country before the sheriff could catch you. All you got to do is give me Cap'n Kidd, and that gold. What you say?"

"I wouldn't give you Cap'n Kidd," I said, "not if they was goin' to hang me."

"Well," he sneered, "'tain't none too shore they ain't. They's plenty of rope-law talk in town tonight. Folks are purty well wrought up over you shootin' old Jim Harrigan."

"I didn't shoot him, damn yore soul!" I said.

"You'll have a hell of a time provin' it," says he, and turnt around and walked around towards the other end of the jail with his shotgun under his arm.

Well, I dunno how long I sot there with my head in my hands and jest suffered. Noises from the town seemed dim and far off. I didn't care if they come and lynched me before morning, I was that low-spirited. I would of bawled if I could of worked up enough energy, but I was too low for that even.

Then somebody says: "Breckinridge!" and I looked up and seen Glory McGraw looking in at the winder with the rising moon behind her.

"Go ahead and t'ant me," I said numbly. "Everything else has happened to me. You might as well, too."

"I ain't goin' to t'ant you!" she said fiercely. "I come here to help you, and I aim to, no matter what you says!"

"You better not let Donovan see you talkin' to me," I says.

"I done seen him," she said. "He didn't want to let me come to the winder, but I told him I'd go to the sheriff for permission if he didn't, so he said he'd let me talk ten minutes. Listen: did he offer to help you escape if you'd do somethin' for him?"

"Yeah," I said. "Why?"

She ground her teeth slightly.

"I thought so!" says she. "The dirty rat! I come through the woods, and snuck on foot the last few hundred feet to git a look at the jail before I come out in the open. They's a hoss tied out there in the thickets and a man hidin' behind a log right nigh it with a sawed-off shotgun. Donovan's always hated you, ever since you taken Cap'n Kidd away from him. He aimed to git you shot whilst tryin' to escape. When I seen that ambush I jest figgered on somethin' like that."

"How'd you git here?" I ast, seeing she seemed to really mean what she said about helping me.

"I follered the posse and yore kinfolks when they came down from Bear Creek," she said. "I kept to the bresh on my pony, and was within hearin' when they stopped you on the trail. After everybody had left I went and caught Cap'n Kidd, and--"

"You caught Cap'n Kidd!" I said in dumbfoundment.

"Certainly," says she. "Hosses has frequently got more sense than men. He'd come back to the creek where he'd saw you last and looked like he was plumb broken-hearted because he couldn't find you. I turnt the pony loose and started him home, and I come on to Chawed Ear on Cap'n Kidd."

"Well, I'm a saw-eared jackrabbit!" I said helplessly.

"Hosses knows who their friends is," says she. "Which is more'n I can say for some men. Breckinridge, pull out of this! Tear this blame jail apart and le's take to the hills! Cap'n Kidd's waitin' out there behind that big clump of oaks. They'll never catch you!"

"I ain't got the strength, Glory," I said helplessly. "My strength has oozed out of me like licker out of a busted jug. What's the use to bust jail, even if I could? I'm a marked man, and a broken man. My own kin has throwed me down. I got no friends."

"You have, too!" she said fiercely. "I ain't throwed you down. I'm standin' by you till hell freezes!"

"But folks thinks I'm a thief and a liar!" I says, about ready to weep.

"What I care what they thinks?" says she. "If you was all them things, I'd still stand by you! But you ain't, and I know it!"

For a second I couldn't see her because my sight got blurry, but I groped and found her hand tense on the winder bar, and I said: "Glory, I dunno what to say. I been a fool, and thought hard things about you, and--"

"Forgit it," says she. "Listen: if you won't bust out of here, we got to prove to them fools that you didn't rob that stage. And we got to do it quick, because them strangers Hurley and Jackson and Slade air in town circulatin' around through the bars and stirrin' them fool Chawed Ear folks up to lynchin' you. A mob's liable to come bustin' out of town any minute. Won't you tell me where you got that there gold they found in yore saddle-bags? I know you never stole it, but if you was to tell me, it might help us."

I shaken my head helplessly.

"I cain't tell you," I said. "Not even you. I promised not to. A Elkins cain't break his word."

"Ha!" says she. "Listen: did some stranger meet you and give you that poke of gold to give to his starvin' wife and chillern, and make you promise not to tell nobody where you got it, because his life was in danger?"

"Why, how'd you know?" I exclaimed in amazement.

"So that was it!" she exclaimed, jumping up and down in her excitement. "How'd I know? Because I know you, you big bone-headed mush-hearted chump! Lissen: don't you see how they worked you? This was a put-up job.

"Jugbelly got you off and made you drink so's you'd be outa the way and couldn't prove no alibi. Then somebody that looked like you robbed the stage and shot old man Harrigan in the laig jest to make the crime wuss. Then this feller what's-his-name give you the money so they'd find it onto you!"

"It looks sensible!" I said dizzily.

"It's bound to be!" says she. "Now all we got to do is find Jugbelly and the feller which give you the gold, and the bay mare the robber rode. But first we got to find a man which has got it in for you enough to frame you like that."

"That's a big order," I says. "Nevada's full of gents which would give their eye-teeth to do me a injury."

"A big man," she mused. "Big enough to be mistook for you, with his head shaved, and ridin' a big bay mare. Hmmmmm! A man which hates you enough to do anything to you, and is got sense enough to frame somethin' like this!"

And jest then Wild Bill Donovan come around the corner of the jail with his shotgun under his arm.

"You've talked to that jail-bird long enough, gal," he says. "You better pull out. The noise is gettin' louder all the time in town, and it wouldn't surprise me to see quite a bunch of folks comin' to the jail before long--with a necktie for yore friend there."

"And I bet you'll plumb risk yore life defendin' him," she sneered.

He laughed and taken off his sombrero and run his fingers through his thick black locks.

"I don't aim to git none of my valuable gore spilt over a stagecoach robber," says he. "But I like yore looks, gal. Why you want to waste yore time with a feller like that when they is a man like me around, I dunno! His head looks like a peeled onion! The hair won't never git no chance to grow out, neither, 'cause he's goin' to git strung up before it has time. Whyn't you pick out a handsome hombre like me, which has got a growth of hair as is hair?"

"He got his hair burnt off tryin' to save a human life," says she. "Somethin' that ain't been said of you, you big monkey!"

"Haw haw haw!" says he. "Ain't you got the spunk, though! That's the way I like gals."

"You might not like me so much," says she suddenly, "if I told you I'd found that big bay mare you rode last night!"

He started like he was shot and blurted out: "Yo're lyin'! Nobody could find her where I hid her--"

He checked hisself sudden, but Glory give a yelp.

"I thought so! It was you!" And before he could stop her she grabbed his black locks and yanked. And his sculp come off in her hands and left his head as bare as what mine was!

"A wig jest like I thought!" she shrieked. "You robbed that stage! You shaved yore head to look like Breckinridge--" He grabbed her and clapped his hand over her mouth, and yelped: "Joe! Tom! Buck!" And at the sight of Glory struggling in his grasp I snapped them handcuffs like they was rotten cords and laid hold of them winder bars and tore 'em out. The logs they was sot in split like kindling wood and I come smashing through that winder like a b'ar through a chicken coop. Donovan let go of Glory and grabbed up his shotgun to blow my head off, but she grabbed the barrel and throwed all her weight onto it, so he couldn't bring it to bear on me, and my feet hit the ground jest as three of his pals come surging around the corner of the jail.

They was so surprised to see me out, and going so fast they couldn't stop and they run right into me and I gathered 'em to my bosom and you ought to of heard the bones crack and snap. I jest hugged the three of 'em together onst and then throwed 'em in all direction like a b'ar ridding hisself of a pack of hounds. Two of 'em fractured their skulls agen the jail-house and t'other broke his laig on a stump.

Meanwhile Donovan had let loose of his shotgun and run for the woods and Glory scrambled up onto her feet with the shotgun and let bam at him, but he was so far away by that time all she done was sting his hide with the shot. But he hollered tremendous jest the same. I started to run after him, but Glory grabbed me.

"He's headed for that hoss I told you about!" she panted. "Git Cap'n Kidd! We'll have to be a-hoss-back if we catch him!"

Bang! went a shotgun in the thickets, and Donovan's maddened voice yelled: "Stop that, you cussed fool! This ain't Elkins! It's me! The game's up! We got to shift!"

"Lemme ride with you!" hollered another voice, which I reckoned was the feller Donovan had planted to shoot me if I agreed to try to escape. "My hoss is on the other side of the jail!"

"Git off, blast you!" snarled Donovan. "This boss won't carry double!" Wham! I jedged he'd hit his pal over the head with his six-shooter. "I owe you that for fillin' my hide with buckshot, you blame fool!" Donovan roared as he went crashing off into the bresh.

By this time we'd reched the oaks Cap'n Kidd was tied behind, and I swung up into the saddle and Glory jumped up behind me.

"I'm goin' with you!" says she. "Don't argy! Git, goin'!"

I headed for the thickets Donovan had disappeared into, and jest inside of 'em we seen a feller sprawled on the ground with a shotgun in his hand and his sculp split open. Even in the midst of my righteous wrath I had a instant of ca'm and serene joy as I reflected that Donovan had got sprinkled with buckshot by the feller who evidently mistook him for me. The deeds of the wicked sure do return onto 'em.

Donovan had took straight out through the bresh, and left gaps in the bushes a blind man could foller. We could hear his hoss crashing through the timber ahead of us, and then purty soon the smashing stopped but we could hear the hoofs lickety-split on hard ground, so I knowed he'd come out into a path, and purty soon so did we. Moonlight hit down into it, but it was winding so we couldn't see very far ahead, but the hoof-drumming warn't pulling away from us, and we knowed we was closing in onto him. He was riding a fast critter but I knowed Cap'n Kidd would run it off its fool laigs within the next mile.

Then we seen a small clearing ahead and a cabin in it with candle-light coming through the winders, and Donovan busted out of the trees and jumped off his hoss which bolted into the bresh. Donovan run to the door and yelled: "Lemme in, you damn' fools! The game's up and Elkins is right behind me!"

The door opened and he fell in onto his all-fours and yelled: "Shet the door and bolt it! I don't believe even he can bust it down!" And somebody else hollered: "Blow out the candles! There he is at the aidge of the trees."

Guns began to crack and bullets whizzed past me, so I backed Cap'n Kidd back into cover and jumped off and picked up a big log which warn't rotten yet, and run out of the clearing and made towards the door. This surprised the men in the cabin, and only one man shot at me and he hit the log. The next instant I hit the door--or rather I hit the door with the log going full clip and the door splintered and ripped offa the hinges and crashed inwards, and three or four men got pinned under it and yelled bloody murder.

I lunged into the cabin over the rooins of the door and the candles was all out, but a little moonlight streamed in and showed me three or four vague figgers before me. They was all shooting at me but it was so dark in the cabin they couldn't see to aim good and only nicked me in a few unimportant places. So I went for them and got both arms full of human beings and started sweeping the floor with 'em. I felt several fellers underfoot because they hollered when I tromped on 'em, and every now and then I felt somebody's head with my foot and give it a good rousing kick. I didn't know who I had hold of because the cabin was so full of gunpowder smoke by this time that the moon didn't do much good. But none of the fellers was big enough to be Donovan, and them I stomped on didn't holler like him, so I started clearing house by heaving 'em one by one through the door, and each time I throwed one they was a resounding whack! outside that I couldn't figger out till I realized that Glory was standing outside with a club and knocking each one in the head as he come out.

Then the next thing I knowed the cabin was empty, except for me and a figger which was dodging back and forth in front of me trying to get past me to the door. So I laid hands onto it and heaved it up over my head and started to throw it through the door when it hollered: "Quarter, my titanic friend, quarter! I surrenders and demands to be treated as a prisoner of war!"

"Jugbelly Judkins!" I says.

"The same," says he, "or what's left of him!"

"Come out here where I can talk to you!" I roared, and groped my way out of the door with him. As I emerged I got a awful lick over the head, and then Glory give a shriek like a stricken elk.

"Oh, Breckinridge!" she wailed. "I didn't know it war you!"

"Never mind!" I says, brandishing my victim before her. "I got my alerbi right here by the neck! Jugbelly Judkins," I says sternly, clapping him onto his feet and waving a enormous fist under his snoot, "if you values yore immortal soul, speak up and tell where I was all last night!"

"Drinkin' licker with me a mile off the Bear Creek trail," gasps he, staring wildly about at the figgers which littered the ground in front of the cabin. "I confesses all! Lead me to the bastile! My sins has catched up with me. I'm a broken man. Yet I am but a tool in the hands of a master mind, same as these misguided sons of crime which lays there--"

"One of 'em's tryin' to crawl off," quoth Glory, fetching the aforesaid critter a clout on the back of the neck with her club. He fell on his belly and howled in a familiar voice.

I started vi'lently and bent over to look close at him.

"Japhet Jalatin!" I hollered. "You cussed thief, you lied to me about yore wife starvin'!"

"If he told you he had a wife it was a gross understatement," says Jugbelly. "He's got three that I know of, includin' a Piute squaw, a Mexican woman, and a Chinee gal in San Francisco. But to the best of my knowledge they're all fat and hearty."

"I have been took for a cleanin' proper," I roared, gnashing my teeth. "I've been played for a sucker! My trustin' nature has been tromped on! My faith in humanity is soured! Nothin' but blood can wipe out I this here infaminy!"

"Don't take it out on us," begged Japhet. "It war all Donovan's idee."

"Where's he?" I yelled, glaring around.

"Knowin' his nature as I does," said Judkins, working his jaw to see if it was broke in more'n one place, "I would sejest that he snuck out the back door whilst the fightin' was goin' on, and is now leggin' it for the corral he's got hid in the thicket behind the cabin, where he secreted the bay mare he rode the night he held up the stagecoach."

Glory pulled a pistol out of one of 'em's belt which he'd never got a chance to use, and she says: "Go after him, Breck. I'll take care of these coyotes!"

I taken one look at the groaning rooins on the ground, and decided she could all right, so I whistled to Cap'n Kidd, and he come, for a wonder. I forked him and headed for the thicket behind the cabin and jest as I done so I seen Donovan streaking it out the other side on a big bay mare. The moon made everything as bright as day.

"Stop and fight like a man, you mangy polecat!" I thundered, but he made no reply except to shoot at me with his six-shooter, and seeing I ignored this, he spurred the mare which he was riding bareback and headed for the high hills.

She was a good mare, but she didn't have a chance agen Cap'n Kidd. We was only a few hundred feet behind and closing in fast when Donovan busted out onto a bare ridge which overlooked a valley. He looked back and seen I was going to ride him down within the next hundred yards, and he jumped offa the mare and taken cover behind a pine which stood by itself a short distance from the aidge of the bresh. They warn't no bushes around it, and to rech him I'd of had to cross a open space in the moonlight, and every time I come out of the bresh he shot at me. So I kept in the aidge of the bresh and unslung my lariat and roped the top of the pine, and sot Cap'n Kid agen it with all his lungs and weight, and tore it up by the roots.

When it fell and left Donovan without no cover he run for the rim of the valley, but I jumped down and grabbed a rock about the size of a man's head and throwed it at him, and hit him jest above the knee on the hind laig. He hit the ground rolling and throwed away both of his six-shooters and hollered: "Don't shoot! I surrenders!"

I quiled my lariat and come up to where he was laying, and says: "Cease that there disgustin' belly-achin'. You don't hear me groanin' like that, do you?"

"Take me to a safe, comfortable jail," says he. "I'm a broken man. My soul is full of remorse and my hide is full of buckshot. My laig is broke and my spirit is crushed. Where'd you git the cannon you shot me with?"

"'Twarn't no cannon," I said with dignity. "I throwed a rock at you."

"But the tree fell!" he says wildly. "Don't tell me you didn't do that with artillery!"

"I roped it and pulled it down," I said, and he give a loud groan and sunk back on the ground, and I said: "Pardon me if I seems to tie yore hands behind yore back and put you acrost Cap'n Kidd. Likely they'll set yore laig at Chawed Ear if you remember to remind 'em about it."

He said nothin' except to groan loud and lusty all the way back to the cabin, and when we got there Glory had tied all them scoundrels' hands behind 'em, and they'd all come to and was groaning in chorus. I found a corral near the house full of their hosses, so I saddled 'em and put them critters onto 'em, and tied their laigs to their stirrups. Then I tied the hosses head to tail, all except one I saved for Glory, and we headed for Chawed Ear.

"What you aimin' to do now, Breck?" she ast as we pulled out.

"I'm goin' to take these critters back to Chawed Ear," I said fiercely, "and make 'em make their spiel to the sheriff and the folks. But my triumph is dust and ashes into my mouth, when I think of the way my folks has did me."

There warn't nothing for her to say; she was a Bear Creek woman. She knowed how Bear Creek folks felt.

"This here night's work," I said bitterly, "has learnt me who my friends is--and ain't. If it warn't for you these thieves would be laughin' up their sleeves at me whilst I rotted in jail."

"I wouldn't never go back on you when you was in trouble, Breck," she says, and I says: "I know that now. I had you all wrong."

We was nearing the town with our groaning caravan strung out behind us, when through the trees ahead of us, we seen a blaze of torches in the clearing around the jail, and men on hosses, and a dark mass of humanity swaying back and forth. Glory pulled up.

"It's the mob, Breck!" says she, with a catch in her throat. "They'll never listen to you. They're crazy mad like mobs always is. They'll shoot you down before you can tell 'em anything. Wait--"

"I waits for nothin'," I said bitterly. "I takes these coyotes in and crams them down the mob's throat! I makes them cussed fools listen to my exoneration. And then I shakes the dust of the Humbolts offa my boots and heads for foreign parts. When a man's kin lets him down, it's time for him to travel."

"Look there!" exclaimed Glory.

We had come out of the trees, and we stopped short at the aidge of the clearing, in the shadder of some oaks.

The mob was there, all right, with torches and guns and ropes--backed up agen the jail with their faces as pale as dough and their knees plumb knocking together. And facing 'em, on hosses, with guns in their hands, I seen pap and every fighting man on Bear Creek! Some of 'em had torches, and they shone on the faces of more Elkinses, Garfields, Gordons, Kirbys, Grimeses, Buckners, and Polks than them Chawed Ear misfits ever seen together at one time. Some of them men hadn't never been that far away from Bear Creek before in their lives. But they was all there now. Bear Creek had sure come to Chawed Ear.

"Whar is he, you mangy coyotes?" roared pap, brandishing his rifle. "What you done with him? I war a fool and a dog, desertin' my own flesh and blood to you polecats! I don't care if he's a thief or a liar, or what! A Bear Creek man ain't made to rot in a blasted town-folks jail! I come after him and I aim to take him back, alive or dead! And if you've kilt him, I aim to burn Chawed Ear to the ground and kill every able-bodied man in her! Whar is he, damn yore souls?"

"I swear we don't know!" panted the sheriff, pale and shaking. "When I heard the mob was formin' I come as quick as I could, and got here by the time they did, but all we found was the jail winder tore out like you see, and three men layin' senseless here and another'n out there in the thicket. They was the guards, but they ain't come to yet to tell us what happened.

We was jest startin' to look for Elkins when you come, and--"

"Don't look no farther!" I roared, riding into the torch-light. "Here I be!"

"Breckinridge!" says pap. "Whar you been? Who's that with you?"

"Some gents which has got a few words to say to the assemblage," I says, drawing my string of captives into the light of the torches. Everybody gaped at 'em, and I says: "I interjuices you to Mister Jugbelly Judkins. He's the slickest word-slingin' sharp I ever seen, so I reckon it oughta be him which does the spielin'. He ain't got on his plug-hat jest now, but he ain't gagged. Speak yore piece, Jugbelly."

"Honest confession is good for the soul," says he. "Lemme have the attention of the crowd, whilst I talks myself right into the penitentiary." You could of heard a pin drop when he commenced.

"Donovan had brooded a long time about failin' to take Cap'n Kidd away from Elkins," says he. "He laid his plans careful and long to git even with Elkins without no risk to hisself. This was a job which taken plenty of caution and preparation. He got a gang of versatile performers together--the cream of the illegal crop, if I do say so myself.

"Most of us kept hid in that cabin back up in the hills, from which Elkins recently routed us. From there he worked out over the whole country--Donovan, I mean. One mornin' he run into Elkins at the Mustang Creek tavern. He overheard Elkins say he was broke, also that he was goin' back to Bear Creek and was aimin' to return to War Paint late that evenin'. All this, and Elkins' singed sculp, give him a idee how to work what he'd been plannin'.

"He sent me to meet Elkins and git him drunk and keep him out in the hills all night. Then I was to disappear, so Elkins couldn't prove no alibi. Whilst we was drinkin' up there, Donovan went and robbed the stage. He had his head shaved so's to make him look like Elkins, of course, and he shot old Jim Harrigan jest to inflame the citizens.

"Hurley and Jackson and Slade was his men. The gold Jackson had on him really belonged to Donovan. Donovan, as soon as he'd robbed the stage, he give the gold to Jalatin who lit out for the place where me and Elkins was boozin'. Then Donovan beat it for the cabin and hid the bay mare and put on his wig to hide his shaved head, and got on another hoss, and started sa'ntering along the Cougar Paw-Grizzly Run road--knowin' a posse would soon be headin' for Bear Creek.

"Which it was, as soon as the stage got in. Hurley and Jackson and Slade swore they'd knowed Elkins in Yavapai, and rekernized him as the man which robbed the stage. Ashley and Harrigan warn't ready to say for sure, but thought the robber looked like him. But you Chawed Ear gents know about that--as soon as you heard about the robbery you started buildin' yore special jail, and sent a posse to Bear Creek, along with Ashley and them three fakes that claimed to of rekernized Elkins. On the way you met Donovan, jest like he planned, and he jined you.

"But meanwhile, all the time, me and Elkins was engaged in alcoholic combat, till he passed out, long after midnight. Then I taken the jugs and hid 'em, and pulled out for the cabin to hide till I could sneak outa the country. Jalatin got there jest as I was leavin', and he waited till Elkins sobered up the next momin', and told him a sob story about havin' a wife in poverty, and give him the gold to give to her, and made him promise not to tell nobody where he got it. Donovan knowed the big grizzly wouldn't bust his word, if it was to save his neck even.

"Well, as you all know, the posse didn't find Elkins on Bear Creek. So they started out lookin' for him, with his pap and some of his uncles, and met him jest comin' out into the trail from the place where me and him had our famous boozin' bout. Imejitly Slade, Hurley and Jackson begun yellin' he was the man, and they was backed by Ashley which is a honest man but really thought Elkins was the robber, when he seen that nude skull. Donovan planned to git Elkins shot while attemptin' to escape. And the rest is now history--war-history, I might say."

"Well spoke, Jugbelly," I says, dumping Donovan off my hoss at the sheriff's feet. "That's the story, and you-all air stuck with it. My part of the game's done did, and I washes my hands of it."

"We done you a big injestice, Elkins," says the sheriff. "But how was we to know--"

"Forget it," I says, and then pap rode up. Us Bear Creek folks don't talk much, but we says plenty in a few words.

"I was wrong, Breckinridge," he says gruffly, and that said more'n most folks could mean in a long-winded speech. "For the first time in my life," he says, "I admits I made a mistake. But," says he, "the only fly in the 'intment is the fack that a Elkins was drunk off'n his feet by a specimen like that!" And he p'inted a accusing finger at Jugbelly Judkins.

"I alone have come through the adventure with credit," admitted Jugbelly modestly. "A triumph of mind over muscle, my law-shootin' friends!"

"Mind, hell!" says Jalatin viciously. "That coyote didn't drink none of that licker! He was a sleight-of-hand performer in a vaudeville show when Donovan picked him up. He had a rubber stummick inside his shirt and he poured the licker into that. He couldn't outdrink Breckinridge Elkins if he was a whole corporation, the derned thief!"

"I admits the charge," sighed Jugbelly. "I bows my head in shame."

"Well," I says, "I've saw worse men than you, at that, and if they's anything I can do, you'll git off light, you derned wind-bag, you!"

"Thank you, my generous friend," says he, and pap reined his hoss around and said: "You comin' home, Breckinridge?"

"Go ahead," I said. "I'll come on with Glory."

So pap and the men of Bear Creek turnt and headed up the trail, riding single file, with their rifles gleaming in the flare of the torches, and nobody saying nothing, jest saddles creaking and hoofs clinking softly, like Bear Creek men generally ride.

And as they went the citizens of Chawed Ear hove a loud sigh of relief, and grabbed Donovan and his gang with enthusiasm and lugged 'em off to the jail--the one I hadn't busted, I mean.

"And that," said Glory, throwing her club away, "is that. You ain't goin' off to foreign parts now, be you, Breckinridge?"

"Naw," I said. "My misguided relatives has redeemed theirselves."

We stood there a minute looking at each other, and she said: "You--you ain't got nothin' to say to me, Breckinridge?"

"Why, sure I has," I responded. "I'm mighty much obliged for what you done."

"Is that all?" she ast, gritting her teeth slightly.

"What else you want me to say?" I ast, puzzled. "Ain't I jest thanked you? They was a time when I would of said more, and likely made you mad, Glory, but knowin' how you feel towards me, I--"

"--!" says Glory, and before I knowed what she was up to, she grabbed up a rock the size of a watermelon and busted it over my head. I was so tooken by surprise I stumbled backwards and fell sprawling and as I looked up at her, a great light bust onto me.

"She loves me!" I exclaimed.

"I been wonderin' how long it was goin' to take you to find out!" says she.

"But what made you treat me like you done?" I demanded presently. "I thought you plumb hated me!"

"You ought to of knowed better," says she, snuggling in my arms. "You made me mad that time you licked pap and them fool brothers of mine. I didn't mean most of them things I said. But you got mad and said some things which made me madder, and after that I was too proud to act any way but like I done. I never loved nobody but you, but I wouldn't admit it as long as you was at the top of the ladder, struttin' around with money in yore pocket, and goin' with purty gals, and everybody eager to be friends with you. I was lovin' you then so's it nearly busted me, but I wouldn't let on. I wouldn't humble myself to no blamed man! But you seen how quick I come to you when you needed a friend, you big lunkhead!"

"Then I'm glad all this happened," I says. "It made me see things straight. I never loved no other gal but you. I was jest tryin' to forgit you and make you jealous when I was goin' with them other gals. I thought I'd lost you, and was jest tryin' to git the next best. I know that now, and I admits it. I never seen a gal which could come within a hundred miles of you in looks and nerve and everything."

"I'm glad you've come to yore senses, Breckinridge," says she.

I swung up on Cap'n Kidd and lifted her up before me, and the sky was jest getting pink and the birds was beginning to cut loose as we started up the road towards Bear Creek.

THE END

Contents

CUPID FROM BEAR CREEK

By Robert E. Howard

Some day, maybe, when I'm a old man, I'll have sense enough to stay away from these new mining camps which springs up overnight like mushroomers. There was that time in Teton Gulch, for instance. It was a ill-advised moment when I stopped there on my way back to the Humbolts from the Yavapai country. I was a sheep for the shearing and I was shore plenty. And if some of the shearers got fatally hurt in the process, they needn't to blame me. I was acting in self-defense all the way through.

At first I aimed to pass right through Teton Gulch without stopping. I was in a hurry to git back to my home-country and find out was any misguided idjits trying to court Dolly Rixby, the belle of War Paint, in my absence. I hadn't heard from her since I left Bear Creek, five weeks before, which warn't surprizing, seeing as how she couldn't write, nor none of her family, and I couldn't of read it if they had. But they was a lot of young bucks around War Paint which could be counted on to start shining around her the minute my back was turnt.

But my thirst got the best of me, and I stopped in the camp. I was drinking me a dram at the bar of the Yaller Dawg Saloon and Hotel, when the bar-keep says, after studying me a spell, he says: "You must be Breckinridge Elkins, of Bear Creek."

I give the matter due consideration, and 'lowed as how I was.

"How come you knowed me?" I inquired suspiciously, because I hadn't never been in Teton Gulch before, and he says: "Well, I've heard tell of Breckinridge Elkins, and when I seen you, I figgered you must be him, because I don't see how they can be two men in the world that big. By the way, there's a friend of yore'n upstairs--Blink Wiltshaw, from War Paint. I've heered him brag about knowin' you personal. He's upstairs now, fourth door from the stair-head, on the left."

Now that there news interested me, because Blink was the most persistent of all them young mavericks which was trying to spark Dolly Rixby. Just the night before I left for Yavapai, I catched him coming out of her house, and was fixing to sweep the street with him when Dolly come out and stopped me and made us shake hands.

It suited me fine for him to be in Teton Gulch, or anywheres just so he warn't no-wheres nigh Dolly Rixby, so I thought I'd pass the time of day with him.

I went upstairs and knocked on the door, and bam! went a gun inside and a .45 slug ripped through the door and taken a nick out of my off-ear. Getting shot in the ear always did irritate me, so without waiting for no more exhibitions of hospitality, I give voice to my displeasure in a deafening beller and knocked the door off its hinges and busted into the room over its ruins.

For a second I didn't see nobody, but then I heard a kind of gurgle going on, and happened to remember that the door seemed kind of squishy underfoot when I tromped over it, so I knowed that whoever was in the room had got pinned under the door when I knocked it down.

So I reached under it and got him by the collar and hauled him out, and shore enough it was Blink Wiltshaw. He was limp as a lariat, and glassy-eyed and pale, and was still kind of trying to shoot me with his six-shooter when I taken it away from him.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" I demanded sternly, dangling him by the collar with one hand, whilst shaking him till his teeth rattled. "Didn't Dolly make us shake hands? What you mean by tryin' to 'sasserinate me through a hotel door?"

"Lemme down, Breck," he gasped. "I didn't know it was you. I thought it was Rattlesnake Harrison comin' after my gold."

SO I SOT HIM DOWN. HE grabbed a jug of licker and taken a swig, and his hand shook so he spilled half of it down his neck.

"Well?" I demanded. "Ain't you goin' to offer me a snort, dern it?"

"Excuse me, Breckinridge," he apolergized. "I'm so derned jumpy I dunno what I'm doin'. You see them buckskin pokes?" says he, p'inting at some bags on the bed. "Them is plumb full of nuggets. I been minin' up the Gulch, and I hit a regular bonanza the first week. But it ain't doin' me no good."

"What you mean?" I demanded.

"These mountains is full of outlaws," says he. "They robs, and murders every man which makes a strike. The stagecoach has been stuck up so often nobody sends their dust out on it no more. When a man makes a pile he sneaks out through the mountains at night, with his gold on pack-mules. I aimed to do that last night. But them outlaws has got spies all over the camp, and I know they got me spotted. Rattlesnake Harrison's their chief, and he's a ring-tailed he-devil. I been squattin' over this here gold with my pistol in fear and tremblin', expectin' 'em to come right into camp after me. I'm dern nigh loco!"

And he shivered and cussed kind of whimpery, and taken another dram, and cocked his pistol and sot there shaking like he'd saw a ghost or two.

"You got to help me, Breckinridge," he said desperately. "You take this here gold out for me, willya? The outlaws don't know you. You could hit the old Injun path south of the camp and foller it to Hell-Wind Pass. The Chawed-Ear--Wahpeton stage goes through there about sun-down. You could put the gold on the stage there, and they'd take it on to Wahpeton. Harrison wouldn't never think of holdin' it up after it left Hell-Wind. They always holds it up this side of the Pass."

"What I want to risk my neck for you for?" I demanded bitterly, memories of Dolly Rixby rising up before me. "If you ain't got the guts to tote out yore own gold--"

"T'ain't altogether the gold, Breck," says he. "I'm tryin' to git married, and--"

"Married?" says I. "Here? In Teton Gulch? To a gal in Teton Gulch?"

"Married to a gal in Teton Gulch," he avowed. "I was aimin' to git hitched tomorrer, but they ain't a preacher or justice of the peace in camp to tie the knot. But her uncle the Reverant Rembrandt Brockton is a circuit rider, and he's due to pass through Hell-Wind on his way to Wahpeton today. I was aimin' to sneak out last night, hide in the hills till the stage come through, then put the gold on the stage and bring Brother Rembrandt back with me. But yesterday I learnt Harrison's spies was watchin' me, and I'm scairt to go. Now Brother Rembrandt will go on to Wahpeton, not knowin' he's needed here, and no tellin' when I'll be able to git married--"

"Hold on," I said hurried, doing some quick thinking. I didn't want this here wedding to fall through. The more Blink was married to some gal in Teton, the less he could marry Dolly Rixby.

"Blink," I said, grasping his hand warmly, "let it never be said that a Elkins ever turned down a friend in distress. I'll take yore gold to Hell-Wind Pass and bring back Brother Rembrandt."

Blink fell onto my neck and wept with joy. "I'll never forgit this, Breckinridge," says he, "and I bet you won't neither! My hoss and pack-mule are in the stables behind the saloon."

"I don't need no pack-mule," I says. "Cap'n Kidd can pack the dust easy."

CAPN KIDD WAS GETTING fed out in the corral next to the hotel. I went out there and got my saddle-bags, which is a lot bigger'n most saddle-bags, because all my plunder has to be made to fit my size. They're made outa three-ply elkskin, stitched with rawhide thongs, and a wildcat couldn't claw his way out of 'em.

I noticed quite a bunch of men standing around the corral looking at Cap'n Kidd, but thought nothing of it, because he is a hoss which naturally attracts attention. But whilst I was getting my saddle-bags, a long lanky cuss with long yaller whiskers come up and said, says he: "Is that yore hoss in the corral?"

If he ain't he ain't nobody's," I says.

"Well, he looks a whole lot like a hoss that was stole off my ranch six months ago," he said, and I seen ten or fifteen hard-looking hombres gathering around me. I laid down my saddle-bags sudden-like and reached for my guns, when it occurred to me that if I had a fight there I might git arrested and it would interfere with me bringing Brother Rembrandt in for the wedding.

"If that there is yore hoss," I said, "you ought to be able to lead him out of that there corral."

"Shore I can," he says with a oath. "And what's more, I aim'ta."

He looked at me suspiciously, but he taken up a rope and clumb the fence and started toward Cap'n Kidd which was chawing on a block of hay in the middle of the corral. Cap'n Kidd throwed up his head and laid back his ears and showed his teeth, and Jake stopped sudden and turned pale.

"I--I don't believe that there is my hoss, after all!" says he.

"Put that lasso on him!" I roared, pulling my right-hand gun. "You say he's yore'n; I say he's mine. One of us is a liar and a hoss-thief, and I aim to prove which. Gwan, before I festoons yore system with lead polka-dots!"

He looked at me and he looked at Cap'n Kidd, and he turned bright green all over. He looked agen at my .45 which I now had cocked and p'inted at his long neck, which his adam's apple was going up and down like a monkey on a pole, and he begun to aidge toward Cap'n Kidd again, holding the rope behind him and sticking out one hand.

"Whoa, boy," he says kind of shudderingly. "Whoa--good old feller--nice hossie--whoa, boy--ow!"

He let out a awful howl as Cap'n Kidd made a snap and bit a chunk out of his hide. He turned to run but Cap'n Kidd wheeled and let fly both heels which caught Jake in the seat of the britches, and his shriek of despair was horrible to hear as he went head-first through the corral fence into a hoss-trough on the other side. From this he ariz dripping water, blood and profanity, and he shook a quivering fist at me and croaked: "You derned murderer! I'll have yore life for this!"

"I don't hold no conversation with hoss-thieves," I snorted, and picked up my saddle-bags and stalked through the crowd which give back in a hurry.

I TAKEN THE SADDLE-BAGS up to Blink's room, and told him about Jake, thinking he'd be amoosed, but got a case of aggers again, and said: "That was one of Harrison's men! He meant to take yore hoss. It's a old trick, and honest folks don't dare interfere. Now they got you spotted! What'll you do?"

"Time, tide and a Elkins waits for no man!" I snorted, dumping the gold into the saddle-bags. "If that yaller-whiskered coyote wants any trouble, he can git a bellyfull. Don't worry, yore gold will be safe in my saddle-bags. It's as good as in the Wahpeton stage right now. And by midnight I'll be back with Brother Rembrandt Brockton to hitch you up with his niece."

"Don't yell so loud," begged Blink. "The cussed camp's full of spies. Some of 'em may be downstairs now, listenin'."

"I warn't speakin' above a whisper," I said indignantly.

"That bull's beller may pass for a whisper on Bear Creek," says he, wiping off the sweat, "but I bet they can hear it from one end of the Gulch to the other, at least."

It's a pitable sight to see a man with a case of the scairts; I shook hands with him and left him pouring red licker down his gullet like it was water, and I swung the saddle-bags over my shoulder and went downstairs, and the bar-keep leaned over the bar and whispered to me: "Look out for Jake Roman! He was in here a minute ago, lookin' for trouble. He pulled out just before you come down, but he won't be forgittin' what yore hoss done to him!"

"Not when he tries to set down, he won't," I agreed, and went on out to the corral, and they was a crowd of men watching Cap'n Kidd eat his hay, and one of 'em seen me and hollered: "Hey, boys, here comes the giant! He's goin' to saddle that man-eatin' monster! Hey, Bill! Tell the boys at the bar!"

And here come a whole passel of fellers running out of all the saloons, and they lined the corral fence solid, and started laying bets whether I'd git the saddle on Cap'n Kidd or git my brains kicked out. I thought miners must all be crazy. They ought've knowed I was able to saddle my own hoss.

Well, I saddled him and throwed on the saddle-bags and clumb aboard, and he pitched about ten jumps like he always does when I first fork him--t'warn't nothing, but them miners hollered like wild Injuns. And when he accidentally bucked hisself and me through the fence and knocked down a section of it along with fifteen men which was setting on the top-rail, the way they howled you'd of thought something terrible had happened. Me and Cap'n Kidd don't generally bother about gates. We usually makes our own through whatever happens to be in front of us. But them miners is a weakly breed, because as I rode out of town I seen the crowd dipping four or five of 'em into a hoss-trough to bring 'em to, on account of Cap'n Kidd having accidentally tromped on 'em.

WELL, I RODE OUT OF THE Gulch and up the ravine to the south, and come out into the high timbered country, and hit the old Injun trail Blink had told me about. It warn't traveled much. I didn't meet nobody after I left the Gulch. I figgered to hit Hell-Wind Pass at least a hour before sun-down which would give me plenty of time. Blink said the stage passed through there about sun-down. I'd have to bring back Brother Rembrandt on Cap'n Kidd, I reckoned, but that there hoss can carry double and still out-run and out-last any other hoss in the State of Nevada. I figgered on getting back to Teton about midnight or maybe a little later.

After I'd went several miles I come to Apache Canyon, which was a deep, narrer gorge, with a river at the bottom which went roaring and foaming along betwixt rock walls a hundred and fifty feet high. The old trail hit the rim at a place where the canyon warn't only about seventy foot wide, and somebody had felled a whopping big pine tree on one side so it fell acrost and made a foot-bridge, where a man could walk acrost. They'd once been a gold strike in Apache Canyon, and a big camp there, but now it was plumb abandoned and nobody lived anywheres near it.

I turned east and follered the rim for about half a mile. Here I come into a old wagon road which was just about growed up with saplings now, but it run down into a ravine into the bed of the canyon, and they was a bridge acrost the river which had been built during the days of the gold rush. Most of it had done been washed away by head-rises, but a man could still ride a horse across what was left. So I done so and rode up a ravine on the other side, and come out on high ground again.

I'd rode a few hundred yards past the ravine when somebody said: "Hey!" and I wheeled with both guns in my hands. Out of the bresh s'antered a tall gent in a long frock tail coat and broad-brimmed hat.

"Who air you and what the hell you mean by hollerin' 'Hey!' at me?" I demanded courteously, p'inting my guns at him. A Elkins is always perlite.

"I am the Reverant Rembrandt Brockton, my good man," says he. "I am on my way to Teton Gulch to unite my niece and a young man of that camp in the bonds of holy matrimony."

"The he--you don't say!" I says. "Afoot?"

"I alit from the stage-coach at--ah--Hades-Wind Pass," says he. "Some very agreeable cowboys happened to be awaiting the stage there, and they offered to escort me to Teton."

"How come you knowed yore niece was wantin' to be united in acrimony?" I ast.

"The cowboys informed me that such was the case," says he.

"Where-at are they now?" I next inquore.

"The mount with which they supplied me went lame a little while ago," says he. "They left me here while they went to procure another from a near-by ranch-house."

"I dunno who'd have a ranch anywheres near here," I muttered. "They ain't got much sense leavin' you here by yore high lonesome."

"You mean to imply there is danger?" says he, blinking mildly at me.

"These here mountains is lousy with outlaws which would as soon kyarve a preacher's gullet as anybody's," I said, and then I thought of something else. "Hey!" I says. "I thought the stage didn't come through the Pass till sun-down?"

"Such was the case," says he. "But the schedule has been altered."

"Heck!" I says. "I was aimin' to put this here gold on it which my saddle-bags is full of. Now I'll have to take it back to Teton with me. Well, I'll bring it out tomorrer and catch the stage then. Brother Rembrandt, I'm Breckinridge Elkins, of Bear Creek, and I come out here to meet you and escort you back to the Gulch, so's you could unite yore niece and Blink Wiltshaw in the holy bounds of alimony. Come on. We'll ride double."

"But I must await my cowboy friends!" he said. "Ah, here they come now!"

I looked over to the east and seen about fifteen men ride into sight out of the bresh and move toward us. One was leading a hoss without no saddle onto it.

"Ah, my good friends!" beamed Brother Rembrandt. "They have procured a mount for me, even as they promised."

He hauled a saddle out of the bresh, and says: "Would you please saddle my horse for me when they get here? I should be delighted to hold your rifle while you did so."

I started to hand him my Winchester, when the snap of a twig under a hoss's hoof made me whirl quick. A feller had just rode out of a thicket about a hundred yards south of me, and he was raising a Winchester to his shoulder. I recognized him instantly. If us Bear Creek folks didn't have eyes like a hawk, we'd never live to git growed. It was Jake Roman!

Our Winchesters banged together. His lead fanned my ear and mine knocked him end-ways out of his saddle.

"Cowboys, hell!" I roared. "Them's Harrison's outlaws! I'll save you, Brother Rembrandt!"

I SWOOPED HIM UP WITH one arm and gouged Cap'n Kidd with the spurs and he went from there like a thunderbolt with its tail on fire. Them outlaws come on with wild yells. I ain't in the habit of running from people, but I was afeared they might do the Reverant harm if it come to a close fight, and if he stopped a hunk of lead, Blink might not git to marry his niece, and might git disgusted and go back to War Paint and start sparking Dolly Rixby again.

I was heading back for the canyon, aiming to make a stand in the ravine if I had to, and them outlaws was killing their hosses trying to git to the bend of the trail ahead of me, and cut me off. Cap'n Kidd was running with his belly to the ground, but I'll admit Brother Rembrandt warn't helping me much. He was laying acrost my saddle with his arms and laigs waving wildly because I hadn't had time to set him comfortable, and when the horn jobbed him in the belly he uttered some words I wouldn't of expected to hear spoke by a minister of the gospel.

Guns begun to crack and lead hummed past us, and Brother Rembrandt twisted his head around and screamed: "Stop that shootin', you--sons of--! You'll hit me!"

I thought it was kind of selfish of Brother Rembrandt not to mention me, too, but I said: "T'ain't no use to remonstrate with them skunks, Reverant. They ain't got no respeck for a preacher even."

But to my amazement the shooting stopped, though them bandits yelled louder'n ever and flogged their cayuses. But about that time I seen they had me cut off from the lower canyon crossing, so I wrenched Cap'n Kidd into the old Injun trace and headed straight for the canyon rim as hard as he could hammer, with the bresh lashing and snapping around us and slapping Brother Rembrandt in the face when it whipped back. The outlaws yelled and wheeled in behind us, but Cap'n Kidd drawed away from them with every stride, and the canyon rim loomed just ahead of us.

"Pull up, you jack-eared son of Baliol!" howled Brother Rembrandt. "You'll go over the edge!"

"Be at ease, Reverant," I reassured him. "We're goin' over the log."

"Lord have mercy on my soul!" he squalled, and shet his eyes and grabbed a stirrup leather with both hands, and then Cap'n Kidd went over that log like thunder rolling on Jedgment Day.

I doubt if they is another hoss west of the Pecos which would bolt out onto a log foot-bridge acrost a canyon a hundred fifty foot deep like that, but they ain't nothing in this world Cap'n Kidd's scairt of except maybe me. He didn't slacken his speed none. He streaked acrost that log like it was a quarter-track, with the bark and splinters flying from under his hoofs, and if one foot had slipped a inch, it would of been Sally bar the door. But he didn't slip, and we was over and on the other side almost before you could catch yore breath.

"You can open yore eyes now, Brother Rembrandt," I said kindly, but he didn't say nothing. He'd fainted. I shook him to wake him up, and in a flash he come to and give a shriek and grabbed my laig like a b'ar trap. I reckon he thought we was still on the log. I was trying to pry him loose when Cap'n Kidd chose that moment to run under a low-hanging oak tree limb. That's his idee of a joke. That there hoss has got a great sense of humor.

I looked up just in time to see the limb coming, but not in time to dodge it. It was as big around as my thigh, and it took me smack acrost the wish-bone. We was going full speed, and something had to give way. It was the girths--both of 'em. Cap'n Kidd went out from under me, and me and Brother Rembrandt and the saddle hit the ground together.

I JUMPED UP BUT BROTHER Rembrandt laid there going: "Wug wug wug!" like water running out of a busted jug. And then I seen them outlaws had dismounted off of their hosses and was corning acrost the bridge single file, with their Winchesters in their hands.

I didn't waste no time shooting them misguided idjits. I run to the end of the foot-bridge, ignoring the slugs they slung at me. It was purty pore shooting, because they warn't shore of their footing, and didn't aim good. So I only got one bullet in the hind laig and was creased three or four other unimportant places--not enough to bother about.

I bent my knees and got hold of the end of the tree and heaved up with it, and them outlaws hollered and fell along it like ten pins, and dropped their Winchesters and grabbed holt of the log. I given it a shake and shook some of 'em off like persimmons off a limb after a frost, and then I swung the butt around clear of the rim and let go, and it went down end over end into the river a hundred and fifty feet below, with a dozen men still hanging onto it and yelling blue murder.

A regular geyser of water splashed up when they hit, and the last I seen of 'em they was all swirling down the river together in a thrashing tangle of arms and laigs and heads.

I remember Brother Rembrandt and run back to where he'd fell, but was already onto his feet. He was kind of pale and wild-eyed and his laigs kept bending under him, but he had hold of the saddle-bags and was trying to drag 'em into a thicket, mumbling kind of dizzily to hisself.

"It's all right now, Brother Rembrandt," I said kindly. "Them outlaws is plumb horse-de-combat now, as the French say. Blink's gold is safe."

"--!" says Brother Rembrandt, pulling two guns from under his coat tails, and if I hadn't grabbed him, he would of undoubtedly shot me. We rassled around and I protested: "Hold on, Brother Rembrandt! I ain't no outlaw. I'm yore friend, Breckinridge Elkins. Don't you remember?"

His only reply was a promise to eat my heart without no seasoning, and he then sunk his teeth into my ear and started to chaw it off, whilst gouging for my eyes with both thumbs and spurring me severely in the hind laigs. I seen he was out of his head from fright and the fall he got, so I said sorrerfully: "Brother Rembrandt, I hate to do this. It hurts me more'n it does you, but we cain't waste time like this. Blink is waitin' to git married." And with a sigh I busted him over the head with the butt of my six-shooter, and he fell over and twitched a few times and then lay limp.

"Pore Brother Rembrandt," I sighed sadly. "All I hope is I ain't addled yore brains so you've forgot the weddin' ceremony."

So as not to have no more trouble with him when, and if, he come to, I tied his arms and laigs with pieces of my lariat, and taken his weppins which was most surprizing arms for a circuit rider. His pistols had the triggers out of 'em, and they was three notches on the butt of one, and four on the other'n. Moreover he had a bowie knife in his boot, and a deck of marked kyards and a pair of loaded dice in his hip-pocket. But that warn't none of my business.

About the time I finished tying him up, Cap'n Kidd come back to see if he'd killed me or just crippled me for life. To show him I can take a joke too, I give him a kick in the belly, and when he could git his breath again, and undouble hisself, I throwed the saddle on him. I spliced the girths with the rest of my lariat, and put Brother Rembrandt in the saddle and clumb on behind and we headed for Teton Gulch.

After a hour or so Brother Rembrandt come to and says kind of dizzily: "Was anybody saved from the typhoon?"

"Yo're all right, Brother Rembrandt," I assured him. "I'm takin' you to Teton Gulch."

"I remember," he muttered. "It all comes back to me. Damn Jake Roman! I thought it was a good idea, but it seems I was mistaken. I thought we had an ordinary human being to deal with. I know when I'm licked. I'll give you a thousand dollars to let me go."

"Take it easy, Brother Rembrandt," I soothed, seeing he was still delirious. "We'll be to Teton in no time."

"I don't want to go to Teton!" he hollered.

"You got to," I said. "You got to unite yore niece and Blink Wiltshaw in the holy bums of parsimony."

"To hell with Blink Wiltshaw and my--niece!" he yelled.

"You ought to be ashamed usin' sech langwidge, and you a minister of the gospel," I reproved him sternly. His reply would of curled a Piute's hair.

I was so scandalized I made no reply. I was just fixing to untie him, so's he could ride more comfortable, but I thought if he was that crazy, I better not. So I give no heed to his ravings which growed more and more unbearable. In all my born days I never seen such a preacher.

IT WAS SHORE A RELIEF to me to sight Teton at last. It was night when we rode down the ravine into the Gulch, and the dance halls and saloons was going full blast. I rode up behind the Yaller Dawg Saloon and hauled Brother Rembrandt off with me and sot him on his feet, and he said, kind of despairingly: "For the last time, listen to reason. I got fifty thousand dollars cached up in the hills. I'll give you every cent if you'll untie me."

"I don't want no money," I said. "All I want is for you to marry yore niece and Blink Wiltshaw. I'll untie you then."

"All right," he said. "All right! But untie me now!"

I was just fixing to do it, when the bar-keep come out with a lantern and he shone it on our faces and said in a startled tone: "Who the hell is that with you, Elkins?"

"You wouldn't never suspect it from his langwidge," I says, "but it's the Reverant Rembrandt Brockton."

"Are you crazy?" says the bar-keep. "That's Rattlesnake Harrison!"

"I give up," said my prisoner. "I'm Harrison. I'm licked. Lock me up somewhere away from this lunatic."

I was standing in a kind of daze, with my mouth open, but now I woke up and bellered: "What? Yo're Harrison? I see it all now! Jake Roman overheard me talkin' to Blink Wiltshaw, and rode off and fixed it with you to fool me like you done, so's to git Blink's gold! That's why you wanted to hold my Winchester whilst I saddled yore cayuse."

"How'd you ever guess it?" he sneered. "We ought to have shot you from ambush like I wanted to, but Jake wanted to catch you alive and torture you to death account of your horse bitin' him. The fool must have lost his head at the last minute and decided to shoot you after all. If you hadn't recognized him we'd had you surrounded and stuck up before you knew what was happening."

"But now the real preacher's gone on to Wahpeton!" I hollered. "I got to foller him and bring him back--"

"Why, he's here," said one of the men which was gathering around us. "He come in with his niece a hour ago on the stage from War Paint."

"War Paint?" I howled, hit in the belly by a premonition. I run into the saloon, where they was a lot of people, and there was Blink and a gal holding hands in front of a old man with a long white beard, and he had a book in his hand, and t'other'in lifted in the air. He was saying: "--And I now pronounces you-all man and wife. Them which God had j'ined together let no snake-hunter put asunder."

"Dolly!" I yelled. Both of 'em jumped about four foot and whirled, and Dolly Rixby jumped in front of Blink and spread her arms like she was shooing chickens.

"Don't you tech him, Breckinridge Elkins!" she hollered. "I just married him and I don't aim for no Humbolt grizzly to spile him!"

"But I don't sabe all this--" I said dizzily, nervously fumbling with my guns which is a habit of mine when upsot.

Everybody in the wedding party started ducking out of line, and Blink said hurriedly: "It's this way, Breck. When I made my pile so onexpectedly quick, I sent for Dolly to come and marry me like she'd promised the day after you left for the Yavapai. I was aimin' to take my gold out today, like I told you, so me and Dolly could go to San Francisco on our honeymoon, but I learnt Harrison's gang was watchin' me, just like I told you. I wanted to git my gold out, and I wanted to git you out of the way before Dolly and her uncle got here on the War Paint stage, so I told you that lie about Brother Rembrandt bein' on the Wahpeton stage. It was the only lie."

"You said you was marryin' a gal in Teton," I accused fiercely.

"Well," says he, "I did marry her in Teton. You know, Breck, all's fair in love and war."

"Now, now, boys," said Brother Rembrandt--the real one, I mean. "The gal's married, yore rivalry is over, and they's no use holdin' grudges. Shake hands and be friends."

"All right," I said heavily. No man cain't say I ain't a good loser. I was cut deep but I concealed my busted heart.

Leastways I concealed it all I was able to. Them folks which says I crippled Blink Wiltshaw with malice aforethought is liars which I'll sweep the road with when I catches 'em. When my emotions is wrought up I unconsciously uses more of my strength than I realizes. I didn't aim to break Blink's arm when I shook hands with him; it was just the stress of my emotions. Likewise it was Dolly's fault that her Uncle Rembrandt got throwed out a winder and some others got their heads banged. When she busted me with that cuspidor I knew that our love was dead forever. Tears come into my eyes as I waded through the crowd, and I had to move fast to keep from making a fool of myself. Them that was flang out of my way ought to have knowed it was done more in sorrer than in anger.

THE END

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EVIL DEEDS AT RED COUGAR

By Robert E. Howard

I BEEN ACCUSED OF prejudice agen the town of Red Cougar, on account of my habit of avoiding it if I have to ride fifty miles outen my way to keep from going through there. I denies the slander. It ain't no more prejudiced for me to ride around Red Cougar than it is for a lobo to keep his paw out of a jump-trap. My experiences in that there lair of iniquity is painful to recall. I was a stranger and took in. I was a sheep for the fleecing, and if some of the fleecers got their fingers catched in the shears, it was their own fault. If I shuns Red Cougar like a plague, that makes it mutual, because the inhabitants of Red Cougar shuns me with equal enthusiasm, even to the p'int of deserting their wagons and taking to the bresh if they happen to meet me on the road.

I warn't intending to go there in the first place. I been punching cows over in Utah and was heading for Bear Creek, with the fifty bucks a draw poker game had left me outa my wages. When I seen a trail branching offa the main road I knowed it turnt off to Red Cougar, but it didn't make no impression on me.

But I hadn't gone far past it when I heard a hoss running, and the next thing it busted around a bend in the road with foam flying from the bit rings. They was a gal on it, looking back over her shoulder down the road. Jest as she rounded the turn her hoss stumbled and went to its knees, throwing her over its head.

I was offa Cap'n Kidd in a instant and catched her hoss before it could run off. I helped her up, and she grabbed holt of me and hollered: "Don't let 'em get me!"

"Who?" I said, taking off my hat with one hand and drawing a .45 with the other'n.

"A gang of desperadoes!" she panted. "They've chased me for five miles! Oh, please don't let 'em get me!"

"They'll tech you only over my dead carcass," I assured her.

She gimme a look which made my heart turn somersets. She had black curly hair and big innercent gray eyes, and she was the purtiest gal I'd saw in a coon's age.

"Oh, thank you!" she panted. "I knowed you was a gent the minute I seen you. Will you help me up onto my hoss?"

"You shore you ain't hurt none?" I ast, and she said she warn't, so I helped her up, and she gathered up her reins and looked back down the road very nervous. "Don't let 'em foller me!" she begged. "I'm goin' on."

"You don't need to do that," I says. "Wait till I exterminate them scoundrels, and I'll escort you home."

But she started convulsively as the distant pound of hoofs reched us, and said: "Oh, I dast not! They mustn't even see me again!"

"But I want to," I said. "Where you live?"

"Red Cougar," says she. "My name's Sue Pritchard. If you happen up that way, drop in."

"I'll be there!" I promised, and she flashed me a dazzling smile and loped on down the road and outa sight up the Red Cougar trail.

SO I SET TO WORK. I USES a rope wove outa buffalo hide, a right smart longer and thicker and stronger'n the average riata because a man my size has got to have a rope to match. I tied said lariat acrost the road about three foot off the ground.

Then I backed Cap'n Kidd into the bushes, and purty soon six men swept around the bend. The first hoss fell over my rope and the others fell over him, and the way they piled up in the road was beautiful to behold. Before you could bat yore eye they was a most amazing tangle of kicking hosses and cussing men. I chose that instant to ride out of the bresh and throw my pistols down on 'em.

"Cease that scandalous langwidge and rise with yore hands up!" I requested, and they done so, but not cheerfully. Some had been kicked right severe by the hosses, and one had pitched over his cayuse's neck and lit on his head, and his conversation warn't noways sensible.

"What's the meanin' of this here hold-up?" demanded a tall maverick with long yaller whiskers.

"Shet up!" I told him sternly. "Men which chases a he'pless gal like a pack of Injuns ain't fittin' for to talk to a white man."

"Oh, so that's it!" says he. "Well, lemme tell yuh--"

"I said shet up!" I roared, emphasizing my request by shooting the left tip offa his mustash. "I don't aim to powwow with no dern women-chasin' coyotes! In my country we'd decorate a live oak with yore carcasses!"

"But you don't--" began one of the others, but Yaller Whiskers profanely told him to shet up.

"Don't yuh see he's one of Ridgeway's men?" snarled he. "He's got the drop on us, but our turn'll come. Till it does, save yore breath!"

"That's good advice," I says. "Onbuckle yore gun-belts and hang 'em on yore saddle-horns, and keep yore hands away from them guns whilst you does it. I'd plumb welcome a excuse to salivate the whole mob of you."

So they done it, and then I fired a few shots under the hosses' feet and stampeded 'em, and they run off down the road the direction they'd come from. Yaller Whiskers and his pals cussed something terrible.

"Better save yore wind," I advised 'em. "You likely got a good long walk ahead of you, before you catches yore cayuses."

"I'll have yore heart's blood for this," raved Yaller Whiskers. "I'll have yore sculp if I have to trail yuh from here to Jedgment Day! Yuh don't know who yo're monkeyin' with."

"And I don't care!" I snorted. "Vamoose!"

They taken out down the road after their hosses, and I shot around their feet a few times to kinda speed 'em on their way. They disappeared down the road in a faint blue haze of profanity, and I turnt around and headed for Red Cougar.

I hoped to catch up with Miss Pritchard before she got to Red Cougar, but she had too good a start and was going at too fast a gait. My heart pounded at the thought of her and my corns begun to ache. It shore was love at first sight.

Well, I'd follered the trail for maybe three miles when I heard guns banging ahead of me. A little bit later I came to where the trail forked and I didn't know which'n led to Red Cougar. Whilst I was setting there wondering which branch to take, I heard hosses running again, and purty soon a couple of men hove in sight, spurring hard and bending low like they was expecting to be shot from behind. When they approached me I seen they had badges onto their vests, and bullet holes in their hats.

"Which is the road to Red Cougar?" I ast perlitely.

"That'n," says the older feller, p'inting back the way they'd come. "But if yo're aimin' to go there I advises yuh to reflect deeply on the matter. Ponder, young man, ponder and meditate! Life is sweet, after all!"

"What you mean?" I ast. "Who're you all chasin'?"

"Chasin' hell!" says he, polishing his sheriff's badge with his sleeve. "We're bein' chased! Buck Ridgeway's in town!"

"Never heard of him," I says.

"Well," says the sheriff, "Buck don't like strangers no more'n he does law-officers. And yuh see how well he likes them!"

"This here's a free country!" I snorted. "When I stays outa town on account of this here Ridgeway or anybody else they'll be ice in hell thick enough for the devil to skate on. I'm goin' to visit a young lady--Miss Sue Pritchard. Can you tell me where she lives?"

They looked at me very pecooliar, and the sheriff says: "Oh, in that case--well, she lives in the last cabin north of the general store, on the left-hand side of the street."

"Le's git goin'," urged his deputy nervously. "They may foller us!"

They started spurring again, and as they rode off, I heard the deputy say: "Reckon he's one of 'em?" And the sheriff said: "If he ain't he's the biggest damn fool that ever lived, to come sparkin' Sue Pritchard--" Then they rode outa hearing. I wondered who they was talking about, but soon forgot it as I rode on into Red Cougar.

I COME IN ON the south end of the town, and it was about like all them little mountain villages. One straggling street, hound dogs sleeping in the dust of the wagon ruts, and a general store and a couple of saloons.

I seen some hosses tied at the hitching rack outside the biggest saloon which said "Mac's Bar" on it, but I didn't see nobody on the streets, although noises of hilarity was coming outa the saloon. I was thirsty and dusty, and I decided I better have me a drink and spruce up some before I called on Miss Pritchard. So I watered Cap'n Kidd at the trough, and tied him to a tree (if I'd tied him to the hitch rack he'd of kicked the tar outa the other hosses) and went into the saloon. They warn't nobody in there but a old coot with gray whiskers tending bar, and the noise was all coming from another room. From the racket I jedged they was a bowling alley in there and the gents was bowling.

I beat the dust outa my pants with my hat and called for whiskey. Whilst I was drinking it the feller said: "Stranger in town, hey?"

I said I was and he said: "Friend of Buck Ridgeway's?"

"Never seen him in my life," says I, and he says: "Then you better git outa town fast as you can dust it. Him and his bunch ain't here--he pulled out jest a little while ago--but Jeff Middleton's in there, and Jeff's plenty bad."

I started to tell him I warn't studying Jeff Middleton, but jest then a lot of whooping bust out in the bowling alley like somebody had made a ten-strike or something, and here come six men busting into the bar whooping and yelling and slapping one of 'em on the back.

"Decorate the mahogany, McVey!" they whooped. "Jeff's buyin'! He jest beat Tom Grissom here six straight games!"

They surged up to the bar and one of 'em tried to jostle me aside, but as nobody ain't been able to do that successful since I got my full growth, all he done was sprain his elbow. This seemed to irritate him, because he turnt around and said heatedly: "What the hell you think yo're doin'?"

"I'm drinkin' me a glass of corn squeezin's," I replied coldly, and they all turnt around and looked at me, and they moved back from the bar and hitched at their pistol-belts. They was a hard looking gang, and the feller they called Middleton was the hardest looking one of 'em.

"Who're you and where'd you come from?" he demanded.

"None of yore damn business," I replied with a touch of old Southern curtesy.

He showed his teeth at this and fumbled at his gun-belt.

"Air you tryin' to start somethin'?" he demanded, and I seen McVey hide behind a stack of beer kaigs.

"I ain't in the habit of startin' trouble," I told him. "All I does is end it. I'm in here drinkin' me a quiet dram when you coyotes come surgin' in hollerin' like you was the first critter which ever hit a pin."

"So you depreciates my talents, hey?" he squalled like he was stung to the quick. "Maybe you think you could beat me, hey?"

"I ain't yet seen the man which could hold a candle to my game," I replied with my usual modesty.

"All right!" he yelled, grinding his teeth. "Come into the alley, and I'll show you some action, you big mountain grizzly!"

"Hold on!" says McVey, sticking his head up from behind the kaigs. "Be keerful, Jeff! I believe that's--"

"I don't keer who he is!" raved Middleton. "He has give me a mortal insult! Come on, you, if you got the nerve!"

"You be careful with them insults!" I roared menacingly, striding into the alley. "I ain't the man to be bulldozed." I was looking back over my shoulder when I shoved the door open with my palm and I probably pushed harder'n I intended to, and that's why I tore the door offa the hinges. They all looked kinda startled, and McVey give a despairing squeak, but I went on into the alley and picked up a bowl ball which I brandished in defiance.

"Here's fifty bucks!" I says, waving the greenbacks. "We puts up fifty each and rolls for five dollars a game. That suit you?"

I couldn't understand what he said, because he jest made a noise like a wolf grabbing a beefsteak, but he snatched up a bulldog, and perjuiced ten five-dollar bills, so I jedged it was agreeable with him.

But he had a awful temper, and the longer we played, the madder he got, and when I had beat him five straight games and taken twenty-five outa his fifty, the veins stood out purple onto his temples.

"It's yore roll," I says, and he throwed his bowl ball down and yelled: "Blast yore soul, I don't like yore style! I'm through and I'm takin' down my stake! You gits no more of my money, damn you!"

"Why, you cheap-heeled piker!" I roared. "I thought you was a sport, even if you was a hoss-thief, but--"

"Don't you call me a hoss-thief!" he screamed.

"Well, cow-thief then," I says. "If yo're so dern particular--"

IT WAS AT THIS INSTANT that he lost his head to the p'int of pulling a pistol and firing at me p'int-blank. He would of ondoubtedly shot me, too, if I hadn't hit him in the head with my bowl ball jest as he fired. His bullet went into the ceiling and his friends begun to display their disapproval by throwing pins and bulldogs at me. This irritated me almost beyond control, but I kept my temper and taken a couple of 'em by the neck and beat their heads together till they was limp. The matter would of ended there, without any vi'lence, but the other three insisted on taking the thing serious, and I defy any man to remain tranquil when three hoss-thieves are kyarving at him with bowies and beating him over the head with ten-pins.

But I didn't intend to bust the big ceiling lamp; I jest hit it by accident with the chair which I knocked one of my enermies stiff with. And it warn't my fault if one of 'em got blood all over the alley. All I done was break his nose and knock out seven teeth with my fist. How'd I know he was going to fall in the alley and bleed on it. As for that section of wall which got knocked out, all I can say is it's a derned flimsy wall which can be wrecked by throwing a man through it. I thought I'd throwed him through a winder until I looked closer and seen it was a hole he busted through the wall. And can I help it if them scalawags blowed holes in the roof till it looked like a sieve trying to shoot me?

It wasn't my fault, nohow.

But when the dust settled and I looked around to see if I'd made a clean sweep, I was jest in time to grab the shotgun which old man McVey was trying to shoot me through the barroom door with.

"You oughta be ashamed," I reproved. "A man of yore age and venerable whiskers, tryin' to shoot a defenseless stranger in the back."

"But my bowlin' alley's wrecked!" he wept, tearing the aforesaid whiskers. "I'm a rooint man! I sunk my wad in it--and now look at it!"

"Aw, well," I says, "it warn't my fault, but I cain't see a honest man suffer. Here's seventy-five dollars, all I got."

"'Tain't enough," says he, nevertheless making a grab for the dough like a kingfisher diving after a pollywog. "'Tain't near enough."

"I'll collect the rest from them coyotes," I says.

"Don't do it!" he shuddered. "They'd kill me after you left!"

"I wanta do the right thing," I says. "I'll work out the rest of it."

He looked at me right sharp then, and says: "Come into the bar."

But I seen three of 'em was coming to, so I hauled 'em up and told 'em sternly to tote their friends out to the hoss trough and bring 'em to. They done so, kinda wabbling on their feet. They acted like they was still addled in the brains, and McVey said it looked to him like Middleton was out for the day, but I told him it was quite common for a man to be like that which has jest had a fifteen-pound bowling ball split in two over his head.

Then I went into the bar with McVey and he poured out the drinks.

"Air you in earnest about workin' out that debt?" says he.

"Sure," I said. "I always pays my debts, by fair means or foul."

"Ain't you Breckinridge Elkins?" says he, and when I says I was, he says: "I thought I rekernized you when them fools was badgerin' you. Look out for 'em. That ain't all of 'em. The whole gang rode into town a hour or so ago and run the sheriff and his deperty out, but Buck didn't stay long. He seen his gal, and then he pulled out for the hills again with four men. They's a couple more besides them you fit hangin' around somewheres. I dunno where."

"Outlaws?" I said, and he said: "Shore. But the local law-force ain't strong enough to deal with 'em, and anyway, most of the folks in town is in cahoots with 'em, and warns 'em if officers from outside come after 'em. They hang out in the hills ordinary, but they come into Red Cougar regular. But never mind them. I was jest puttin' you on yore guard.

"This is what I want you to do. A month ago I was comin' back to Red Cougar with a tidy fortune in gold dust I'd panned back up in the hills, when I was held up and robbed. It warn't one of Ridgeway's men; it was Three-Fingers Clements, a old lone wolf and the wust killer in these parts. He lives by hisself up in the hills and nobody knows where.

"But I jest recent learnt by accident. He sent a message by a sheepherder and the sheepherder got drunk in my saloon and talked. I learnt he's still got my gold, and aims to sneak out with it as soon as he's j'ined by a gang of desperadoes from Tomahawk. It was them the sheepherder was takin' the message to. I cain't git no help from the sheriff; these outlaws has got him plumb buffaloed. I want you to ride up in the hills and git my gold. Of course, if yo're scairt of him--"

"Who said I was scairt of him or anybody else?" I demanded irritably. "Tell me how to git to his hide-out and I'm on my way."

McVey's eyes kinda gleamed, and he says: "Good boy! Foller the trail that leads outa town to the northwest till you come to Diablo Canyon. Foller it till you come to the fifth branch gulch openin' into it on the right. Turn off the trail then and foller the gulch till you come to a big white oak nigh the left-hand wall. Climb up outa the gulch there and head due west up the slope. Purty soon you'll see a crag like a chimney stickin' out above a clump of spruces. At the foot of that crag they's a cave, and Clements is livin' there. And he's a tough old--"

"It's as good as did," I assured him, and had another drink, and went out and clumb aboard Cap'n Kidd and headed out of town.

BUT AS I RODE PAST THE last cabin on the left, I suddenly remembered about Sue Pritchard, and I 'lowed Three Fingers could wait long enough for me to pay my respecks on her. Likely she was expecting me and getting nervous and impatient because I was so long coming. So I reined up to the stoop and hailed, and somebody looked at me through a winder. They also appeared to be a rifle muzzle trained on me, too, but who could blame folks for being cautious with them Ridgeway coyotes in town.

"Oh, it's you!" said a female voice, and then the door opened and Sue Pritchard said: "Light and come in! Did you kill any of them rascals?"

"I'm too soft-hearted for my own good," I says apologetically. "I jest merely only sent 'em down the road on foot. But I ain't got time to come in now. I'm on my way up in the mountains to see Three Fingers Clements. I aimed to stop on my way back, if it's agreeable with you."

"Three Fingers Clements?" says she in a pecooliar voice. "Do you know where he is?"

"McVey told me," I said. "He's got a poke of dust he stole from McVey. I'm goin' after it."

She said something under her breath which I must have misunderstood because I was sure Miss Pritchard wouldn't use the word it sounded like.

"Come in jest a minute," she begged. "You got plenty of time. Come in and have a snort of corn juice. My folks is all visitin' and it gets mighty lonesome to a gal. Please come in!"

Well, I never could resist a purty gal, so I tied Cap'n Kidd to a stump that looked solid, and went in, and she brung out her old man's jug. It was tolerable licker. She said she never drunk none, personal.

We set and talked, and there wasn't a doubt we cottoned to each other right spang off. There is some that says that Breckinridge Elkins hain't got a lick of sense when it comes to wimmin-folks--among these bein' my cousin, Bearfield Buckner--but I vow and declare that same is my only weakness, if any, and that likewise it is manly weakness.

This Sue Pritchard was plumb sensible I seen. She wasn't one of these flighty kind that a feller would have to court with a banjo or geetar. We talked around about bear-traps and what was the best length barrel on shotguns and similar subjects of like nature. I likewise told her one or two of my mild experiences and her eyes boogered big as saucers. We finally got around to my latest encounter.

"Tell me some more about Three Fingers," she coaxed. "I didn't know anybody knowed his hide-out." So I told her what all McVey said, and she was a heap interested, and had me repeat the instructions how to get there two or three times. Then she ast me if I'd met any badmen in town, and I told her I'd met six and they was now recovering on pallets in the back of the general store. She looked startled at this, and purty soon she ast me to excuse her because she heard one of the neighbor women calling her. I didn't hear nobody, but I said all right, and she went out of the back door, and I heard her whistle three times. I sot there and had another snort or so and reflected that the gal was ondoubtedly taken with me.

She was gone quite a spell, and finally I got up and looked out the back winder and seen her standing down by the corral talking to a couple of fellers. As I looked one of 'em got on a bobtailed roan and headed north at a high run, and t'other'n come on back to the cabin with Sue.

"This here's my cousin Jack Montgomery," says she. "He wants to go with you. He's jest a boy, and likes excitement."

He was about the hardest-looking boy I ever seen, and he seemed remarkable mature for his years, but I said: "All right. But we got to git goin'."

"Be careful, Breckinridge," she advised. "You, too, Jack."

"I won't hurt Three Fingers no more'n I got to," I promised her, and we went on our way yonderly, headed for the hideout.

WE GOT TO DIABLO CANYON in about a hour, and went up it about three miles till we come to the gulch mouth McVey had described. All to onst Jack Montgomery pulled up and p'inted down at a pool we was passing in a holler of the rock, and hollered: "Look there! Gold dust scattered at the aidge of the water!"

"I don't see none," I says.

"Light," he urged, getting off his cayuse. "I see it! It's thick as butter along the aidge!"

Well, I got down and bent over the pool but I couldn't see nothing and all to onst something hit me in the back of the head and knocked my hat off. I turnt around and seen Jack Montgomery holding the bent barrel of a Winchester carbine in his hands. The stock was busted off and pieces was laying on the ground. He looked awful surprized about something; his eyes was wild and his hair stood up.

"Air you sick?" I ast. "What you want to hit me for?"

"You ain't human!" he gasped, dropping the bent barrel and jerking out his pistol. I grabbed him and taken it away from him.

"What's the matter with you?" I demanded. "Air you locoed?"

For answer he run off down the canyon shrieking like a lost soul. I decided he must have went crazy like sheepherders does sometimes, so I pursued him and catched him. He fit and hollered like a painter.

"Stop that!" I told him sternly. "I'm yore friend. It's my duty to yore cousin to see that you don't come to no harm."

"Cousin, hell!" says he with frightful profanity. "She ain't no more my cousin than you be."

"Pore feller," I sighed, throwing him on his belly and reaching for his lariat. "Yo're outa yore head and sufferin' from hallucernations. I knowed a sheepherder jest like you onst, only he thought he was Sittin' Bull."

"What you doin'?" he hollered, as I started tying him with his rope.

"Don't you worry," I soothed him. "I cain't let you go tearin' around over these mountains in yore condition. I'll fix you so's you'll be safe and comfortable till I git back from Three Fingers' cave. Then I'll take you to Red Cougar and we'll send you to some nice, quiet insane asylum."

"Blast yore soul!" he shrieked. "I'm sane as you be! A damn sight saner, because no man with a normal brain could ignore gittin' a rifle stock broke off over his skull like you done!"

Whereupon he tries to kick me between the eyes and otherwise give evidence of what I oncet heard a doctor call his derangement. It was a pitiful sight to see, especially since he was a cousin to Miss Sue Pritchard and would ondoubtedly be my cousin-in-law one of these days. He jerked and rassled and some of his words was downright shocking.

But I didn't pay no attention to his ravings. I always heard the way to get along with crazy people was to humor 'em. I was afeared if I left him laying on the ground the wolves might chaw him, so I tied him up in the crotch of a big tree where they couldn't rech him. I likewise tied his hoss by the pool where it could drink and graze.

"Lissen!" Jack begged as I clumb onto Cap'n Kidd. "I give up! Ontie me and I'll spill the beans! I'll tell you everything!"

"You jest take it easy," I soothed. "I'll be back soon."

"$#%&*@!" says he, frothing slightly at the mouth.

With a sigh of pity I turnt up the gulch, and his langwidge till I was clean outa sight ain't to be repeated. A mile or so on I come to the white oak tree, and clumb outa the gulch and went up a long slope till I seen a jut of rock like a chimney rising above the trees. I slid offa Cap'n Kidd and drawed my pistols and snuck for'ard through the thick bresh till I seen the mouth of a cave ahead of me. And I also seen something else, too.

A man was laying in front of it with his head in a pool of blood.

I rolled him over and he was still alive. His sculp was cut open, but the bone didn't seem to be caved in. He was a lanky old coot, with reddish gray whiskers, and he didn't have but three fingers onto his left hand. They was a pack tore up and scattered on the ground nigh him, but I reckon the pack mule had run off. They was also hoss-tracks leading west.

They was a spring nearby and I brung my hat full of water and sloshed it into his face, and tried to pour some into his mouth, but it warn't no go. When I throwed the water over him he kinda twitched and groaned, but when I tried to pour the water down his gullet he kinda instinctively clamped his jaws together like a bulldog.

Then I seen a jug setting in the cave, so I brung it out and pulled out the cork. When it popped he opened his mouth convulsively and reched out his hand.

So I poured a pint or so down his gullet, and he opened his eyes and glared wildly around till he seen his busted pack, and then he clutched his whiskers and shrieked: "They got it! My poke of dust! I been hidin' up here for weeks, and jest when I was goin' to make a jump for it, they finds me!"

"Who?" I ast.

"Buck Ridgeway and his gang!" he squalled. "I was keerless. When I heard hosses I thought it was the men which was comin' to help me take my gold out. Next thing I knowed Ridgeway's bunch had run outa the bresh and was beatin' me over the head with their Colts. I'm a rooint man!"

"Hell's fire!" quoth I with passion. Them Ridgeways was beginning to get on my nerves. I left old man Clements howling his woes to the skies like a timber wolf with the bellyache, and I forked Cap'n Kidd and headed west. They'd left a trail the youngest kid on Bear Creek could foller.

IT LED FOR FIVE MILES through as wild a country as I ever seen outside the Humbolts, and then I seen a cabin ahead, on a wide benchland and that backed agen a steep mountain slope. I could jest see the chimney through the tops of a dense thicket. It warn't long till sun-down and smoke was coming outa the chimney.

I knowed it must be the Ridgeway hideout, so I went busting through the thicket in sech a hurry that I forgot they might have a man on the look-out. I'm powerful absent minded thataway. They was one all right, but I was coming so fast he missed me with his buffalo gun, and he didn't stop to reload but run into the cabin yelling: "Bar the door quick! Here comes the biggest man in the world on the biggest hoss in creation!"

They done so. When I emerged from amongst the trees they opened up on me through the loop-holes with sawed-off shotguns. If it'd been Winchesters I'd of ignored 'em, but even I'm a little bashful about buckshot at close range, when six men is shooting at me all to onst. So I retired behind a big tree and begun to shoot back with my pistols, and the howls of them worthless critters when my bullets knocked splinters in their faces was music to my ears.

They was a corral some distance behind the cabin with six hosses in it. To my surprise I seen one of 'em was a bob-tailed roan the feller was riding which I seen talking with Sue Pritchard and Jack Montgomery, and I wondered if them blame outlaws had captured him.

But I warn't accomplishing much, shooting at them loop-holes, and the sun dipped lower and I began to get mad. I decided to rush the cabin anyway and to hell with their derned buckshot, and I dismounted and stumped my toe right severe on a rock. It always did madden me to stump my toe, and I uttered some loud and profane remarks, and I reckon them scoundrels must of thunk I'd stopped some lead, the way they whooped. But jest then I had a inspiration. A big thick smoke was pouring outa the rock chimney so I knowed they was a big fire on the fireplace where they was cooking supper, and I was sure they warn't but one door in the cabin. So I taken up the rock which was about the size of a ordinary pig and throwed it at the chimney.

Boys on Bear Creek is ashamed if they have to use more'n one rock on a squirrel in a hundred-foot tree acrost the creek, and I didn't miss. I hit her center and she buckled and come crashing down in a regular shower of rocks, and most of 'em fell down into the fireplace as I knowed by the way the sparks flew. I jedged that the coals was scattered all over the floor, and the chimney hole was blocked so the smoke couldn't get out that way. Anyway, the smoke begun to pour outa the winders and the Ridgewayers stopped shooting and started hollering.

Somebody yelled: "The floor's on fire! Throw that bucket of water on it!" And somebody else shrieked: "Wait, you damn fool! That ain't water, it's whiskey!"

But he was too late; I heard the splash and then a most amazing flame sprung up and licked outa the winders and the fellers hollered louder'n ever and yelled: "Lemme out! I got smoke in my eyes! I'm chokin' to death!"

I left the thicket and run to the door just as a man throwed it open and staggered out blind as a bat and cussing and shooting wild. I was afeared he'd hurt hisself if he kept tearing around like that, so I taken his shotgun away from him and bent the barrel over his head to kinda keep him quiet, and then I seen to my surprize that he was the feller which rode the bob-tailed roan. I thunk how surprized Sue'd be to know a friend of her'n was a cussed outlaw.

I then went into the cabin which was so full of smoke and gun-powder fumes a man couldn't hardly see nothing. The walls and roof was on fire by now, and them idjits was tearing around with their eyes full of smoke trying to find the door, and one of 'em run head-on into the wall and knocked hisself stiff. I throwed him outside, and got hold of another'n to lead him out, and he cut me acrost the boozum with his bowie. I was so stung by this ingratitude that when I tossed him out to safety I maybe throwed him further'n I aimed to, and it appears they was a stump which he hit his head on. But I couldn't help it being there.

I THEN TURNT AROUND and located the remaining three, which was fighting with each other evidently thinking they was fighting me. Jest as I started for 'em a big log fell outa the roof and knocked two of 'em groggy and sot their clothes on fire, and a regular sheet of flame sprung up and burnt off most of my hair, and whilst I was dazzled by it the surviving outlaw run past me out the door, leaving his smoking shirt in my hand.

Well, I dragged the other two out and stomped on 'em to put out the fire, and the way they hollered you'd of thought I was injuring 'em instead of saving their fool lives.

"Shet up and tell me where the gold is," I ordered, and one of 'em gurgled: "Ridgeway's got it!"

I ast which'n of 'em was him and they all swore they wasn't, and I remembered the feller which run outa the cabin. So I looked around and seen him jest leading a hoss outa the corral to ride off bareback.

"You stop!" I roared, letting my voice out full, which I seldom does. The acorns rattled down outa the trees, and the tall grass bent flat, and the hoss Ridgeway was fixing to mount got scairt and jerked away from him and bolted, and the other hosses knocked the corral gate down and stampeded. Three or four of 'em run over Ridgeway before he could git outa the way.

He jumped up and headed out acrost the flat on foot, wabbling some but going strong. I could of shot him easy but I was afeared he'd hid the gold somewheres, and if I kilt him he couldn't tell me where. So I run and got my lariat and taken out after him on foot, because I figgered he'd duck into the thick bresh to get away. But when he seen I was overhauling him he made for the mountain side and began to climb a steep slope.

I follered him, but before he was much more'n half way up he taken refuge on a ledge behind a dead tree and started shooting at me. I got behind a boulder about seventy-five foot below him, and ast him to surrender, like a gent, but his only reply was a direct slur on my ancestry and more bullets, one of which knocked off a sliver of rock which gouged my neck.

This annoyed me so much that I pulled my pistols and started shooting back at him. But all I could hit was the tree, and the sun was going down and I was afeared if I didn't get him before dark he'd manage to sneak off. So I stood up, paying no attention to the slug he put in my shoulder, and swang my lariat. I always uses a ninety-foot rope; I got no use for them little bitsy pieces of string most punchers uses.

I throwed my noose and looped that tree, and sot my feet solid and heaved, and tore the dern tree up by the roots. But them roots went so deep most of the ledge come along with 'em, and that started a landslide. The first thing I knowed here come the tree and Ridgeway and several tons of loose rock and shale, gathering weight and speed as they come. It sounded like thunder rolling down the mountain, and Ridgeway's screams was frightful to hear. I jumped out from behind the boulder intending to let the landslide split on me and grab him out as it

went past me, but I stumbled and fell and that dern tree hit me behind the ear and the next thing I knowed I was traveling down the mountain with Ridgeway and the rest of the avalanche. It was very humiliating.

I was right glad at the time, I recollect, that Miss Sue Pritchard wasn't nowheres near to witness this catastrophe. It's hard for a man to keep his dignity, I found, when he's scootin' in a hell-slue of trees and bresh and rocks and dirt, and I become aware, too, that a snag had tore the seat outa my pants, which made me some despondent. This, I figgered, is what a man gets for losing his self-control. I recollected another time or two when I'd exposed myself to the consequences by exertin' my full strength, and I made me a couple of promises then and there.

It's all right for a single young feller to go hellin' around and let the chips fall where they may, but it's different with a man like me who was almost just the same as practically married. You got to look before you leap, was the way I reckoned it. A man's got to think of his wife and children.

We brung up at the foot of the slope in a heap of boulders and shale, and I throwed a few hundred pounds of busted rocks offa me and riz up and shaken the blood outa my eyes and looked around for Ridgeway.

I presently located a boot sticking outa the heap, and I laid hold onto it and hauled him out and he looked remarkable like a skint rabbit. About all the clothes he had left onto him beside his boots was his belt, and I seen a fat buckskin poke stuck under it. So I dragged it out, and about that time he sot up groggy and looked around dizzy and moaned feeble: "Who the hell are you?"

"Breckinridge Elkins, of Bear Creek," I said.

"And with all the men they is in the State of Nevada," he says weakly, "I had to tangle with you. What you goin' to do?"

"I think I'll turn you and yore gang over to the sheriff," I says. "I don't hold much with law--we ain't never had none on Bear Creek--but sech coyotes as you all don't deserve no better."

"A hell of a right you got to talk about law!" he said fiercely. "After plottin' with Badger McVey to rob old man Clements! That's all I done!"

"What you mean?" I demanded. "Clements robbed McVey of this here dust--"

"Robbed hell!" says Ridgeway. "McVey is the crookedest cuss that ever lived, only he ain't got the guts to commit robbery hisself. Why, Clements is a honest miner, the old jackass, and he panned that there dust up in the hills. He's been hidin' for weeks, scairt to try to git outa the country, we was huntin' him too industrious."

"McVey put me up to committin' robbery?" I ejaculated, aghast.

"That's jest what he did!" declared Ridgeway, and I was so overcome by this perfidy that I was plumb paralyzed. Before I could recover Ridgeway give a convulsive flop and rolled over into the bushes and was gone in a instant.

THE NEXT THING I KNOWED I heard hosses running and I turnt in time to see a bunch of men riding up on me. Old man Clements was with 'em, and I rekernized the others as the fellers I stopped from chasing Sue Pritchard on the road below Red Cougar.

I reched for a pistol, but Clements yelled: "Hold on! They're friends!" He then jumped off and grabbed the poke outa my limp hand and waved it at them triumphantly. "See that?" he hollered. "Didn't I tell you he was a friend? Didn't I tell you he come up here to bust up that gang? He got my gold back for me, jest like I said he would!" He then grabbed my hand and shaked it energetic, and says: "These is the men I sent to Tomahawk for, to help me git my gold out. They got to my cave jest a while after you left. They're prejudiced agen you, but--"

"No, we ain't!" denied Yaller Whiskers, which I now seen was wearing a deputy's badge. And he got off and shaken my hand heartily. "You didn't know we was special law-officers, and I reckon it did look bad, six men chasin' a woman. We thought you was a outlaw! We was purty mad at you when we finally caught our hosses and headed back. But I begun to wonder about you when we found them six disabled outlaws in the store at Red Cougar. Then when we got to Clements' cave, and found you'd befriended him, and had lit out on Ridgeway's trail, it looked still better for you, but I still thought maybe you was after that gold on yo're own account. But, of course, I see now I was all wrong, and I apolergizes. Where's Ridgeway?"

"He got away," I said.

"Never mind!" says Clements, pumping my hand again. "Kirby here and his men has got Jeff Middleton and five more men in the jail at Red Cougar. McVey, the old hypocrite, taken to the hills when Kirby rode into town. And we got six more of Ridgeway's gang tied up over at Ridgeway's cabin--or where it was till you burnt it down. They're shore a battered mob! It musta been a awful fight! You look like you been through a tornado yoreself. Come on with us and our prisoners to Tomahawk. I buys you a new suit of clothes, and we celebrates!"

"I got to git a feller I left tied up in a tree down the gulch," I said. "Jack Montgomery. He's et loco weed or somethin'. He's crazy."

They laughed hearty, and Kirby says: "You got a great sense of humor, Elkins. We found him when we come up the gulch, and brung him on with us. He's tied up with the rest of 'em back there. You shore was slick, foolin' McVey into tellin' you where Clements was hidin', and foolin' that whole Ridgeway gang into thinkin' you aimed to rob Clements! Too bad you didn't know we was officers, so we could of worked together. But I gotta laugh when I think how McVey thought he was gyppin' you into stealin' for him, and all the time you was jest studyin' how to rescue Clements and bust up Ridgeway's gang! Haw! Haw! Haw!"

"But I didn't--" I begun dizzily, because my head was swimming.

"You jest made one mistake," says Kirby, "and that was when you let slip where Clements was hidin'."

"But I never told nobody but Sue Pritchard!" I says wildly.

"Many a good man has been euchered by a woman," says Kirby tolerantly. "We got the whole yarn from Montgomery. The minute you told her, she snuck out and called in two of Ridgeway's men and sent one of 'em foggin' it to tell Buck where to find Clements, and she sent the other'n, which was Montgomery, to go along with you and lay you out before you could git there. She lit for the hills when we come into Red Cougar and I bet her and Ridgeway are streakin' it over the mountains together right now. But that ain't yore fault. You didn't know she was Buck's gal."

The perfidity of wimmen!

"Gimme my hoss," I said groggily. "I been scorched and shot and cut and fell on by a avalanche, and my honest love has been betrayed. You sees before you the singed, skint and blood-soaked result of female treachery. Fate has dealt me the joker. My heart is busted and the seat is tore outa my pants. Git outa the way. I'm ridin'."

"Where to?" they ast, awed.

"Anywhere," I bellers, "jest so it's far away from Red Cougar."

THE END

Contents

GUNS OF THE MOUNTAINS

By Robert E. Howard

This business begun with Uncle Garfield Elkins coming up from Texas to visit us. Between Grizzly Run and Chawed Ear the stage got held up by some masked bandits, and Uncle Garfield, never being able to forget that he was a gun-fighting fool thirty or forty years ago, pulled his old cap-and-ball instead of putting up his hands like he was advised to. For some reason, instead of blowing out his light, they merely busted him over the head with a .45 barrel, and when he come to he was rattling on his way toward Chawed Ear with the other passengers, minus his money and watch.

It was his watch what caused the trouble. That there timepiece had been his grandpap's, and Uncle Garfield sot more store by it than he did all his kin folks.

When he arriv up in the Humbolt mountains where our cabin was, he imejitly let in to howling his woes to the stars like a wolf with the belly-ache. And from then on we heered nothing but that watch. I'd saw it and thunk very little of it. It was big as my fist, and wound up with a key which Uncle Garfield was always losing and looking for. But it was solid gold, and he called it a hairloom, whatever them things is. And he nigh driv the family crazy.

"A passle of big hulks like you-all settin' around and lettin' a old man get robbed of all his property," he would say bitterly. "When I was a young buck, if'n my uncle had been abused that way, I'd of took the trail and never slept nor et till I brung back his watch and the scalp of the skunk which stole it. Men now days--" And so on and so on, till I felt like drownding the old jassack in a barrel of corn licker.

Finally pap says to me, combing his beard with his fingers: "Breckinridge," says he, "I've endured Uncle Garfield's belly-achin' all I aim to. I want you to go look for his cussed watch, and don't come back without it."

"How'm I goin' to know where to look?" I protested, aghast. "The feller which got it may be in Californy or Mexico by now."

"I realizes the difficulties," says pap. "But if Uncle Garfield knows somebody is out lookin' for his dern timepiece, maybe he'll give the rest of us some peace. You git goin', and if you can't find that watch, don't come back till after Uncle Garfield has went home."

"How long is he goin' to stay?" I demanded.

"Well," said pap, "Uncle Garfield's visits allus lasts a year, at least."

At this I bust into profanity.

I said: "I got to stay away from home a year? Dang it, pap, Jim Braxton'll steal Ellen Reynolds away from me whilst I'm gone. I been courtin' that girl till I'm ready to fall dead. I done licked her old man three times, and now, just when I got her lookin' my way, you tells me I got to up and leave her for a year for that dern Jim Braxton to have no competition with."

"You got to choose between Ellen Reynolds, and yore own flesh and blood," said pap. "I'm darned if I'll listen to Uncle Garfield's squawks any longer. You make yore own choice--but, if you don't choose to do what I asks you to, I'll fill yore hide with buckshot every time I see you from now on."

Well, the result was that I was presently riding morosely away from home and Ellen Reynolds, and in the general direction of where Uncle Garfield's blasted watch might possibly be.

I passed by the Braxton cabin with the intention of dropping Jim a warning about his actions whilst I was gone, but he wasn't there. So I issued a general defiance to the family by slinging a .45 slug through the winder which knocked a cob pipe outa old man Braxton's mouth. That soothed me a little, but I knowed very well that Jim would make a bee-line for the Reynolds' cabin the second I was out of sight. I could just see him gorging on Ellen's bear meat and honey, and bragging on hisself. I hoped Ellen would notice the difference between a loud mouthed boaster like him, and a quiet, modest young man like me, which never bragged, though admittedly the biggest man and the best fighter in the Humbolts.

I hoped to meet Jim somewhere in the woods as I rode down the trail, for I was intending to do something to kinda impede his courting while I was gone, like breaking his leg, or something, but luck wasn't with me.

I headed in the general direction of Chawed Ear, and the next day seen me riding in gloomy grandeur through a country quite some distance from Ellen Reynolds.

PAP ALWAYS SAID MY curiosity would be the ruination of me some day, but I never could listen to guns popping up in the mountains without wanting to find out who was killing who. So that morning, when I heard the rifles talking off amongst the trees, I turned Cap'n Kidd aside and left the trail and rode in the direction of the noise.

A dim path wound up through the big boulders and bushes, and the shooting kept getting louder. Purty soon I come out into a glade, and just as I did, bam! somebody let go at me from the bushes and a .45-70 slug cut both my bridle reins nearly in half. I instantly returned the shot with my .45, getting just a glimpse of something in the brush, and a man let out a squall and jumped out into the open, wringing his hands. My bullet had hit the lock of his Winchester and mighty nigh jarred his hands off him.

"Cease that ungodly noise," I said sternly, p'inting my .45 at his bay-winder, "and tell me how come you waylays innercent travelers."

He quit working his fingers and moaning, and he said: "I thought you was Joel Cairn, the outlaw. You're about his size."

"Well, I ain't," I said. "I'm Breckinridge Elkins, from the Humbolts. I was just ridin' over to learn what all the shootin' was about."

The guns was firing in the trees behind the fellow, and somebody yelled what was the matter.

"Ain't nothin' the matter," he hollered back. "Just a misunderstandin'." And he said to me: "I'm glad to see you, Elkins. We need a man like you. I'm Sheriff Dick Hopkins, from Grizzly Run."

"Where at's your star?" I inquired.

"I lost it in the bresh." he said. "Me and my deputies have been chasin' Tarantula Bixby and his gang for a day and a night, and we got 'em cornered over there in a old deserted cabin in a holler. The boys is shootin' at 'em now. I heard you comin' up the trail and snuck over to see who it is. Just as I said, I thought you was Cairn. Come on with me. You can help us."

"I ain't no deputy," I said. "I got nothin' against Tranchler Bixby."

"Well, you want to uphold the law, don't you?" he said.

"Naw," I said.

"Well, gee whiz!" he wailed. "If you ain't a hell of a citizen! The country's goin' to the dogs. What chance has a honest man got?"

"Aw, shut up," I said. "I'll go over and see the fun, anyhow."

So he picked up his gun, and I tied Cap'n Kidd, and follered the sheriff through the trees till we come to some rocks, and there was four men laying behind them rocks and shooting down into a hollow. The hill sloped away mighty steep into a small basin that was just like a bowl, with a rim of slopes all around. In the middle of this bowl there was a cabin and puffs of smoke was coming from the cracks between the logs.

The men behind the rocks looked at me in surprize, and one of them said, "What the hell--?"

But the sheriff scowled at them and said, "Boys, this here is Breck Elkins. I done told him already about us bein' a posse from Grizzly Run, and about how we got Tarantula Bixby and two of his cutthroats trapped in that there cabin."

One of the deputies bust into a guffaw and Hopkins glared at him and said: "What you laughin' about, you spotted hyener?"

"I swallered my tobaccer and that allus gives me the hystericals," mumbled the deputy, looking the other way.

"Hold up your right hand, Elkins," requested Hopkins, so I done so, wondering what for, and he said: "Does you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, e pluribus unum, anno dominecker, to wit in status quo?"

"What the hell are you talkin' about?" I demanded.

"Them which God has j'ined asunder let no man put together," said Hopkins. "Whatever you say will be used against you and the Lord have mercy on yore soul. That means you're a deputy. I just swore you in."

"Go set on a tack," I snorted disgustedly. "Go catch your own thieves. And don't look at me like that. I might bend a gun over your skull."

"But Elkins," pleaded Hopkins, "with yore help we can catch them rats easy. All you got to do is lay up here behind this big rock and shoot at the cabin and keep 'em occupied till we can sneak around and rush 'em from the rear. See, the bresh comes down purty close to the foot of the slope on the other side, and gives us cover. We can do it easy, with somebody keepin' their attention over here. I'll give you part of the reward."

"I don't want no derned blood-money," I said, backing away. "And besides--ow!"

I'd absent-mindedly backed out from behind the big rock where I'd been standing, and a .30-30 slug burned its way acrost the seat of my britches.

"Dern them murderers!" I bellered, seeing red. "Gimme a rifle! I'll learn 'em to shoot a man behind his back. Gwan, take 'em in the rear. I'll keep 'em busy."

"Good boy!" said Hopkins. "You'll get plenty for this!"

IT SOUNDED LIKE SOMEBODY was snickering to theirselves as they snuck away, but I give no heed. I squinted cautiously around the big boulder, and begun sniping at the cabin. All I could see to shoot at was the puffs of smoke which marked the cracks they was shooting through, but from the cussing and yelling which begun to float up from the shack, I must have throwed some lead mighty close to them.

They kept shooting back, and the bullets splashed and buzzed on the rocks, and I kept looking at the further slope for some sign of Sheriff Hopkins and the posse. But all I heard was a sound of horses galloping away toward the west. I wondered who it could be, and I kept expecting the posse to rush down the opposite slope and take them desperadoes in the rear, and whilst I was craning my neck around a corner of the boulder--whang! A bullet smashed into the rock a few inches from my face and a sliver of stone took a notch out of my ear. I don't know of nothing that makes me madder'n to get shot in the ear.

I seen red and didn't even shoot back. A mere rifle was too paltry to satisfy me. Suddenly I realized that the big boulder in front of me was just poised on the slope, its underside partly embedded in the earth. I throwed down my rifle and bent my knees and spread my arms and gripped it.

I shook the sweat and blood outa my eyes, and bellered so them in the hollow could hear me: "I'm givin' you-all a chance to surrender! Come out, your hands up!"

They give loud and sarcastic jeers, and I yelled: "All right, you ring-tailed jackasses! If you gets squashed like a pancake, it's your own fault. Here she comes!"

And I heaved with all I had. The veins stood out on my temples, my feet sunk into the ground, but the earth bulged and cracked all around the big rock, rivelets of dirt begun to trickle down, and the big boulder groaned, give way and lurched over.

A dumfounded yell riz from the cabin. I leaped behind a bush, but the outlaws was too surprized to shoot at me. That enormous boulder was tumbling down the hill, crushing bushes flat and gathering speed as it rolled. And the cabin was right in its path.

Wild yells bust the air, the door was throwed violently open, and a man hove into view. Just as he started out of the door I let bam at him and he howled and ducked back just like anybody will when a .45-90 slug knocks their hat off. The next instant that thundering boulder hit the cabin. Smash! It knocked it sidewise like a ten pin and caved in the wall, and the whole structure collapsed in a cloud of dust and bark and splinters.

I run down the slope, and from the yells which issued from under the ruins, I knowed they hadn't all been killed.

"Does you-all surrender?" I roared.

"Yes, dern it!" they squalled. "Get us out from under this landslide!"

"Throw out yore guns," I ordered.

"How in hell can we throw anything?" they hollered wrathfully. "We're pinned down by a ton of rocks and boards and we're bein' squoze to death. Help, murder!"

"Aw, shut up," I said. "You don't hear me carryin' on in no such hysterical way, does you?"

Well, they moaned and complained, and I sot to work dragging the ruins off them, which wasn't no great task. Purty soon I seen a booted leg and I laid hold of it and dragged out the critter it was fastened to, and he looked more done up than what my brother Bill did that time he rassled a mountain lion for a bet. I took his pistol out of his belt, and laid him down on the ground and got the others out. There was three, altogether, and I disarm 'em and laid 'em out in a row.

Their clothes was nearly tore off, and they was bruised and scratched, and had splinters in their hair, but they wasn't hurt permanent. They sot up and felt of theirselves, and one of 'em said: "This here is the first earthquake I ever seen in this country."

"T'warn't no earthquake," said another'n. "It was a avalanche."

"Listen here, Joe Partland," said the first 'un, grinding his teeth, "I says it was a earthquake, and I ain't the man to be called a liar--"

"Oh, you ain't?" said the other'n, bristling up. "Well, lemme tell you somethin', Frank Jackson--"

"This ain't no time for such argyments," I admonished 'em sternly. "As for that there rock, I rolled that at you myself."

They gaped at me. "Who are you?" said one of 'em, mopping the blood offa his ear.

"Never mind," I said. "You see this here Winchester? Well, you-all set still and rest yourselves. Soon as the sheriff gets here, I'm goin' to hand you over to him."

His mouth fell open. "Sheriff?" he said, dumb-like. "What sheriff?"

"Dick Hopkins, from Grizzly Run," I said.

"Why, you derned fool!" he screamed, scrambling up.

"Set down!" I roared, shoving my rifle barrel at him, and he sank back, all white and shaking. He could hardly talk.

"Listen to me!" he gasped. "I'm Dick Hopkins! I'm sheriff of Grizzly Run! These men are my deputies."

"Yeah?" I said sarcastically. "And who was the fellows shootin' at you from the brush?"

"Tarantula Bixby and his gang," he said. "We was follerin' 'em when they jumped us, and bein' outnumbered and surprized, we took cover in that old hut. They robbed the Grizzly Run bank day before yesterday. And now they'll be gettin' further away every minute! Oh, Judas J. Iscariot! Of all the dumb, bone-headed jackasses--"

"Heh! heh! heh!" I said cynically. "You must think I ain't got no sense. If you're the sheriff, where at's your star?"

"It was on my suspenders," he said despairingly. "When you hauled me out by the laig my suspenders caught on somethin' and tore off. If you'll lemme look amongst them ruins--"

"You set still," I commanded. "You can't fool me. You're Tranchler Bixby yourself. Sheriff Hopkins told me so. Him and the posse will be here in a little while. Set still and shut up."

WE STAYED THERE, AND the fellow which claimed to be the sheriff moaned and pulled his hair and shed a few tears, and the other fellows tried to convince me they was deputies till I got tired of their gab and told 'em to shut up or I'd bend my Winchester over their heads. I wondered why Hopkins and them didn't come, and I begun to get nervous, and all to once the fellow which said he was the sheriff give a yell that startled me so I jumped and nearly shot him. He had something in his hand and was waving it around.

"See here?" His voice cracked he hollered so loud. "I found it! It must have fell down into my shirt when my suspenders busted! Look at it, you dern mountain grizzly!"

I looked and my flesh crawled. It was a shiny silver star.

"Hopkins said he lost his'n," I said weakly. "Maybe you found it in the brush."

"You know better!" he bellered. "You're one of Bixby's men. You was sent to hold us here while Tarantula and the rest made their getaway. You'll get ninety years for this!"

I turned cold all over as I remembered them horses I heard galloping. I'd been fooled! This was the sheriff! That pot-bellied thug which shot at me had been Bixby hisself! And whilst I held up the real sheriff and his posse, them outlaws was riding out of the country.

Now wasn't that a caution?

"You better gimme that gun and surrender," opined Hopkins. "Maybe if you do they won't hang you."

"Set still!" I snarled. "I'm the biggest sap that ever straddled a mustang, but even saps has their feelin's. You ain't goin' to put me behind no bars. I'm goin' up this slope, but I'll be watchin' you. I've throwed your guns over there in the brush. If any of you makes a move toward 'em, I'll put a harp in his hand."

Nobody craved a harp.

They set up a chant of hate as I backed away, but they sot still. I went up the slope backwards till I hit the rim, and then I turned and ducked into the brush and run. I heard 'em cussing somethin' awful down in the hollow, but I didn't pause. I come to where I'd left Cap'n Kidd, and a-forked him and rode, thankful them outlaws had been in too big a hurry to steal him. I throwed away the rifle they give me, and headed west.

I aimed to cross Wild River at Ghost Canyon, and head into the uninhabited mountain region beyond there. I figgered I could dodge a posse indefinite once I got there. I pushed Cap'n Kidd hard, cussing my reins which had been notched by Bixby's bullet. I didn't have time to fix 'em, and Cap'n Kidd was a iron-jawed outlaw.

He was sweating plenty when I finally hove in sight of the place I was heading for. As I topped the canyon's crest before I dipped down to the crossing, I glanced back. They was a high notch in the hills a mile or so behind me. And as I looked three horsemen was etched in that notch, against the sky behind 'em. I cussed fervently. Why hadn't I had sense enough to know Hopkins and his men was bound to have horses tied somewheres near? They'd got their mounts and follered me, figgering I'd aim for the country beyond Wild River. It was about the only place I could go.

Not wanting no running fight with no sheriff's posse, I raced recklessly down the sloping canyon wall, busted out of the bushes--and stopped short. Wild River was on the rampage--bank full in the narrow channel and boiling and foaming. Been a big rain somewhere away up on the head, and the horse wasn't never foaled which could swum it.

They wasn't but one thing to do, and I done it. I wheeled Cap'n Kidd and headed up the canyon. Five miles up the river there was another crossing, with a bridge--if it hadn't been washed away.

CAP'N KIDD HAD HIS SECOND wind and we was going lickety-split, when suddenly I heard a noise ahead of us, above the roar of the river and the thunder of his hoofs on the rocky canyon floor. We was approaching a bend in the gorge where a low ridge run out from the canyon wall, and beyond that ridge I heard guns banging. I heaved back on the reins--and both of 'em snapped in two!

Cap'n Kidd instantly clamped his teeth on the bit and bolted, like he always done when anything out of the ordinary happened. He headed straight for the bushes at the end of the ridge, and I leaned forward and tried to get hold of the bit rings with my fingers. But all I done was swerve him from his course. Instead of following the canyon bed on around the end of the ridge, he went right over the rise, which sloped on that side. It didn't slope on t'other side; it fell away abrupt. I had a fleeting glimpse of five men crouching amongst the bushes on the canyon floor with guns in their hands. They looked up--and Cap'n Kidd braced his legs and slid to a halt at the lip of the low bluff and simultaneously bogged his head and throwed me heels over head down amongst 'em.

My boot heel landed on somebody's head, and the spur knocked him cold and blame near scalped him. That partly bust my fall, and it was further cushioned by another fellow which I landed on in a sitting position, and which took no further interest in the proceedings. The other three fell on me with loud brutal yells, and I reached for my .45 and found to my humiliation that it had fell out of my scabbard when I was throwed.

So I riz with a rock in my hand and bounced it offa the head of a fellow which was fixing to shoot me, and he dropped his pistol and fell on top of it. At this juncture one of the survivors put a buffalo gun to his shoulder and sighted, then evidently fearing he would hit his companion which was carving at me on the other side with a bowie knife, he reversed it and run in swinging it like a club.

The man with the knife got in a slash across my ribs and I then hit him on the chin which was how his jaw-bone got broke in four places. Meanwhile the other'n swung at me with his rifle, but missed my head and broke the stock off across my shoulder. Irritated at his persistency in trying to brain me with the barrel, I laid hands on him and throwed him head-on against the bluff, which is when he got his fractured skull and concussion of the brain, I reckon.

I then shook the sweat from my eyes, and glaring down, rekernized the remains as Bixby and his gang. I might have knew they'd head for the wild Country across the river, same as me. Only place they could go.

Just then, however, a clump of bushes parted, near the river bank, and a big black-bearded man riz up from behind a dead horse. He had a six-shooter in his hand and he approached me cautiously.

"Who're you?" he demanded. "Where'd you come from?"

"I'm Breckinridge Elkins," I answered, mopping the blood offa my shirt. "What is this here business, anyway?"

"I was settin' here peaceable waitin' for the river to go down so I could cross," he said, "when up rode these yeggs and started shootin'. I'm a honest citizen--"

"You're a liar," I said with my usual diplomacy. "You're Joel Cairn, the wust outlaw in the hills. I seen your pitcher in the post office at Chawed Ear."

With that he p'inted his .45 at me and his beard bristled like the whiskers of a old timber wolf.

"So you know me, hey?" he said. "Well, what you goin' to do about it, hey? Want to colleck the reward money, hey?"

"Naw, I don't," I said. "I'm a outlaw myself, now. I just run foul of the law account of these skunks. They's a posse right behind me."

"They is?" he snarled. "Why'nt you say so? Here, le's catch these fellers' horses and light out. Cheap skates! They claims I double-crossed 'em in the matter of a stagecoach hold-up we pulled together recently. I been avoidin' 'em 'cause I'm a peaceful man by nater, but they rode onto me onexpected today. They shot my horse first crack; we been tradin' lead for more'n a hour without doin' much damage, but they'd got me eventually, I reckon. Come on. We'll pull out together."

"No, we won't," I said. "I'm a outlaw by force of circumstances, but I ain't no murderin' bandit."

"Purty particular of yore comperny, ain'tcha?" he sneered. "Well, anyways, help me catch me a horse. Yore's is still up there on that bluff. The day's still young--"

He pulled out a big gold watch and looked at it; it was one which wound with a key.

I JUMPED LIKE I WAS SHOT. "Where'd you get that watch?" I hollered.

He jerked up his head kinda startled, and said: "My grandpap gimme it. Why?"

"You're a liar!" I bellered. "You took that off'n my Uncle Garfield. Gimme that watch!"

"Are you crazy?" he yelled, going white under his whiskers. I plunged for him, seeing red, and he let bang! and I got it in the left thigh. Before he could shoot again I was on top of him, and knocked the gun up. It banged but the bullet went singing up over the bluff and Cap'n Kidd squealed and started changing ends. The pistol flew outa Cairn's hand and he hit me vi'lently on the nose which made me see stars. So I hit him in the belly and he grunted and doubled up; and come up with a knife out of his boot which he cut me across the boozum with, also in the arm and shoulder and kicked me in the groin. So I swung him clear of the ground and throwed him headfirst and jumped on him with both feet. And that settled him.

I picked up the watch where it had fell, and staggered over to the cliff, spurting blood at every step like a stuck hawg.

"At last my search is at a end!" I panted. "I can go back to Ellen Reynolds who patiently awaits the return of her hero--"

It was at this instant that Cap'n Kidd, which had been stung by Cairn's wild shot and was trying to buck off his saddle, bucked hisself off the bluff. He fell on me....

The first thing I heard was bells ringing, and then they turned to horses galloping. I set up and wiped off the blood which was running into my eyes from where Cap'n Kidd's left hind hoof had split my scalp. And I seen Sheriff Hopkins, Jackson and Partland come tearing around the ridge. I tried to get up and run, but my right leg wouldn't work. I reached for my gun and it still wasn't there. I was trapped.

"Look there!" yelled Hopkins, wild-eyed. "That's Bixby on the ground--and all his gang. And ye gods, there's Joel Cairn! What is this, anyhow? It looks like a battlefield! What's that settin' there? He's so bloody I can't recognize him!"

"It's the hill-billy!" yelped Jackson. "Don't move or I'll shoot 'cha!"

"I already been shot," I snarled. "Gwan--do yore wust. Fate is against me."

They dismounted and stared in awe.

"Count the dead, boys," said Hopkins in a still, small voice.

"Aw," said Partland, "ain't none of 'em dead, but they'll never be the same men again. Look! Bixby's comin' to! Who done this, Bixby?"

Bixby cast a wabbly eye about till he spied me, and then he moaned and shriveled up.

"He done it!" he waited. "He trailed us down like a bloodhound and jumped on us from behind! He tried to scalp me! He ain't human!" And he bust into tears.

They looked at me, and all took off their hats.

"Elkins," said Hopkins in a tone of reverence, "I see it all now. They fooled you into thinkin' they was the posse and us the outlaws, didn't they? And when you realized the truth, you hunted 'em down, didn't you? And cleaned 'em out single handed, and Joel Cairn, too, didn't you?"

"Well," I said groggily, "the truth is--"

"We understand," Hopkins soothed. "You mountain men is all modest. Hey, boys, tie up them outlaws whilst I look at Elkins' wounds."

"If you'll catch my horse," I said, "I got to be ridin' back--"

"Gee whiz, man!" he said, "you ain't in no shape to ride a horse! Do you know you got four busted ribs and a broke arm, and one leg broke and a bullet in the other'n, to say nothin' of bein' slashed to ribbons? We'll rig up a litter for you. What's that you got in your good hand?"

I suddenly remembered Uncle Garfield's watch which I'd kept clutched in a death grip. I stared at what I held in my hand; and I fell back with a low moan. All I had in my hand was a bunch of busted metal and broken wheels and springs, bent and smashed plumb beyond recognition.

"Grab him!" yelled Hopkins. "He's fainted!"

"Plant me under a pine tree, boys," I murmured weakly; "just carve on my tombstone: 'He fit a good fight but Fate dealt him the joker.'"

A FEW DAYS LATER A melancholy procession wound its way up the trail into the Humbolts. I was packed on a litter. I told 'em I wanted to see Ellen Reynolds before I died, and to show Uncle Garfield the rooins of the watch, so he'd know I done my duty as I seen it.

As we approached the locality where my home cabin stood, who should meet us but Jim Braxton, which tried to conceal his pleasure when I told him in a weak voice that I was a dying man. He was all dressed up in new buckskins and his exuberance was plumb disgustful to a man in my condition.

"Too bad," he said. "Too bad, Breckinridge. I hoped to meet you, but not like this, of course. Yore pap told me to tell you if I seen you about yore Uncle Garfield's watch. He thought I might run into you on my way to Chawed Ear to git a license--"

"Hey?" I said, pricking up my ears.

"Yeah, me and Ellen Reynolds is goin' to git married. Well, as I started to say, seems like one of them bandits which robbed the stage was a fellow whose dad was a friend of yore Uncle Garfield's back in Texas. He reckernized the name in the watch and sent it back, and it got here the day after you left--"

They say it was jealousy which made me rise up on my litter and fracture Jim Braxton's jaw-bone. I denies that. I stoops to no such petty practices. What impelled me was family conventions. I couldn't hit Uncle Garfield--I had to hit somebody--and Jim Braxton just happened to be the nearest one to me.

THE END

Contents

HIGH HORSE RAMPAGE

By Robert E. Howard

I GOT A LETTER FROM Aunt Saragosa Grimes the other day which said:

Dear Breckinridge:

I believe time is softenin' yore Cousin Bearfield Buckner's feelings toward you. He was over here to supper the other night jest after he shot the three Evans boys, and he was in the best humor I seen him in since he got back from Colorado. So I jest kind of casually mentioned you and he didn't turn near as purple as he used to every time he heered yore name mentioned. He jest kind of got a little green around the years, and that might of been on account of him chokin on the b'ar meat he was eatin'. And all he said was he was going to beat yore brains out with a post oak maul if he ever ketched up with you, which is the mildest remark he's made about you since he got back to Texas. I believe he's practically give up the idee of sculpin' you alive and leavin' you on the prairie for the buzzards with both laigs broke like he used to swear was his sole ambition. I believe in a year or so it would be safe for you to meet dear Cousin Bearfield, and if you do have to shoot him, I hope you'll be broad-minded and shoot him in some place which ain't vital because after all you know it was yore fault to begin with. We air all well and nothin's happened to speak of except Joe Allison got a arm broke argyin' politics with Cousin Bearfield. Hopin' you air the same, I begs to remane.

Yore lovin' Ant Saragosa.

It's heartening to know a man's kin is thinking kindly of him and forgetting petty grudges. But I can see that Bearfield is been misrepresenting things and pizening Aunt Saragosa's mind agen me, otherwise she wouldn't of made that there remark about it being my fault. All fair-minded men knows that what happened warn't my fault--that is all except Bearfield, and he's naturally prejudiced, because most of it happened to him.

I knowed Bearfield was somewheres in Colorado when I j'ined up with Old Man Brant Mulholland to make a cattle drive from the Pecos to the Platte, but that didn't have nothing to do with it. I expects to run into Bearfield almost any place where the licker is red and the shotguns is sawed-offs. He's a liar when he says I come into the High Horse country a-purpose to wreck his life and ruin his career.

Everything I done to him was in kindness and kindredly affection. But he ain't got no gratitude. When I think of the javelina meat I et and the bare-footed bandits I had to associate with whilst living in Old Mexico to avoid having to kill that wuthless critter, his present attitude embitters me.

I never had no notion of visiting High Horse in the first place. But we run out of grub a few miles north of there, so what does Old Man Mulholland do but rout me outa my blankets before daylight, and says, "I want you to take the chuck wagon to High Horse and buy some grub. Here's fifty bucks. If you spends a penny of that for anything but bacon, beans, flour, salt and coffee, I'll have yore life, big as you be."

"Why'n't you send the cook?" I demanded.

"He's layin' helpless in a chaparral thicket reekin' with the fumes of vaniller extract," says Old Man Mulholland. "Anyway, yo're responsible for this famine. But for yore inhuman appetite we'd of had enough grub to last the whole drive. Git goin'. Yo're the only man in the string I trust with money and I don't trust you no further'n I can heave a bull by the tail."

Us Elkinses is sensitive about sech remarks, but Old Man Mulholland was born with a conviction that everybody is out to swindle him, so I maintained a dignerfied silence outside of telling him to go to hell, and harnessed the mules to the chuck wagon and headed for Antioch. I led Cap'n Kidd behind the wagon because I knowed if I left him unguarded he'd kill every he-hoss in the camp before I got back.

Well, jest as I come to the forks where the trail to Gallego splits off of the High Horse road, I heard somebody behind me thumping a banjer and singing, "Oh, Nora he did build the Ark!" So I pulled up and purty soon around the bend come the derndest looking rig I'd saw since the circus come to War Paint.

It was a buggy all painted red, white and blue and drawed by a couple of wall-eyed pintos. And they was a feller in it with a long-tailed coat and a plug hat and fancy checked vest, and a cross-eyed nigger playing a banjer, with a monkey setting on his shoulder.

The white man taken off his plug hat and made me a bow, and says, "Greetings, my mastodonic friend! Can you inform me which of these roads leads to the fair city of High Horse?"

"That's leadin' south," I says. "T'other'n goes east to Gallego. Air you all part of a circus?"

"I resents the implication," says he. "In me you behold the greatest friend to humanity since the inventor of corn licker. I am Professor Horace J. Lattimer, inventor and sole distributor of that boon to suffering humanity, Lattimer's Lenitive Loco Elixir, good for man or beast!"

He then h'isted a jug out from under the seat and showed it to me and a young feller which had jest rode up along the road from Gallego.

"A sure cure," says he. "Have you a hoss which has nibbled the seductive loco-weed? That huge brute you've got tied to the end-gate there looks remarkable wild in his eye, now--"

"He ain't loco," I says. "He's jest blood-thirsty."

"Then I bid you both a very good day, sirs," says he. "I must be on my way to allay the sufferings of mankind. I trust we shall meet in High Horse."

So he drove on, and I started to cluck to the mules, when the young feller from Gallego, which had been eying me very close, he says, "Ain't you Breckinridge Elkins?"

When I says I was, he says with some bitterness, "That there perfessor don't have to go to High Horse to find locoed critters. They's a man in Gallego right now, crazy as a bedbug--yore own cousin, Bearfield Buckner!"

"What?" says I with a vi'lent start, because they hadn't never been no insanity in the family before, only Bearfield's great-grand-uncle Esau who onst voted agen Hickory Jackson. But he recovered before the next election.

"It's the truth," says the young feller. "He's sufferin' from a hallucination that he's goin' to marry a gal over to High Horse by the name of Ann Wilkins. They ain't even no gal by that name there. He was havin' a fit in the saloon when I left, me not bearin' to look on the rooins of a onst noble character. I'm feared he'll do hisself a injury if he ain't restrained."

"Hell's fire!" I said in great agitation. "Is this the truth?"

"True as my name's Lem Campbell," he declared. "I thought bein' as how yo're a relation of his'n, if you could kinda git him out to my cabin a few miles south of Gallego, and keep him there a few days maybe he might git his mind back--"

"I'll do better'n that," I says, jumping out of the wagon and tying the mules. "Foller me," I says, forking Cap'n Kidd. The Perfessor's buggy was jest going out of sight around a bend, and I lit out after it. I was well ahead of Lem Campbell when I overtaken it. I pulled up beside it in a cloud of dust and demanded, "You say that stuff kyores man or beast?"

"Absolutely!" declared Lattimer.

"Well, turn around and head for Gallego," I said. "I got you a patient."

"But Gallego is but a small inland village" he demurs. "There is a railroad and many saloons at High Horse and--"

"With a human reason at stake you sets and maunders about railroads!" I roared, drawing a .45 and impulsively shooting a few buttons off of his coat. "I buys yore whole load of loco licker. Turn around and head for Gallego."

"I wouldn't think of argying," says he, turning pale. "Meshak, don't you hear the gentleman? Get out from under that seat and turn these hosses around."

"Yes suh!" says Meshak, and they swung around jest as Lem Campbell galloped up.

I hauled out the wad Old Man Mulholland gimme and says to him, "Take this dough on to High Horse and buy some grub and have it sent out to Old Man Mulholland's cow camp on the Little Yankton. I'm goin' to Gallego and I'll need the wagon to lug Cousin Bearfield in."

"I'll take the grub out myself," he declared, grabbing the wad. "I knowed I could depend on you as soon as I seen you."

So he told me how to get to his cabin, and then lit out for High Horse and I headed back up the trail. When I passed the buggy I hollered, "Foller me into Gallego. One of you drive the chuck wagon which is standin' at the forks. And don't try to shake me as soon as I git out of sight, neither!"

"I wouldn't think of such a thing," says Lattimer with a slight shudder. "Go ahead and fear not. We'll follow you as fast as we can."

So I dusted the trail for Gallego.

It warn't much of a town, with only jest one saloon, and as I rode in I heard a beller in the saloon and the door flew open and three or four fellows come sailing out on their heads and picked theirselves up and tore out up the street.

"Yes," I says to myself, "Cousin Bearfield is in town, all right."

GALLEGO LOOKED ABOUT like any town does when Bearfield is celebrating. The stores had their doors locked and the shutters up, nobody was on the streets, and off down acrost the flat I seen a man which I taken to be the sheriff spurring his hoss for the hills. I tied Cap'n Kidd to the hitch-rail and as I approached the saloon I nearly fell over a feller which was crawling around on his all-fours with a bartender's apron on and both eyes swelled shet.

"Don't shoot!" says he. "I give up!"

"What happened?" I ast.

"The last thing I remember is tellin' a feller named Buckner that the Democratic platform was silly," says he. "Then I think the roof must of fell in or somethin'. Surely one man couldn't of did all this to me."

"You don't know my cousin Bearfield," I assured him as I stepped over him and went through the door which was tore off its hinges. I'd begun to think that maybe Lem Campbell had exaggerated about Bearfield; he seemed to be acting in jest his ordinary normal manner. But a instant later I changed my mind.

Bearfield was standing at the bar in solitary grandeur, pouring hisself a drink, and he was wearing the damnedest-looking red, yaller, green and purple shirt ever I seen in my life.

"What," I demanded in horror, "is that thing you got on?"

"If yo're referrin' to my shirt," he retorted with irritation, "it's the classiest piece of goods I could find in Denver. I bought it special for my weddin'."

"It's true!" I moaned. "He's crazy as hell."

I knowed no sane man would wear a shirt like that.

"What's crazy about gittin' married?" he snarled, biting the neck off of a bottle and taking a big snort. "Folks does it every day."

I walked around him cautious, sizing him up and down, which seemed to exasperate him considerable.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" he roared, hitching his harness for'ard. "I got a good mind to--"

"Be ca'm, Cousin Bearfield," I soothed him. "Who's this gal you imagine yo're goin' to marry?"

"I don't imagine nothin' about it, you ignerant ape," he retorts cantankerously. "Her name's Ann Wilkins and she lives in High Horse. I'm ridin' over there right away and we gits hitched today."

I shaken my head mournful and said, "You must of inherited this from yore great-grand-uncle Esau. Pap's always said Esau's insanity might crop out in the Buckners again some time. But don't worry. Esau was kyored and voted a straight Democratic ticket the rest of his life. You can be kyored too, Bearfield, and I'm here to do it. Come with me, Bearfield," I says, getting a good rassling grip on his neck.

"Consarn it!" says Cousin Bearfield, and went into action.

We went to the floor together and started rolling in the general direction of the back door and every time he come up on top he'd bang my head agen the floor which soon became very irksome. However, about the tenth revolution I come up on top and pried my thumb out of his teeth and said, "Bearfield, I don't want to have to use force with you, but--ulp!" That was account of him kicking me in the back of the neck.

My motives was of the loftiest, and they warn't no use in the saloon owner belly-aching the way he done afterwards. Was it my fault if Bearfield missed me with a five-gallon demijohn and busted the mirror behind the bar? Could I help it if Bearfield wrecked the billiard table when I knocked him through it? As for the stove which got busted, all I got to say is that self-preservation is the first law of nature. If I hadn't hit Bearfield with the stove he would of ondoubtedly scrambled my features with that busted beer mug he was trying to use like brass knucks.

I'VE HEARD MANIACS fight awful, but I dunno as Bearfield fit any different than usual. He hadn't forgot his old trick of hooking his spur in my neck whilst we was rolling around on the floor, and when he knocked me down with the roulette wheel and started jumping on me with both feet I thought for a minute I was going to weaken. But the shame of having a maniac in the family revived me and I throwed him off and riz and tore up a section of the brass foot-rail and wrapped it around his head. Cousin Bearfield dropped the bowie he'd jest drawed, and collapsed.

I wiped the blood off of my face and discovered I could still see outa one eye. I pried the brass rail off of Cousin Bearfield's head and dragged him out onto the porch by a hind laig, jest as Perfessor Lattimer drove up in his buggy. Meshak was behind him in the chuck wagon with the monkey, and his eyes was as big and white as saucers.

"Where's the patient?" ast Lattimer, and I said, "This here's him! Throw me a rope outa that wagon. We takes him to Lem Campbell's cabin where we can dose him till he recovers his reason."

Quite a crowd gathered whilst I was tying him up, and I don't believe Cousin Bearfield had many friends in Gallego by the remarks they made. When I lifted his limp carcass up into the wagon one of 'em ast me if I was a law. And when I said I warn't, purty short, he says to the crowd, "Why, hell, then, boys, what's to keep us from payin' Buckner back for all the lickin's he's give us? I tell you, it's our chance! He's unconscious and tied up, and this here feller ain't no sheriff."

"Git a rope!" howled somebody. "We'll hang 'em."

They begun to surge for'ards, and Lattimer and Meshak was so scairt they couldn't hardly hold the lines. But I mounted my hoss and pulled my pistols and says. "Meshak, swing that chuck wagon and head south. Perfessor, you foller him. Hey, you, git away from them mules!"

One of the crowd had tried to grab their bridles and stop 'em, so I shot a heel off'n his boot and he fell down hollering bloody murder.

"Git outa the way!" I bellered, swinging my pistols on the crowd, and they give back in a hurry. "Git goin'," I says, firing some shots under the mules' feet to encourage 'em, and the chuck wagon went out of Gallego jumping and bouncing with Meshak holding onto the seat and hollering blue ruin, and the Perfessor come right behind it in his buggy. I follered the Perfessor looking back to see nobody didn't shoot me in the back, because several men had drawed their pistols. But nobody fired till I was out of good pistol range. Then somebody let loose with a buffalo rifle, but he missed me by at least a foot, so I paid no attention to it, and we was soon out of sight of the town.

I was a feared Bearfield might come to and scare the mules with his bellering, but that brass rail must of been harder'n I thought. He was still unconscious when we pulled up to the cabin which stood in a little wooded cove amongst the hills a few miles south of Gallego. I told Meshak to onhitch the mules and turn 'em into the corral whilst I carried Bearfield into the cabin and laid him on a bunk. I told Lattimer to bring in all the elixir he had, and he brung ten gallons in one-gallon jugs. I give him all the money I had to pay for it.

Purty soon Bearfield come to and he raised his head and looked at Perfessor Lattimer setting on the bunk opposite him in his long tailed coat and plug hat, the cross-eyed nigger and the monkey setting beside him. Bearfield batted his eyes and says, "My God, I must be crazy. That can't be real!"

"Sure, yo're crazy, Cousin Bearfield," I soothed him. "But don't worry. We're goin' to kyore you--"

Bearfield here interrupted me with a yell that turned Meshak the color of a fish's belly.

"Untie me, you son of Perdition!" he roared, heaving and flopping on the bunk like a python with the belly-ache, straining agen his ropes till the veins knotted blue on his temples. "I oughta be in High Horse right now gittin' married--"

"See there?" I sighed to Lattimer. "It's a sad case. We better start dosin' him right away. Git a drenchin' horn. What size dose do you give?"

"A quart at a shot for a hoss," he says doubtfully. "But--"

"We'll start out with that," I says. "We can increase the size of the dose if we need to."

IGNORING BEARFIELD'S terrible remarks I was jest twisting the cork out of a jug when I heard somebody say, "What the hell air you doin' in my shack?"

I turned around and seen a bow-legged critter with drooping whiskers glaring at me kinda pop-eyed from the door.

"What you mean, yore shack?" I demanded, irritated at the interruption. "This shack belongs to a friend of mine which has lent it to us."

"Yo're drunk or crazy," says he, clutching at his whiskers convulsively. "Will you git out peaceable or does I have to git vi'lent?"

"Oh, a cussed claim-jumper, hey?" I snorted, taken his gun away from him when he drawed it. But he pulled a bowie so I throwed him out of the shack and shot into the dust around him a few times jest for warning.

"I'll git even with you, you big lummox!" he howled, as he ran for a scrawny looking sorrel he had tied to the fence. "I'll fix you yet," he promised blood-thirstily as he galloped off, shaking his fist at me.

"Who do you suppose he was?" wondered Lattimer, kinda shaky, and I says, "What the hell does it matter? Forgit the incident and help me give Cousin Bearfield his medicine."

That was easier said than did. Tied up as he was, it was all we could do to get that there elixir down him. I thought I never would get his jaws pried open, using the poker for a lever, but when he opened his mouth to cuss me, we jammed the horn in before he could close it. He left the marks of his teeth so deep on that horn it looked like it'd been in a b'ar-trap.

He kept on heaving and kicking till we'd poured a full dose down him and then he kinda stiffened out and his eyes went glassy. When we taken the horn out his jaws worked but didn't make no sound. But the Perfessor said hosses always acted like that when they'd had a good healthy shot of the remedy, so we left Meshak to watch him, and me and Lattimer went out and sot down on the stoop to rest and cool off.

"Why ain't Meshak onhitched yore buggy?" I ast.

"You mean you expect us to stay here overnight?" says he, aghast.

"Over night, hell!" says I. "You stays till he's kyored, if it takes a year. You may have to make up some more medicine if this ain't enough."

"You mean to say we got to rassle with that maniac three times a day like we just did?" squawked Lattimer.

"Maybe he won't be so vi'lent when the remedy takes holt," I encouraged him. Lattimer looked like he was going to choke, but jest then inside the cabin sounds a yell that even made my hair stand up. Cousin Bearfield had found his voice again.

We jumped up and Meshak come out of the cabin so fast he knocked Lattimer out into the yard and fell over him. The monkey was right behind him streaking it like his tail was on fire.

"Oh, lawdy!" yelled Meshak, heading for the tall timber. "Dat crazy man am bustin' dem ropes like dey was twine. He gwine kill us all, sho'!"

I run into the shack and seen Cousin Bearfield rolling around on the floor and cussing amazing, even for him. And to my horror I seen he'd busted some of the ropes so his left arm was free. I pounced on it, but for a few minutes all I was able to do was jest to hold onto it whilst he throwed me hither and thither around the room with freedom and abandon. At last I kind of wore him down and got his arm tied again jest as Lattimer run in and done a snake dance all over the floor.

"Meshak's gone," he howled. "He was so scared he run off with the monkey and my buggy and team. It's all your fault."

Being too winded to argy I jest heaved Bearfield up on the bunk and staggered over and sot down on the other'n, whilst the Perfessor pranced and whooped and swore I owed him for his buggy and team.

"Listen," I said when I'd got my wind back. "I spent all my money for that elixir, but when Bearfield recovers his reason he'll be so grateful he'll be glad to pay you hisself. Now forgit sech sordid trash as money and devote yore scientific knowledge to gittin' Bearfield sane."

"Sane!" howls Bearfield. "Is that what yo're doin'--tyin' me up and pizenin' me? I've tasted some awful muck in my life, but I never drempt nothin' could taste as bad as that stuff you poured down me. It plumb paralyzes a man. Lemme loose, dammit."

"Will you be ca'm if I onties you?" I ast.

"I will," he promised heartily, "jest as soon as I've festooned the surroundin' forest with yore entrails!"

"Still vi'lent," I said sadly. "We better keep him tied, Perfessor."

"But I'm due to git married in High Horse right now!" Bearfield yelled, giving sech a convulsive heave that he throwed hisself clean offa the bunk. It was his own fault, and they warn't no use in him later blaming me because he hit his head on the floor and knocked hisself stiff.

"Well," I said, "at least we'll have a few minutes of peace and quiet around here. Help me lift him back on his bunk."

"What's that?" yelped the Perfessor, jumping convulsively as a rifle cracked out in the bresh and a bullet whined through the cabin.

"That's probably Droopin' Whiskers," I says, lifting Cousin Bearfield. "I thought I seen a Winchester on his saddle. Say, it's gittin' late. See if you cain't find some grub in the kitchen. I'm hungry."

Well, the Perfessor had an awful case of the willies, but we found some bacon and beans in the shack and cooked 'em and et 'em, and fed Bearfield, which had come to when he smelt the grub cooking. I don't think Lattimer enjoyed his meal much because every time a bullet hit the shack he jumped and choked on his grub. Drooping Whiskers was purty persistent, but he was so far back in the bresh he wasn't doing no damage. He was a rotten shot anyhow. All of his bullets was away too high, as I p'inted out to Lattimer, but the Perfessor warn't happy.

I didn't dare untie Bearfield to let him eat, so I made Lattimer set by him and feed him with a knife, and he was scairt and shook so he kept spilling hot beans down Bearfield's collar, and Bearfield's langwidge was awful to hear.

Time we got through it was long past dark, and Drooping Whiskers had quit shooting at us. As it later appeared, he'd run out of ammunition and gone to borrow some ca'tridges from a ranch house some miles away. Bearfield had quit cussing us, he jest laid there and glared at us with the most horrible expression I ever seen on a human being. It made Lattimer's hair stand up.

But Bearfield kept working at his ropes and I had to examine 'em every little while and now and then put some new ones on him. So I told Lattimer we better give him another dose, and when we finally got it down him, Lattimer staggered into the kitchen and collapsed under the table and I was as near wore out myself as a Elkins can get.

But I didn't dare sleep for fear Cousin Bearfield would get loose and kill me before I could wake up. I sot down on the other bunk and watched him and after while he went to sleep and I could hear the Perfessor snoring out in the kitchen.

About midnight I lit a candle and Bearfield woke up and said, "Blast yore soul, you done woke me up out of the sweetest dream I ever had. I drempt I was fishin' for sharks off Mustang Island."

"What's sweet about that?" I ast.

"I was usin' you for bait," he said. "Hey, what you doin'?"

"It's time for yore dose," I said, and then the battle started. This time he got my thumb in his mouth and would ondoubtedly have chawed it off if I hadn't kind of stunned him with the iron skillet. Before he could recover hisself I had the elixir down him with the aid of Lattimer which had been woke up by the racket.

"How long is this going on?" Lattimer ast despairingly. "Ow!"

It was Drooping Whiskers again. This time he'd crawled up purty clost to the house and his first slug combed the Perfessor's hair.

"I'm a patient man but I've reached my limit," I snarled, blowing out the candle and grabbing a shotgun off the wall. "Stay here and watch Bearfield whilst I go out and hang Droopin' Whiskers' hide to the nearest tree."

I snuck out of the cabin on the opposite side from where the shot come from, and begun to sneak around in a circle through the bresh. The moon was coming up, and I knowed I could out-Injun Drooping Whiskers. Any Bear Creek man could. Sure enough, purty soon I slid around a clump of bushes and seen him bending over behind a thicket whilst he took aim at the cabin with a Winchester. So I emptied both barrels into the seat of his britches and he give a most amazing howl and jumped higher'n I ever seen a bow-legged feller jump, and dropped his Winchester and taken out up the trail toward the north.

I was determined to run him clean off the range this time, so I pursued him and shot at him every now and then, but the dern gun was loaded with bird-shot and all the shells I'd grabbed along with it was the same. I never seen a white man run like he did. I never got clost enough to do no real damage to him, and after I'd chased him a mile or so he turned off into the bresh, and I soon lost him.

Well, I made my way back to the road again, and was jest fixing to step out of the bresh and start down the road toward the cabin, when I heard hosses coming from the north. So I stayed behind a bush, and purty soon a gang of men come around the bend, walking their hosses, with the moonlight glinting on Winchesters in their hands.

"Easy now," says one. "The cabin ain't far down the road. We'll ease up and surround it before they know what's happenin'."

"I wonder what that shootin' was we heered a while back?" says another'n kind of nervous.

"Maybe they was fightin' amongst theirselves," says yet another'n. "No matter. We'll rush in and settle the big feller's hash before he knows what's happenin'. Then we'll string Buckner up."

"What you reckon they kidnaped Buckner for?" some feller begun, but I waited for no more. I riz up from behind the bushes and the hosses snorted and reared.

"Hang a helpless man because he licked you in a fair fight, hey?" I bellowed, and let go both barrels amongst 'em.

THEY WAS RIDING SO clost-grouped don't think I missed any of 'em. The way they hollered was disgusting to hear. The hosses was scairt at the flash and roar right in their faces and they wheeled and bolted, and the whole gang went thundering up the road a dern sight faster than they'd come. I sent a few shots after 'em with my pistols, but they didn't shoot back, and purty soon the weeping and wailing died away in the distance. A fine mob they turned out to be!

But I thought they might come back, so I sot down behind a bush where I could watch the road from Gallego. And the first thing I knowed I went to sleep in spite of myself.

When I woke up it was jest coming daylight. I jumped up and grabbed my guns, but nobody was in sight. I guess them Gallego gents had got a bellyful. So I headed back for the cabin and when I got there the corral was empty and the chuck wagon was gone!

I started on a run for the shack and then I seen a note stuck on the corral fence. I grabbed it. It said--

Dear Elkins:

This strain is too much for me. I'm getting white-haired sitting and watching this devil laying there glaring at me, and wondering all the time how soon he'll bust loose. I'm pulling out. I'm taking the chuck wagon and team in payment for my rig that Meshak ran off with. I'm leaving the elixir but I doubt if it'll do Buckner any good. It's for locoed critters, not homicidal maniacs.

Respectfully yours.

Horace J. Lattimer, Esquire.

"Hell's fire," I said wrathfully, starting for the shack.

I dunno how long it had took Bearfield to wriggle out of his ropes. Anyway he was laying for me behind the door with the iron skillet and if the handle hadn't broke off when he lammed me over the head with it he might of did me a injury.

I dunno how I ever managed to throw him, because he fit like a frothing maniac, and every time he managed to break loose from me he grabbed a jug of Lattimer's Loco Elixir and busted it over my head. By the time I managed to stun him with a table laig he'd busted every jug on the place, the floor was swimming in elixir, and my clothes was soaked in it. Where they wasn't soaked with blood.

I fell on him and tied him up again and then sot on a bunk and tried to get my breath back and wondered what in hell to do. Because here the elixir was all gone and I didn't have no way of treating Bearfield and the Perfessor had run off with the chuck wagon so I hadn't no way to get him back to civilization.

Then all at onst I heard a train whistle, away off to the west, and remembered that the track passed through jest a few miles to the south. I'd did all I could for Bearfield, only thing I could do now was to get him back to his folks where they could take care of him.

I run out and whistled for Cap'n Kidd and he busted out from around the corner of the house where he'd been laying for me, and tried to kick me in the belly before I could get ready for him, but I warn't fooled. He's tried that trick too many times. I dodged and give him a good bust in the nose, and then I throwed the bridle and saddle on him, and brung Cousin Bearfield out and throwed him acrost the saddle and headed south.

That must of been the road both Meshak and Lattimer taken when they run off. It crossed the railroad track about three miles from the shack. The train had been whistling for High Horse when I first heard it. I got to the track before it come into sight. I flagged it and it pulled up and the train crew jumped down and wanted to know what the hell I was stopping them for.

"I got a man here which needs medical attention," I says. "It's a case of temporary insanity. I'm sendin' him back to Texas."

"Hell," says they, "this train don't go nowheres near Texas."

"Well," I says, "you unload him at Dodge City. He's got plenty of friends there which will see that he gits took care of. I'll send word from High Horse to his folks in Texas tellin' 'em to go after him."

So they loaded Cousin Bearfield on, him being still unconscious, and I give the conductor his watch and chain and pistol to pay for his fare. Then I headed along the track for High Horse.

When I got to High Horse I tied Cap'n Kidd nigh the track and started for the depot when who should I run smack into but Old Man Mulholland who immejitly give a howl like a hungry timber wolf.

"Whar's the grub, you hoss-thief?" he yelled before I could say nothing.

"Why, didn't Lem Campbell bring it out to you?" I ast.

"I never seen a man by that name," he bellered. "Whar's my fifty bucks?"

"Heck," I says, "he looked honest."

"Who?" yowled Old Man Mulholland. "Who, you polecat?"

"Lem Campbell, the man I give the dough to for him to buy the grub," I says. "Oh, well, never mind. I'll work out the fifty."

The Old Man looked like he was fixing to choke. He gurgled, "Where's my chuck wagon?"

"A feller stole it," I said. "But I'll work that out too."

"You won't work for me," foamed the Old Man, pulling a gun. "Yo're fired. And as for the dough and the wagon, I takes them out of yore hide here and now."

Well, I taken the gun away from him, of course, and tried to reason with him, but he jest hollered that much louder, and got his knife out and made a pass at me. Now it always did irritate me for somebody to stick a knife in me, so I taken it away from him and throwed him into a nearby hoss trough. It was one of these here V-shaped troughs which narrers together at the bottom, and somehow his fool head got wedged and he was about to drown.

Quite a crowd had gathered and they tried pulling him out by the hind laigs but his feet was waving around in the air so wild that every time anybody tried to grab him they got spurred in the face. So I went over to the trough and taken hold of the sides and tore it apart. He fell out and spit up maybe a gallon of water. And the first words he was able to say he accused me of trying to drownd him on purpose, which shows how much gratitude people has got.

But a man spoke up and said, "Hell, the big feller didn't do it on purpose. I was right here and I seen it all."

And another'n said, "I seen it as good as you did, and the big feller did try to drownd him, too!"

"Air you callin' me a liar?" said the first feller, reaching for his gun.

But jest then another man chipped in and said, "I dunno what the argyment's about, but I bet a dollar you're both wrong!"

And then some more fellers butted in and everybody started cussing and hollering till it nigh deefened me. Someone else reaches for a gun and I seen that as soon as one feller shoots another there is bound to be trouble so I started to gentle the first feller by hitting him over the head. The next thing I know someone hollers at me, "You big hyener!", and tries to ruint me with a knife. Purty soon there is hitting and shooting all over the town. High Horse is sure on a rampage.

I jest had finished blunting my Colts on a varmit's haid when I thinks disgustedly, "Heck, Elkins, you came to this town on a mission of good will! You got business to do. You got yore poor family to think about."

I started to go on to the depot but I heard a familiar voice screech above the racket. "There he is, Sheriff! Arrest the dern' claim-jumper!"

I whirled around quick and there was Drooping Whiskers, a saddle blanket wropped around him like a Injun and walking purty spraddle-legged. He was p'inting at me and hollering like I'd did something to him.

Everybody else quieted down for a minute, and he hollered, "Arrest him, dern him. He throwed me out of my own cabin and ruint my best pants with my own shotgun. I been to Knife River and come back several days quicker'n I aimed to, and there this big hyener was in charge of my shack. He was too dern big for me to handle, so I come to High Horse after the sheriff--soon as I got three or four hundred bird-shot picked out my hide."

"What you got to say about this?" ast the sheriff, kinda uncertain, like he warn't enjoying his job for some reason or other.

"Why, hell," I says disgustedly. "I throwed this varmint out of a cabin, sure, and later peppered his anatomy with bird-shot. But I was in my rights. I was in a cabin which had been loaned me by a man named Lem Campbell--"

"Lem Campbell!" shrieked Drooping Whiskers, jumping up and down so hard he nigh lost the blanket he was wearing instead of britches. "That wuthless critter ain't got no cabin. He was workin' for me till I fired him jest before I started for Knife River, for bein' so triflin'."

"Hell's fire!" I says, shocked. "Ain't there no honesty any more? Shucks, stranger, it looks like the joke's on me."

At this Drooping Whiskers collapsed into the arms of his friends with a low moan, and the sheriff says to me uncomfortably, "Don't take this personal, but I'm afeared I'll have to arrest you, if you don't mind--"

Jest then a train whistled away off to the east, and somebody said, "What the hell, they ain't no train from the east this time of day!"

Then the depot agent run out of the depot waving his arms and yelling, "Git them cows off'n the track! I jest got a flash from Knife River, the train's comin' back. A maniac named Buckner busted loose and made the crew turn her around at the switch. Order's gone down the line to open the track all the way. She's comin' under full head of steam. Nobody knows where Buckner's takin' her. He's lookin' for some relative of his'n!"

There was a lot of noise comin' down that track and all of it waren't the noise that a steam-ingine makes by itself. No, that noise was a different noise all right. That noise was right familiar to me. It struck a chord in my mind and made me wonder kinda what happened to them trainmen.

"Can that be Bearfield Buckner?" wondered a woman. "It sounds like him. Well, if it is, he's too late to git Ann Wilkins."

"What?" I yelled. "Is they a gal in this town named Ann Wilkins?"

"They was," she snickered. "She was to marry this Buckner man yesterday, but he never showed up, and when her old beau, Lem Campbell, come along with fifty dollars he'd got some place, she up and married him and they lit out for San Francisco on their honeymoon--Why, what's the matter, young man? You look right green in the face. Maybe it's somethin' you et--"

It weren't nothin' I et. It was the thoughts I was thinkin'. Here I had gone an' ruint Cousin Bearfield's whole future. And outa kindness. Thet's what busted me wide open. I had ruint Cousin Bearfield's future out of kindness. My motives had been of the loftiest, I had tried to kyore an hombre what was loco from goin' locoer yet, and what was my reward? What was my reward? Jest thet moment I looks up and I seen a cloud of smoke a puffin' down the track and they is a roarin' like the roarin' of a herd of catamounts.

"Here she comes around the bend," yelled somebody. "She's burnin' up the track. Listen at that whistle. Jest bustin' it wide open."

But I was already astraddle of Cap'n Kidd and traveling. The man which says I'm scairt of Bearfield is a liar. A Elkins fears neither man, beast nor Buckner. But I seen that Lem Campbell had worked me into getting Bearfield out of his way, and if I waited till Bearfield got there, I'd have to kill him or get killed, and I didn't crave to do neither.

I headed south jest to save Cousin Bearfield's life, and I didn't stop till I was in Durango. Let me tell you the revolution I got mixed up in there was a plumb restful relief after my association with Cousin Bearfield.

THE END

Contents

NO COWHERDERS WANTED

By Robert E. Howard

I hear a gang of buffalo hunters got together recently in a saloon in Dodge City to discuss ways and means of keeping their sculps onto their heads whilst collecting pelts, and purty soon one of 'em riz and said, "You mavericks make me sick. For the last hour you been chawin' wind about the soldiers tryin' to keep us north of the Cimarron, and belly-achin' about the Comanches, Kiowas and Apaches which yearns for our hair. You've took up all that time jawin' about sech triflin' hazards, and plannin' steps to take agen 'em, but you ain't makin' no efforts whatsoever to pertect yoreselves agen the biggest menace they is to the entire buffalo-huntin' clan--which is Breckinridge Elkins!"

That jest show's how easy prejudiced folks is. You'd think I had a grudge agen buffalo hunters, the way they takes to the bresh whenever they sees me coming. And the way they misrepresents what happened at Cordova is plumb disgustful. To hear 'em talk you'd think I was the only man there which committed any vi'lence.

If that's so I'd like to know how all them bullet holes got in the Diamond Bar saloon which I was using for a fort. Who throwed the mayor through that board fence? Who sot fire to Joe Emerson's store, jest to smoke me out? Who started the row in the first place by sticking up insulting signs in public places? They ain't no use in them fellers trying to ack innercent. Any unbiased man which was there, and survived to tell the tale, knows I acted all the way through with as much dignity as a man can ack which is being shot at by forty or fifty wild-eyed buffalo skinners.

I had never even saw a buffalo hunter before, because it was the first time I'd ever been that far East. I was taking a pasear into New Mexico with a cowpoke by the name of Glaze Bannack which I'd met in Arizona. I stopped in Albuquerque and he went on, heading for Dodge City. Well, I warn't in Albuquerque as long as I'd aimed to be, account of going broke quicker'n I expected. I had jest one dollar left after payin' for having three fellers sewed up which had somehow got afoul of my bowie knife after criticizing the Democratic party. I ain't the man to leave my opponents on the public charge.

Well, I pulled out of town and headed for the cow camps on the Pecos, aiming to git me a job. But I hadn't went far till I met a waddy riding in, and he taken a good look at me and Cap'n Kidd, and says: "You must be him. Wouldn't no other man fit the description he gimme."

"Who?" I says.

"Glaze Bannack," says he. "He gimme a letter to give to Breckinridge Elkins."

So I says, "Well, all right, gimme it." So he did, and it read as follers:

Dere Breckinridge:

I am in jail in Panther Springs for nothin all I done was kind of push the deperty sheriff with a little piece of scrap iron could I help it if he fell down and fracktured his skull Breckinridge. But they say I got to pay $Ten dolars fine and I have not got no sech money Breckinridge. But old man Garnett over on Buck Creek owes me ten bucks so you colleck from him and come and pay me out of this hencoop. The food is terrible Breckinridge. Hustle.

Yore misjedged frend.

Glaze Bannack, Eskwire.

Glaze never could stay out of trouble, not being tactful like me, but he was a purty good sort of hombre. So I headed for Buck Creek and collected the money off of Old Man Garnett, which was somewhat reluctant to give up the dough. In fact he bit me severely in the hind laig whilst I was setting on him prying his fingers loose from that there ten spot, and when I rode off down the road with the dinero, he run into his shack and got his buffalo gun and shot at me till I was clean out of sight.

But I ignored his lack of hospitality. I knowed he was too dizzy to shoot straight account of him having accidentally banged his head on a fence post which I happened to have in my hand whilst we was rassling.

I left him waving his gun and howling damnation and destruction, and I was well on the road for Panther Springs before I discovered to my disgust that my shirt was a complete rooin. I considered going back and demanding that Old Man Garnett buy me a new one, account of him being the one which tore it. But he was sech a onreasonable old cuss I decided agen it and rode on to Panther Springs, arriving there shortly after noon.

The first critter I seen was the purtiest I gal I'd saw in a coon's age. She come out of a store and stopped to talk to a young cowpuncher she called Curly. I reined Cap'n Kidd around behind a corn crib so she wouldn't see me in my scare-crow condition. After a while she went on down the street and went into a cabin with a fence around it and a front porch, which showed her folks was wealthy, and I come out from behind the crib and says to the young buck which was smirking after her and combing his hair with the other hand, I says: "Who is that there gal? The one you was jest talkin' to."

"Judith Granger," says he. "Her folks lives over to Sheba, but her old man brung her over here account of all the fellers over there was about to cut each other's throats over her. He's makin' her stay a spell with her Aunt Henrietta, which is a war-hoss if I ever seen one. The boys is so scairt of her they don't dast try to spark Judith. Except me. I persuaded the old mudhen to let me call on Judith and I'm goin' over there for supper."

"That's what you think," I says gently. "Fact is, though, Miss Granger has got a date with me."

"She didn't tell me--" he begun scowling.

"She don't know it herself, yet," I says. "But I'll tell her you was sorry you couldn't show up."

"Why, you--" he says bloodthirsty, and started for his gun, when a feller who'd been watching us from the store door, he hollered: "By golly, if it ain't Breckinridge Elkins!"

"Breckinridge Elkins?" gasped Curly, and he dropped his gun and keeled over with a low gurgle.

"Has he got a weak heart?" I ast the feller which had recognized me, and he said, "Aw, he jest fainted when he realized how clost he come to throwin' a gun on the terror of the Humbolts. Drag him over to the hoss trough, boys, and throw some water on him. Breckinridge, I owns that grocery store there, and yore paw knows me right well. As a special favor to me will you refrain from killin' anybody in my store?"

So I said all right, and then I remembered my shirt was tore too bad to call on a young lady in. I generally has 'em made to order, but they warn't time for that if I was going to eat supper with Miss Judith, so I went into the general store and bought me one. I dunno why they don't make shirts big enough to fit reasonable sized men like me. You'd think nobody but midgets wore shirts. The biggest one in the store warn't only eighteen in the collar, but I didn't figger on buttoning the collar anyway. If I'd tried to button it it would of strangled me.

So I give the feller five dollars and put it on. It fit purty clost, but I believed I could wear it if I didn't have to expand my chest or something. Of course, I had to use some of Glaze's dough to pay for it with but I didn't reckon he'd mind, considering all the trouble I was going to gitting him out of jail.

I rode down the alley behind the jail and come to a barred winder, and said, "Hey!"

Glaze looked out, kinda peaked, like his grub warn't setting well with him, but he brightened up and says, "Hurray! I been on aidge expectin' you. Go on around to the front door, Breck, and pay them coyotes the ten spot and let's go. The grub I been gitten' here would turn a lobo's stummick!"

"Well," I says, "I ain't exactly got the ten bucks, Glaze. I had to have a shirt, because mine got tore, so--"

HE GIVE A YELP LIKE a stricken elk and grabbed the bars convulsively.

"Air you crazy?" he hollered. "You squanders my money on linens and fine raiment whilst I languishes in a prison dungeon?"

"Be ca'm," I advised. "I still got five bucks of yore'n, and one of mine. All I got to do is step down to a gamblin' hall and build it up."

"Build it up!" says he fiercely. "Lissen, blast your hide! Does you know what I've had for breakfast, dinner and supper, ever since I was throwed in here? Beans! Beans! Beans!"

Here he was so overcome by emotion that he choked on the word.

"And they ain't even first-class beans, neither," he said bitterly, when he could talk again. "They're full of grit and wormholes, and I think the Mex cook washes his feet in the pot he cooks 'em in."

"Well," I says, "sech cleanliness is to be encouraged, because I never heard of one before which washed his feet in anything. Don't worry. I'll git in a poker game and win enough to pay yore fine and plenty over."

"Well, git at it," he begged. "Git me out before supper time. I wants a steak with ernyuns so bad I can smell it."

So I headed for the Golden Steer saloon.

They warn't many men in there jest then, but they was a poker game going on, and when I told 'em I craved to set in they looked me over and made room for me. They was a black whiskered cuss which said he was from Cordova which was dealing, and the first thing I noticed, was he was dealing his own hand off of the bottom of the deck. The others didn't seem to see it, but us Bear Creek folks has got eyes like hawks, otherwise we'd never live to git grown.

So I says, "I dunno what the rules is in these parts, but where I come from we almost always deals off of the top of the deck."

"Air you accusin' me of cheatin'?" he demands passionately, fumbling for his weppins and in his agitation dropping three or four extra aces out of his sleeves.

"I wouldn't think of sech a thing," I says. "Probably them marked kyards I see stickin' out of yore boot-tops is merely soovernears."

For some reason this seemed to infuriate him to the p'int of drawing a bowie knife, so I hit him over the head with a brass cuspidor and he fell under the table with a holler groan.

Some fellers run in and looked at his boots sticking out from under the table, and one of 'em said, "Hey! I'm the Justice of the Peace. You can't do that. This is a orderly town."

And another'n said, "I'm the sheriff. If you cain't keep the peace I'll have to arrest you!"

This was too much even for a mild-mannered man like me.

"Shet yore fool heads!" I roared, brandishing my fists. "I come here to pay Glaze Bannack's fine, and git him outa jail, peaceable and orderly, and I'm tryin' to raise the dough like a #$%&*! gentleman! But by golly, if you hyenas pushes me beyond endurance, I'll tear down the cussed jail and snake him out without payin' no blasted fine."

The J.P. turnt white. He says to the sheriff: "Let him alone! I've already bought these here new boots on credit on the strength of them ten bucks we gits from Bannack."

"But--" says the sheriff dubiously, and the J.P. hissed fiercely, "Shet up, you blame fool. I jest now reckernized him. That's Breckinridge Elkins!"

The sheriff turnt pale and swallered his adam's apple and says feebly, "Excuse me--I--uh--I ain't feelin' so good. I guess it's somethin' I et. I think I better ride over to the next county and git me some pills."

But I don't think he was very sick from the way he run after he got outside the saloon. If they had been a jackrabbit ahead of him he would of trompled the gizzard out of it.

Well, they taken the black whiskered gent out from under the table and started pouring water on him, and I seen it was now about supper time so I went over to the cabin where Judith lived.

I WAS MET AT THE DOOR by a iron-jawed female about the size of a ordinary barn, which give me a suspicious look and says "Well, what's you want?"

"I'm lookin' for yore sister, Miss Judith," I says, taking off my Stetson perlitely.

"What you mean, my sister?" says she with a scowl, but a much milder tone. "I'm her aunt."

"You don't mean to tell me!" I says looking plumb astonished. "Why, when I first seen you, I thought you was her herself, and couldn't figger out how nobody but a twin sister could have sech a resemblance. Well, I can see right off that youth and beauty is a family characteristic."

"Go 'long with you, you young scoundrel," says she, smirking, and giving me a nudge with her elbow which would have busted anybody's ribs but mine. "You cain't soft-soap me--come in! I'll call Judith. What's yore name?"

"Breckinridge Elkins, ma'am," I says.

"So!" says she, looking at me with new interest. "I've heard tell of you. But you got a lot more sense than they give you credit for. Oh, Judith!" she called, and the winders rattled when she let her voice go. "You got company."

Judith come in, looking purtier than ever, and when she seen me she batted her eyes and recoiled vi'lently.

"Who--who's that?" she demanded wildly.

"Mister Breckinridge Elkins, of Bear Creek, Nevader," says her aunt. "The only young man I've met in this whole dern town which has got any sense. Well, come on in and set. Supper's on the table. We was jest waitin' for Curly Jacobs," she says to me, "but if the varmint cain't git here on time, he can go hongry."

"He cain't come," I says. "He sent word by me he's sorry."

"Well, I ain't," snorted Judith's aunt. "I give him permission to jest because I figgered even a bodacious flirt like Judith wouldn't cotton to sech a sapsucker, but--"

"Aunt Henrietta!" protested Judith, blushing.

"I cain't abide the sight of sech weaklin's," says Aunt Henrietta, settling herself carefully into a rawhide-bottomed chair which groaned under her weight. "Drag up that bench, Breckinridge. It's the only thing in the house which has a chance of holdin' yore weight outside of the sofie in the front room. Don't argy with me, Judith! I says Curly Jacobs ain't no fit man for a gal like you. Didn't I see him strain his fool back tryin' to lift that there barrel of salt I wanted fotched to the smoke house? I finally had to tote it myself. What makes young men so blame spindlin' these days?"

"Pap blames the Republican party," I says.

"Haw! Haw! Haw!" says she in a guffaw which shook the doors on their hinges and scairt the cat into convulsions. "Young man, you got a great sense of humor. Ain't he, Judith?" says she, cracking a beef bone betwixt her teeth like it was a pecan.

Judith says yes kind of pallid, and all during the meal she eyed me kind of nervous like she was expecting me to go into a war-dance or something. Well, when we was through, and Aunt Henrietta had et enough to keep a tribe of Sioux through a hard winter, she riz up and says, "Now clear out of here whilst I washes the dishes."

"But I must help with 'em," says Judith.

Aunt Henrietta snorted. "What makes you so eager to work all of a sudden? You want yore guest to think you ain't eager for his company? Git out of here."

So she went, but I paused to say kind of doubtful to Aunt Henrietta, "I ain't shore Judith likes me much."

"Don't pay no attention to her whims," says Aunt Henrietta, picking up the water barrel to fill her dish pan. "She's a flirtatious minx. I've took a likin' to you, and if I decide yo're the right man for her, yo're as good as hitched. Nobody couldn't never do nothin' with her but me, but she's learnt who her boss is--after havin' to eat her meals off of the mantel-board a few times. Gwan in and court her and don't be backward!"

So I went on in the front room, and Judith seemed to kind of warm up to me, and ast me a lot of questions about Nevada, and finally she says she's heard me spoke of as a fighting man and hoped I ain't had no trouble in Panther Springs.

I told her no, only I had to hit one black whiskered thug from Cordova over the head with a cuspidor.

AT THAT SHE JUMPED UP like she'd sot on a pin.

"That was my uncle Jabez Granger!" she hollered. "How dast you, you big bully! You ought to be ashamed, a, great big man like you pickin' on a little feller like him which don't weigh a ounce over two hundred and fifteen pounds!"

"Aw, shucks," I said contritely. "I'm sorry Judith."

"Jest as I was beginnin' to like you," she mourned. "Now he'll write to pap and prejudice him agen you. You jest got to go and find him and apologize to him and make friends with him."

"Aw, heck," I said.

But she wouldn't listen to nothing else, so I went out and clumb onto Cap'n Kidd and went back to the Golden Steer, and when I come in everybody crawled under the tables.

"What's the matter with you all?" I says fretfully. "I'm lookin' for Jabez Granger."

"He's left for Cordova," says the barkeep, sticking his head up from behind the bar.

Well, they warn't nothing to do but foller him, so I rode by the jail and Glaze was at the winder, and he says eagerly, "Air you ready to pay me out?"

"Be patient, Glaze," I says. "I ain't got the dough yet, but I'll git it somehow as soon as I git back from Cordova."

"What?" he shrieked.

"Be ca'm like me," I advised. "You don't see me gittin' all het up, do you? I got to go catch Judith Granger's Uncle Jabez and apolergize to the old illegitimate for bustin' his conk with a spittoon. I be back tomorrer or the next day at the most."

Well, his langwidge was scandalous, considering all the trouble I was going to jest to git him out of jail, but I refused to take offense. I headed back for the Granger cabin and Judith was on the front porch.

I didn't see Aunt Henrietta, she was back in the kitchen washing dishes and singing: "They've laid Jesse James in his grave!" in a voice which loosened the shingles on the roof. So I told Judith where I was going and ast her to take some pies and cakes and things to the jail for Glaze, account of the beans was rooining his stummick, and she said she would. So I pulled stakes for Cordova.

It laid quite a ways to the east, and I figgered to catch up with Uncle Jabez before he got there, but he had a long start and was on a mighty good hoss, I reckon. Anyway, Cap'n Kidd got one of his hellfire streaks and insisted on stopping every few miles to buck all over the landscape, till I finally got sick of his muleishness and busted him over the head with my pistol. By this time we'd lost so much time I never overtaken Uncle Jabez at all and it was gitting daylight before I come in sight of Cordova.

Well, about sun-up I come onto a old feller and his wife in a ramshackle wagon drawed by a couple of skinny mules with a hound dawg. One wheel had run off into a sink hole and the mules so pore and good-for-nothing they couldn't pull it out, so I got off and laid hold on the wagon, and the old man said, "Wait a minute, young feller, whilst me and the old lady gits out to lighten the load."

"What for?" I ast. "Set still."

So I h'isted the wheel out, but if it had been stuck any tighter I might of had to use both hands.

"By golly!" says the old man. "I'd of swore nobody but Breckinridge Elkins could do that!"

"Well, I'm him," I says, and they both looked at me with reverence, and I ast 'em was they going to Panther Springs.

"We aim to," says the old woman, kind of hopeless. "One place is as good as another'n to old people which has been robbed out of their life's savin's."

"You all been robbed?" I ast, shocked.

"WELL," SAYS THE OLD man, "I ain't in the habit of burdenin' strangers with my woes, but as a matter of fact, we has. My name's Hopkins. I had a ranch down on the Pecos till the drouth wiped me out and we moved to Panther Springs with what little we saved from the wreck. In a ill-advised moment I started speculatin' on buffler-hides. I put in all my cash buyin' a load over on the Llano Estacado which I aimed to freight to Santa Fe and sell at a fat profit--I happen to know they're fetchin' a higher price there now than they air in Dodge City--and last night the whole blame cargo disappeared into thin air, as it were.

"We was stoppin' at Cordova for the night, and the old lady was sleepin' in the hotel and I was camped at the aidge of town with the wagon, and sometime durin' the night somebody snuck up and hit me over the head. When I come to this mornin' hides, wagon and team was all gone, and no trace. When I told the city marshal he jest laughed in my face and ast me how I'd expect him to track down a load of buffalo hides in a town which was full of 'em. Dang him! They was packed and corded neat with my old brand, the Circle A, marked on 'em in red paint.

"Joe Emerson, which owns the saloon and most all the town, taken a mortgage on our little shack in Panther Springs and loaned me enough money to buy this measly team and wagon. If we can git back to Panther Springs maybe I can git enough freightin' to do so we can kind of live, anyway."

"Well," I said, much moved by the story, "I'm goin' to Cordova, and I'll see if I cain't find yore hides."

"Thankee kindly, Breckinridge," says he. "But I got a idee them hides is already far on their way to Dodge City. Well, I hopes you has better luck in Cordova than we did."

So they driv on west and I rode east, and got to Cordova about a hour after sun-up. As I come into the aidge of town I seen a sign-board about the size of a door stuck up which says on it, in big letters, "No cowherders allowed in Cordova."

"What the hell does that mean?" I demanded wrathfully of a feller which had stopped by it to light him a cigaret. And he says, "Jest what it says! Cordova's full of buffler hunters in for a spree and they don't like cowboys. Big as you be, I'd advise you to light a shuck for somewhere else. Bull Croghan put that sign up, and you ought to seen what happened to the last puncher which ignored it!"

"#$%&*!" I says in a voice which shook the beans out of the mesquite trees for miles around. And so saying I pulled up the sign and headed for main street with it in my hand. I am as peaceful and mild-mannered a critter as you could hope to meet, but even with me a man can go too damned far. This here's a free country and no derned hairy-necked buffalo-skinner can draw boundary lines for us cowpunchers and git away with it--not whilst I can pull a trigger.

They was very few people on the street and sech as was looked at me surprized-like.

"Where the hell is them fool buffalo hunters?" I roared, and a feller says, "They're all gone to the race track east of town to race hosses, except Bull Croghan, which is takin' hisself a dram in the Diamond Bar."

So I lit and stalked into the Diamond Bar with my spurs ajingling and my disposition gitting thornier every second. They was a big hairy critter in buckskins and moccasins standing at the bar drinking whiskey and talking to the bar-keep and a flashy-dressed gent with slick hair and a diamond hoss-shoe stickpin. They all turnt and gaped at me, and the hunter reched for his belt where he was wearing the longest knife I ever seen.

"Who air you?" he gasped.

"A cowman!" I roared, brandishing the sign. "Air you Bull Croghan?"

"Yes," says he. "What about it?"

So I busted the sign-board over his head and he fell onto the floor yelling bloody murder and trying to draw his knife. The board was splintered, but the stake it had been fastened to was a purty good-sized post, so I took and beat him over the head with it till the bartender tried to shoot me with a sawed-off shotgun.

I grabbed the barrel and the charge jest busted a shelf-load of whiskey bottles and I throwed the shotgun through a nearby winder. As I neglected to git the bartender loose from it first, it appears he went along with it. Anyway, he picked hisself up off of the ground, bleeding freely, and headed east down the street shrieking, "Help! Murder! A cowboy is killin' Croghan and Emerson!"

WHICH WAS A LIE, BECAUSE Croghan had crawled out the front door on his all-fours whilst I was tending to the bar-keep, and if Emerson had showed any jedgment he wouldn't of got his sculp laid open to the bone. How did I know he was jest trying to hide behind the bar? I thought he was going for a gun he had hid back there. As soon as I realized the truth I dropped what was left of the bung starter and commenced pouring water on Emerson, and purty soon he sot up and looked around wild-eyed with blood and water dripping off of his head.

"What happened?" he gurgled.

"Nothin' to git excited about," I assured him knocking the neck off of a bottle of whiskey. "I'm lookin' for a Gent named Jabez Granger."

It was at this moment that the city marshal opened fire on me through the back door. He grazed my neck with his first slug and would probably of hit me with the next if I hadn't shot the gun out of his hand. He then run off down the alley. I pursued him and catched him when he looked back over his shoulder and hit a garbage can.

"I'm a officer of the law!" he howled, trying to git his neck out from under my foot so as he could draw his bowie. "Don't you dast assault no officer of the law."

"I ain't," I snarled, kicking the knife out of his hand, and kind of casually swiping my spur acrost his whiskers. "But a officer which lets a old man git robbed of his buffalo hides, and then laughs in his face, ain't deservin' to be no officer. Gimme that badge! I demotes you to a private citizen!"

I then hung him onto a nearby hen-roost by the seat of his britches and went back up the alley, ignoring his impassioned profanity. I didn't go in at the back door of the saloon, because I figgered Joe Emerson might be laying to shoot me as I come in. So I went around the saloon to the front and run smack onto a mob of buffalo hunters which had evidently been summoned from the race track by the bar-keep. They had Bull Croghan at the hoss trough and was trying to wash the blood off of him, and they was all yelling and cussing so loud they didn't see me at first.

"Air we to be defied in our own lair by a #$%&*! cowsheperd?" howled Croghan. "Scatter and comb the town for him! He's hidin' down some back alley, like as not. We'll hang him in front of the Diamond Bar and stick his sculp onto a pole as a warnin' to all his breed! Jest lemme lay eyes onto him again--"

"Well, all you got to do is turn around," I says. And they all whirled so quick they dropped Croghan into the hoss trough. They gaped at me with their mouths open for a second. Croghan riz out of the water snorting and spluttering, and yelled, "Well, what you waitin' on? Grab him!"

It was in trying to obey his instructions that three of 'em got their skulls fractured, and whilst the others was stumbling and falling over 'em, I backed into the saloon and pulled my six-shooters and issued a defiance to the world at large and buffalo hunters in particular.

They run for cover behind hitch racks and troughs and porches and fences, and a feller in a plug hat come out and says, "Gentlemen! Le's don't have no bloodshed within the city limits! As mayor of this fair city, I--"

It was at this instant that Croghan picked him up and throwed him through a board fence into a cabbage patch where he lay till somebody revived him a few hours later.

The hunters then all started shooting at me with .50 caliber Sharps' buffalo rifles. Emerson, which was hiding behind a Schlitz sign-board, hollered something amazing account of the holes which was being knocked in the roof and walls. The big sign in front was shot to splinters, and the mirror behind the bar was riddled, and all the bottles on the shelves and the hanging lamps was busted. It's plumb astonishing the damage a bushel or so of them big slugs can do to a saloon.

They went right through the walls. If I hadn't kept moving all the time I'd of been shot to rags, and I did git several bullets through my clothes and three or four grazed some hide off. But even so I had the aidge, because they couldn't see me only for glimpses now and then through the winders and was shooting more or less blind because I had 'em all spotted and slung lead so fast and clost they didn't dast show theirselves long enough to take good aim.

BUT MY CATRIDGES BEGUN to run short so I made a sally out into the alley jest as one of 'em was trying to sneak in the back door. I hear tell he is very bitter toward me about his teeth, but I like to know how he expects to git kicked in the mouth without losing some fangs.

So I jumped over his writhing carcase and run down the alley, winging three or four as I went and collecting a pistol ball in my hind laig. They was hiding behind board fences on each side of the alley but them boards wouldn't stop a .45 slug. They all shot at me, but they misjedged my speed. I move a lot faster than most folks expect.

Anyway, I was out of the alley before they could git their wits back. And as I went past the hitch rack where Cap'n Kidd was champing and snorting to git into the fight, I grabbed my Winchester .45-90 off of the saddle, and run acrost the street. The hunters which was still shooting at the front of the Diamond Bar seen me and that's when I got my spurs shot off, but I ducked into Emerson's General Store whilst the clerks all run shrieking out the back way.

As for that misguided hunter which tried to confiscate Cap'n Kidd, I ain't to blame for what happened to him. They're going around now saying I trained Cap'n Kidd special to jump onto a buffalo hunter with all four feet after kicking him through a corral fence. That's a lie. I didn't have to train him. He thought of it hisself. The idjit which tried to take him ought to be thankful he was able to walk with crutches inside of ten months.

Well, I was now on the same side of the street as the hunters was, so as soon as I started shooting at 'em from the store winders they run acrost the street and taken refuge in a dance hall right acrost from the store and started shooting back at me, and Joe Emerson hollered louder'n ever, because he owned the dance hall too. All the citizens of the town had bolted into the hills long ago, and left us to fight it out.

Well, I piled sides of pork and barrels of pickles and bolts of calico in the winders, and shot over 'em, and I built my barricades so solid even them buffalo guns couldn't shoot through 'em. They was plenty of Colt and Winchester ammunition in the store, and whiskey, so I knowed I could hold the fort indefinite.

Them hunters could tell they warn't doing no damage so purty soon I heard Croghan bellering, "Go git that cannon the soldiers loaned the folks to fight the Apaches with. It's over behind the city hall. Bring it in at the back door. We'll blast him out of his fort, by golly!"

"You'll ruin my store!" screamed Emerson.

"I'll rooin' your face if you don't shet up," opined Croghan. "Gwan!"

Well, they kept shooting and so did I and I must of hit some of 'em, jedging from the blood-curdling yells that went up from time to time. Then a most remarkable racket of cussing busted out, and from the remarks passed, I gathered that they'd brung the cannon and somehow got it stuck in the back door of the dance hall. The shooting kind of died down whilst they rassled with it and in the lull I heard me a noise out behind the store.

THEY WARN'T NO WINDERS in the back, which is why they hadn't shot at me from that direction. I snuck back and looked through a crack in the door and I seen a feller in the dry gully which run along behind the store, and he had a can of kerosine and some matches and was setting the store on fire.

I jest started to shoot when I recognized Judith Granger's Uncle Jabez. I laid down my Winchester and opened the door soft and easy and pounced out on him, but he let out a squawk and dodged and run down the gully. The shooting acrost the street broke out again, but I give no heed, because I warn't going to let him git away from me again. I run him down the gully about a hundred yards and catched him, and taken his pistol away from him, but he got hold of a rock which he hammered me on the head with till I nigh lost patience with him.

But I didn't want to injure him account of Judith, so I merely kicked him in the belly and then throwed him before he could git his breath back, and sot on him, and says, "Blast yore hide, I apolergizes for lammin' you with that there cuspidor. Does you accept my apology, you pot-bellied hoss-thief?"

"Never!" says he rampacious. "A Granger never forgits!"

So I taken him by the ears and beat his head agen a rock till he gasps, "Let up! I accepts yore apology, you #$%&*!"

"All right." I says, arising and dusting my hands, "and if you ever goes back on yore word, I'll hang yore mangy hide to the--"

It was at that moment that Emerson's General Store blew up with a ear-splitting bang.

"What the hell?" shrieked Uncle Jabez, staggering, as the air was filled with fragments of groceries and pieces of flying timbers.

"Aw," I said disgustedly, "I reckon a stray bullet hit a barrel of gunpowder. I aimed to move them barrels out of the line of fire, but kind of forgot about it--"

But Uncle Jabez had bit the dust. I hear tell he claims I hit him onexpected with a wagon pole. I didn't do no sech thing. It was a section of the porch roof which fell on him, and if he'd been watching, and ducked like I did, it wouldn't of hit him.

I clumb out of the gully and found myself opposite from the Diamond Bar. Bull Croghan and the hunters was pouring out of the dance hall whooping and yelling, and Joe Emerson was tearing his hair and howling like a timber wolf with the belly ache because his store was blowed up and his saloon was shot all to pieces.

But nobody paid no attention to him. They went surging acrost the street and nobody seen me when I crossed it from the other side and went into the alley that run behind the saloon. I run on down it till I got to the dance hall, and sure enough, the cannon was stuck in the back door. It warn't wide enough for the wheels to git through.

I HEARD CROGHAN ROARING acrost the street, "Poke into the debray, boys! Elkins' remains must be here somewheres, unless he was plumb dissolved! That--!"

Crash!

They was a splintering of planks, and somebody yelled, "Hey! Croghan's fell into a well or somethin'!"

I heard Joe Emerson shriek, "Dammitt, stay away from there! Don't--"

I tore away a section of the wall and got the cannon loose and run it up to the front door of the dance hall and looked out. Them hunters was all ganged up with their backs to the dance hall, all bent over whilst they was apparently trying to pull Croghan out of some hole he'd fell into headfirst. His cussing sounded kinda muffled. Joe Emerson was having a fit at the aidge of the crowd.

Well, they'd loaded that there cannon with nails and spikes and lead slugs and carpet tacks and sech like, but I put in a double handful of beer bottle caps jest for good measure, and touched her off. It made a noise like a thunder clap and the recoil knocked me about seventeen foot, but you should of heard the yell them hunters let out when that hurricane of scrap iron hit 'em in the seat of the britches. It was amazing!

To my disgust, though, it didn't kill none of 'em. Seems like the charge was too heavy for the powder, so all it done was knock 'em off their feet and tear the britches off of 'em. However, it swept the ground clean of 'em like a broom, and left 'em all standing on their necks in the gully behind where the store had been, except Croghan whose feet I still perceived sticking up out of the ruins.

Before they could recover their wits, if they ever had any, I run acrost the street and started beating 'em over the head with a pillar I tore off of the saloon porch. Some sech as was able ariz and fled howling into the desert. I hear tell some of 'em didn't stop till they got to Dodge City, having run right through a Kiowa war-party and scairt them pore Injuns till they turnt white.

Well, I laid holt of Croghan's laigs and hauled him out of the place he had fell into, which seemed to be a kind of cellar which had been under the floor of the store. Croghan's conversation didn't noways make sense, and every time I let go of him he fell on his neck.

So I abandoned him in disgust and looked down into the cellar to see what was in it that Emerson should of took so much to keep it hid. Well, it was plumb full of buffalo hides, all corded into neat bundles! At that Emerson started to run, but I grabbed him, and reached down with the other hand and hauled a bundle out. It was marked with a red Circle A brand.

"So!" I says to Emerson, impulsively busting him in the snout. "You stole old man Hopkins' hides yoreself! Perjuice that mortgage! Where's the old man's wagon and team?"

"I got 'em hid in my livery stable," he moaned.

"Go hitch 'em up and bring 'em here," I says. "And if you tries to run off, I'll track you down and sculp you alive!"

I went and got Cap'n Kidd and watered him. When I got back, Emerson come up with the wagon and team, so I told him to load on them hides.

"I'm a ruined man!" sniveled he. "I ain't able to load no hides."

"The exercize'll do you good," I assured him, kicking the seat loose from his pants, so he give a harassed howl and went to work. About this time Croghan sot up and gaped at me weirdly.

"It all comes back to me!" he gurgled. "We was going to run Breckinridge Elkins out of town!"

He then fell back and went into shrieks of hysterical laughter which was most hair raising to hear.

"The wagon's loaded," panted Joe Emerson. "Take it and git out and be quick!"

"Well, let this be a lesson to you," I says, ignoring his hostile attitude. "Honesty's always the best policy!"

I then hit him over the head with a wagon spoke and clucked to the hosses and we headed for Panther Springs.

Old man Hopkins' mules had give out half way to Panther Springs. Him and the old lady was camped there when I drove up. I never seen folks so happy in my life as they was when I handed the team, wagon, hides and mortgage over to 'em. They both cried and the old lady kissed me, and the old man hugged me, and I thought I'd plumb die of embarrassment before I could git away. But I did finally, and headed for Panther Springs again, because I still had to raise the dough to git Glaze out of jail.

I GOT THERE ABOUT SUN-UP and headed straight for Judith's cabin to tell her I'd made friends with Uncle Jabez. Aunt Henrietta was cleaning a carpet on the front porch and looking mad. When I come up she stared at me and said, "Good land, Breckinridge, what happened to you?"

"Aw, nothin'," I says. "Jest a argyment with them fool buffalo hunters over to Cordova. They'd cleaned a old gent and his old lady of their buffalo hides, to say nothin' of their hosses and wagon. So I rid on to see what I could do about it. Them hairy-necked hunters didn't believe me when I said I wanted them hides, so I had to persuade 'em a leetle. On'y thing is they is sayin' now that I was to blame fer the hull affair. I apologized to Judith's uncle, too. Had to chase him from here to Cordova. Where's Judith?"

"Gone!" she says, stabbing her broom at the floor so vicious she broke the handle off. "When she taken them pies and cakes to yore fool friend down to the jail house, she taken a shine to him at first sight. So she borrored the money from me to pay his fine--said she wanted a new dress to look nice in for you, the deceitful hussy! If I'd knowed what she wanted it for she wouldn't of got it--she'd of got somethin' acrost my knee! But she paid him out of the jug, and--"

"And what happened then?" I says wildly.

"She left me a note," snarled Aunt Henrietta, giving the carpet a whack that tore it into six pieces. "She said anyway she was afeared if she didn't marry him I'd make her marry you. She must of sent you off on that wild goose chase a purpose. Then she met him, and--well, they snuck out and got married and air now on their way to Denver for their honeymoon--Hey, what's the matter? Air you sick?"

"I be," I gurgled. "The ingratitude of mankind cuts me to the gizzard! After all I'd did for Glaze Bannack! Well, by golly, this is lesson to me! I bet I don't never work my fingers to the quick gittin' another ranny out of jail!"

THE END

Contents

PILGRIMS TO THE PECOS

By Robert E. Howard

That there wagon rolled up the trail and stopped in front of our cabin one morning jest after sun-up. We all come out to see who it was, because strangers ain't common on Bear Creek--and not very often welcome, neither. They was a long, hungry-looking old coot driving, and four or five growed boys sticking their heads out.

"Good mornin', folks," said the old coot, taking off his hat. "My name is Joshua Richardson. I'm headin' a wagon-train of immigrants which is lookin' for a place to settle. The rest of 'em's camped three miles back down the trail. Everybody we met in these here Humbolt Mountings told us we'd hev to see Mister Roaring Bill Elkins about settlin' here-abouts. Be you him?"

"I'm Bill Elkins," says pap suspiciously.

"Well, Mister Elkins," says Old Man Richardson, wagging his chin-whiskers, "we'd admire it powerful if you folks would let us people settle somewheres about."

"Hmmmm!" says pap, pulling his beard. "Whar you all from?"

"Kansas," says Old Man Richardson.

"Ouachita," says pap, "git my shotgun."

"Don't you do no sech thing, Ouachie," says maw. "Don't be stubborn, Willyum. The war's been over for years."

"That's what I say," hastily spoke up Old Man Richardson. "Let bygones be bygones, I says!"

"What," says pap ominously, "is yore honest opinion of General Sterlin' Price?"

"One of nature's noblemen!" declares Old Man Richardson earnestly.

"Hmmmmm!" says pap. "You seem to have considerable tact and hoss-sense for a Red-laig. But they hain't no more room on Bear Creek fer no more settlers, even if they was Democrats. They's nine er ten families now within a rech of a hunnert square miles, and I don't believe in over-crowdin' a country."

"But we're plumb tuckered out!" wailed Old Man Richardson. "And nowheres to go! We hev been driv from pillar to post, by settlers which got here ahead of us and grabbed all the best land. They claims it whether they got any legal rights or not."

"Legal rights be damned," snorted pap. "Shotgun rights is what goes in this country. But I know jest the place fer you. It's ten er fifteen days' travel from here, in Arizony. It's called Bowie Knife Canyon, and hit's jest right fer farmin' people, which I jedge you all be."

"We be," says Old Man Richardson. "But how we goin' to git there?"

"My son Breckinridge will be plumb delighted to guide you there," says pap. "Won't you, Breckinridge?"

"No, I won't," I said. "Why the tarnation have I got to be picked on to ride herd on a passle of tenderfooted mavericks--"

"He'll git you there safe," says pap, ignoring my remarks. "He dotes on lendin' folks a helpin' hand, don't you, Breckinridge?"

Seeing the futility of argyment, I merely snarled and went to saddle Cap'n Kidd. I noticed Old Man Richardson and his boys looking at me in a very pecooliar manner all the time, and when I come out on Cap'n Kidd, him snorting and bucking and kicking the rails out of the corral like he always does, they turnt kind of pale and Old Man Richardson said: "I wouldn't

want to impose on yore son, Mister Elkins. After all, we wasn't intendin' to go to that there canyon, in the first place--"

"I'm guidin' you to Bowie Knife Canyon!" I roared. "Maybe you warn't goin' there before I saddled my hoss, but you air now! C'm'on."

I then cut loose under the mules' feet with my .45s to kind of put some ginger in the critters, and they brayed and sot off down the trail jest hitting the high places with Old Man Richardson hanging onto the lines and bouncing all over the seat and his sons rolling in the wagon-bed.

WE COME INTO CAMP full tilt, and some of the men grabbed their guns and the women hollered and jerked up their kids, and one feller was so excited he fell into a big pot of beans which was simmering over a fire and squalled out that the Injuns was trying to burn him alive.

Old Man Richardson had his feet braced again the front-gate, pulling back on the lines as hard as he could and yelling bloody murder, but the mules had the bits betwixt their teeth. So I rode to their heads and grabbed 'em by the bridles and throwed 'em back onto their haunches, and Old Man Richardson ought to of knew the stop would be sudden. T'warn't my fault he done a dive off of the seat and hit on the wagon-tongue on his head. And it warn't my fault neither that one of the mules kicked him and t'other'n bit him before I could ontangle him from amongst them. Mules is mean critters howsoever you take 'em.

Everybody hollered amazing, and he riz up and mopped the blood offa his face and waved his arms and hollered: "Ca'm down, everybody! This hain't nawthin' to git excited about. This gent is Mister Breckinridge Elkins, which has kindly agreed to guide us to a land of milk and honey down in Arizony."

They received the news without enthusiasm. They was about fifty of 'em, mostly women, chillern, and half-grown young 'uns. They warn't more'n a dozen fit fighting men in the train. They all looked like they'd been on the trail a long time. And they was all some kin to Old Man Richardson--sons and daughters, and grandchillern, and nieces and nephews, and their husbands and wives, and sech like. They was one real purty gal, the old man's youngest daughter Betty, who warn't yet married.

They'd jest et breakfast and was hitched up when we arrove, so we pulled out without no more delay. I rode along of Old Man Richardson's wagon, which went ahead with the others strung out behind, and he says to me: "If this here Bowie Knife Canyon is sech a remarkable place, why ain't it already been settled?"

"Aw, they was a settlement there," I said, "but the Apaches kilt some, and Mexicans bandits kilt some, and about three years ago the survivors got to fightin' amongst theirselves and jest kind of kilt each other off."

He yanked his beard nervously and said: "I dunno! I dunno! Maybe we had ought to hunt a more peaceful spot than that there sounds like."

"You won't find no peaceful spots west of the Pecos," I assured him. "Say no more about it. I've made up our minds that Bowie Knife Canyon is the place for you all, and we're goin' there!"

"I wouldn't think of argyin' the p'int," he assured me hastily. "What towns does we pass on our way."

"Jest one," I said. "War Smoke, right on the Arizona line. Tell yore folks to keep out of it. It's a hangout for every kind of a outlaw. I jedge yore boys ain't handy enough with weppins to mix in sech company."

"We don't want no trouble," says he. "I'll tell 'em."

SO WE ROLLED ALONG, and the journey was purty uneventful except for the usual mishaps which generally happens to tenderfeet. But we progressed, until we was within striking distance of the Arizona border. And there we hit a snag. The rear wagon bogged in a creek we had to cross a few miles north of the line. They'd been a head rise, and the wagons churned the mud so the last one stuck fast. It was getting on toward sun-down, and I told the others to go on and make camp a mile west of War Smoke, and me and the folks in the wagon would foller when we got it out.

But that warn't easy. It was mired clean to the hubs, and the mules was up to their bellies. We pried and heaved and hauled, and night was coming on, and finally I said: "If I could git them cussed mules out of my way, I might accomplish somethin'."

So we unhitched 'em from the wagon, but they was stuck too, and I had to wade out beside 'em and lift 'em out of the mud one by one and tote 'em to the bank. A mule is a helpless critter. But then, with them out of the way, I laid hold of the tongue and hauled the wagon out of the creek in short order. Them Kansas people sure did look surprized, I dunno why.

Time we'd scraped the mud offa the wagon and us, and hitched up the mules again, it was night, and so it was long after dark when we come up to the camp the rest of the train had made in the place I told 'em. Old Man Richardson come up to me looking worried, and he says: "Mister Elkins, some of the boys went into that there town in spite of what I told 'em."

"Don't worry," I says. "I'll go git 'em."

I clumb on Cap'n Kidd without stopping to eat supper, and rode over to War Smoke, and tied my hoss outside the only saloon they was there. It was a small town, and awful hard looking. As I went into the saloon I seen the four Richardson boys, and they was surrounded by a gang of cut-throats and outlaws. They was a Mexican there, too, a tall, slim cuss, with a thin black mustash, and gilt braid onto his jacket.

"So you theenk you settle in Bowie Knife Canyon, eh?" he says, and one of the boys said: "Well, that's what we was aimin' to do."

"I theenk not," he said, grinning like a cougar, and I seen his hands steal to the ivory-handled guns at his hips. "You never heard of Senor Gonzeles Zamora? No? Well, he is a beeg hombre in thees country, and he has use for thees canyon in hees business."

"Start the fireworks whenever yo're ready, Gomez," muttered a white desperado. "We're backin' yore play."

The Richardson boys didn't know what the deal was about, but they seen they was up agen real trouble, and they turnt pale and looked around like trapped critters, seeing nothing but hostile faces and hands gripping guns.

"Who tell you you could settle thees canyon?" ast Gomez. "Who breeng you here? Somebody from Kansas? Yes? No?"

"No," I said, shouldering my way through the crowd. "My folks come from Texas. My granddaddy was at San Jacinto. You remember that?"

His hands fell away from his guns and his brown hide turnt ashy. The rest of them renegades give back, muttering: "Look out, boys! It's Breckinridge Elkins!"

They all suddenly found they had business at the bar, or playing cards, or something, and Gomez found hisself standing alone. He licked his lips and looked sick, but he tried to keep up his bluff.

"You maybe no like what I say about Senor Zamora?" says he. "But ees truth. If I tell him gringoes come to Bowie Knife Canyon, he get very mad!"

"Well, suppose you go tell him now," I said, and so as to give him a good start, I picked him up and throwed him through the nearest winder.

He picked hisself up and staggered away, streaming blood and Mex profanity, and them in the saloon maintained a kind of pallid silence. I hitched my guns forard, and said to the escaped convict which was tending bar, I says: "You don't want me to pay for that winder, do you?"

"Oh, no!" says he, polishing away with his rag at a spittoon he must of thought was a beer mug. "Oh, no, no, no, no! We needed that winder busted fer the ventilation!"

"Then everybody's satisfied," I suggested, and all the hoss-thieves and stagecoach bandits in the saloon give me a hearty agreement.

"That's fine," I says. "Peace is what I aim to have, if I have to lick every--in the joint to git it. You boys git back to the camp."

They was glad to do so, but I lingered at the bar, and bought a drink for a train-robber I'd knowed at Chawed Ear onst, and I said: "Jest who is this cussed Zamora that Mex was spielin' about?"

"I dunno," says he. "I never heard of him before."

"I wouldn't say you was lyin'," I said tolerantly. "Yo're jest sufferin' from loss of memory. Frequently cases like that is cured and their memory restored by a severe shock or jolt like a lick onto the head. Now then, if I was to take my six-shooter butt and drive yore head through that whiskey barrel with it, I bet it'd restore yore memory right sudden."

"Hold on!" says he in a hurry. "I jest remembered that Zamora is the boss of a gang of Mexicans which claims Bowie Knife Canyon. He deals in hosses."

"You mean he steals hosses," I says, and he says: "I ain't argyin'. Anyway, the canyon is very convenient for his business, and if you dump them immigrants in his front yard, he'll be very much put out."

"He sure will," I agreed. "As quick as I can git my hands onto him."

I finished my drink and strode to the door and turnt suddenly with a gun in each hand. The nine or ten fellers which had drawed their guns aiming to shoot me in the back as I went through the door, they dropped their weppins and throwed up their hands and yelled: "Don't shoot!" So I jest shot the lights out, and then went out and got onto Cap'n Kidd whilst them idjits was hollering and falling over each other in the dark, and rode out of War Smoke, casually shattering a few winder lights along the street as I went.

When I got back to camp the boys had already got there, and the whole wagon train was holding their weppins and scairt most to death.

"I'm mighty relieved to see you back safe, Mister Elkins," says Old Man Richardson. "We heard the shootin' and was afeared them bullies had kilt you. Le's hitch up and pull out right now!"

Them tenderfoots is beyond my comprehension. They'd of all pulled out in the dark if I'd let 'em, and I believe most of 'em stayed awake all night, expecting to be butchered in their sleep. I didn't say nothing to them about Zamora. The boys hadn't understood what Gomez was talking about, and they warn't no use getting 'em worse scairt than what they generally was.

WELL, WE PULLED OUT before daylight, because I aimed to rech the canyon without another stop. We kept rolling and got there purty late that night. It warn't really no canyon at all, but a whopping big valley, well timbered, and mighty good water and grass. It was a perfect place for a settlement, as I p'inted out, but tenderfoots is powerful pecooliar. I happened to pick our camp site that night on the spot where the Apaches wiped out a mule-train of Mexicans six years before, and it was too dark to see the bones scattered around till next morning. Old Man Richardson was using what he thought was a round rock for a piller, and when he woke up the next morning and found he'd been sleeping with his head onto a human skull he like to throwed a fit.

And when I wanted to stop for the noonday meal in that there grove where the settlers hanged them seven cattle-rustlers three years before, them folks got the willies when they seen some of the ropes still sticking onto the limbs, and wouldn't on no account eat their dinner there. You got no idee what pecooliar folks them immigrants is till you've saw some.

Well, we stopped a few miles further on, in another grove in the midst of a wide rolling country with plenty of trees and tall grass, and I didn't tell 'em that was where them outlaws murdered the three Grissom boys in their sleep. Old Man Richardson said it looked like as good a place as any to locate the settlement. But I told him we was going to look over the whole derned valley before we chosed a spot. He kind of wilted and said at least for God's sake let 'em rest a few days.

I never seen folks which tired out so easy, but I said all right, and we camped there that night. I hadn't saw no signs of Zamora's gang since we come into the valley, and thought likely they was all off stealing hosses somewhere. Not that it made any difference.

Early next morning Ned and Joe, the old man's boys, they wanted to look for deer, and I told 'em not to go more'n a mile from camp, and be keerful, and they said they would, and sot out to the south.

I went back of the camp a mile or so to the creek where Jim Dornley ambushed Tom Harrigan four years before, and taken me a swim. I stayed longer'n I intended to, it was sech a relief to get away from them helpless tenderfoots for a while, and when I rode back into camp, I seen Ned approaching with a stranger--a young white man, which carried hisself with a air of great importance.

"Hey, pap!" hollered young Ned as they dismounted. "Where's Mister Elkins? This feller says we can't stay in Bowie Knife Canyon!"

"Who're you?" I demanded, emerging from behind a wagon, and the stranger's eyes bugged out as he seen me.

"My name's George Warren," says he. "A wagon train of us just came into the valley from the east yesterday. We're from Illinois."

"And by what right does you order people outa this canyon?" I ast.

"We got the fightin'est man in the world guidin' us," says he. "I thought he was the biggest man in the world till I seen you. But he ain't to be fooled with. When he heard they was another train in the valley, he sent me to tell you to git. You better, too, if you got any sense!"

"We don't want no trouble!" quavered Old Man Richardson.

"You got a nerve!" I snorted, and I pulled George Warren's hat down so the brim come off and hung around his neck like a collar, and turnt him around and lifted him off the ground with a boot in the pants, and then throwed him bodily onto his hoss. "Go back and tell yore champeen that Bowie Knife Canyon belongs to us!" I roared, slinging a few bullets around his hoss' feet. "And we gives him one hour to hitch up and clear out!"

"I'll git even for this!" wept George Warren, as he streaked it for his home range. "You'll be sorry, you big polecat! Jest wait'll I tell Mister--" I couldn't catch what else he said.

"Now I bet he's mad," says Old Man Richardson. "We better go. After all--"

"Shet up!" I roared. "This here valley's our'n, and I intends to defend our rights to the last drop of yore blood! Hitch them mules and swing the wagons in a circle! Pile yore saddles and plunder betwixt the wheels. I got a idee you all fights better behind breastworks. Did you see their camp, Ned?"

"Naw," says he, "but George Warren said it lies about three miles east of our'n. Me and Joe got separated and I was swingin' east around the south end of that ridge over there, when I met this George Warren. He said he was out lookin' for a hoss before sun-up and seen our camp and went back and told their guide, and he sent him over to tell us to git out."

"I'm worried about Joe," said Old Man Richardson. "He ain't come back."

"I'll go look for him," I said. "I'll also scout their camp, and if the odds ain't more'n ten to one, we don't wait for 'em to attack. We goes over and wipes 'em out pronto. Then we hangs their fool sculps to our wagon bows as a warnin' to other sech scoundrels."

Old Man Richardson turnt pale and his knees knocked together, but I told him sternly to get to work swinging them wagons, and clumb onto Cap'n Kidd and lit out.

REASON I HADN'T SAW the smoke of the Illinois camp was on account of a thick-timbered ridge which lay east of our camp. I swung around the south end of that ridge and headed east, and I'd gone maybe a mile and a half when I seen a man riding toward me.

When he seen me he come lickety-split, and I could see the sun shining on his Winchester barrel. I cocked my .45-90 and rode toward him and we met in the middle of a open flat. And suddenly we both lowered our weppins and pulled up, breast to breast, glaring at each other.

"Breckinridge Elkins!" says he.

"Cousin Bearfield Buckner!" says I. "Air you the man which sent that unlicked cub of a George Warren to bring me a defiance?"

"Who else?" he snarled. He always had a awful temper.

"Well," I says, "this here is our valley. You all got to move on."

"What you mean, move on?" he yelled. "I brung them pore critters all the way from Dodge City, Kansas, where I encountered 'em bein' tormented by some wuthless buffalo hunters which is no longer in the land of the livin'. I've led 'em through fire, flood, hostile Injuns and white renegades. I promised to lead 'em into a land of milk and honey, and I been firm with 'em, even when they weakened theirselves. Even when they begged on bended knees to be allowed to go back to Illinois, I wouldn't hear of it, because, as I told 'em, I knowed what was best for 'em. I had this canyon in mind all the time. And now you tells me to move on!"

Cousin Bearfield rolled an eye and spit on his hand. I jest waited.

"What sort of a reply does you make to my request to go on and leave us in peace?" he goes on. "George Warren come back to camp wearin' his hat brim around his neck and standin' up in the stirrups because he was too sore to set in the saddle. So I set 'em fortifyin' the camp whilst I went forth to reconnoiter. That word I sent you, I now repeats in person. Yo're my blood-kin, but principles comes first!"

"Me, too," I said. "A Nevada Elkins' principles is as loftey as a Texas Buckner's any day. I whupped you a year ago in Cougar Paw--"

"That's a cussed lie!" gnashed he. "You taken a base advantage and lammed me with a oak log when I warn't expectin' it!"

"Be that as it may," says I, "--ignorin' the fack that you had jest beaned me with a rock the size of a water-bucket--the only way to settle this dispute is to fight it out like gents. But we got to determine what weppins to use. The matter's too deep for fists."

"I'd prefer butcher knives in a dark room," says he, "only they ain't no room. If we jest had a couple of sawed-off shotguns, or good double-bitted axes--I tell you, Breck, le's tie our left hands together and work on each other with our bowies."

"Naw," I says, "I got a better idee. We'll back our hosses together, and then ride for the oppersite sides of the flat. When we git there we'll wheel and charge back, shootin' at each other with our Winchesters. Time they're empty we'll be clost enough to use our pistols, and when we've emptied them we'll be clost enough to finish the fight with our bowies."

"Good idee!" agreed Bearfield. "You always was a brainy, cultured sort of a lobo, if you wasn't so damn stubborn. Now, me, I'm reasonable. When I'm wrong, I admit it."

"You ain't never admitted it so far," says I.

"I ain't never been wrong yet!" he roared. "And I'll kyarve the gizzard of the buzzard which says I am! Come on! Le's git goin'."

So we started to gallop to the oppersite sides of the flat when I heard a voice hollering: "Mister Elkins! Mister Elkins!"

"Hold on!" I says. "That's Joe Richardson."

NEXT MINUTE JOE COME tearing out of the bresh from the south on a mustang I hadn't never seen before, with a Mexican saddle and bridle on. He didn't have no hat nor shirt, and his back was criss-crossed with bloody streaks. He likewise had a cut in his sculp which dribbled blood down his face.

"Mexicans!" he panted. "I got separated from Ned and rode further'n I should ought to had. About five miles down the canyon I run into a big gang of Mexicans--about thirty of 'em. One was that feller Gomez. Their leader was a big feller they called Zamora.

"They grabbed me and taken my hoss, and whupped me with their quirts. Zamora said they was goin' to wipe out every white man in the canyon. He said his scouts had brung him news of our camp, and another'n east of our'n, and he aimed to destroy both of 'em at one sweep. Then they all got onto their hosses and headed north, except one man which I believe they left there to kill me before he follered 'em. He hit me with his six-shooter and knocked me down, and then put up his gun and started to cut my throat with his knife. But I wasn't unconscious like he thought, and I grabbed his gun and knocked him down with it, and jumped on his hoss and lit out. As I made for camp I heard you and this gent talkin' loud to each other, and headed this way."

"Which camp was they goin' for first?" I demanded.

"I dunno," he said. "They talked mostly in Spanish I can't understand."

"The duel'll have to wait," I says. "I'm headin' for our camp."

"And me for mine," says Bearfield. "Lissen: le's decide it this way: one that scuppers the most Greasers wins and t'other'n takes his crowd and pulls out!"

"Bueno!" I says, and headed for camp.

The trees was dense. Them bandits could of passed either to the west or the east of us without us seeing 'em. I quickly left Joe, and about a quarter of a mile further on I heard a sudden burst of firing and screaming, and then silence. A little bit later I bust out of the trees into sight of the camp, and I cussed earnestly. Instead of being drawed up in a circle, with the men shooting from between the wheels and holding them bandits off like I expected, them derned wagons was strung out like they was heading back north. The hosses was cut loose from some of 'em, and mules was laying acrost the poles of the others, shot full of lead. Women was screaming and kids was squalling, and I seen young Jack Richardson laying face down in the ashes of the campfire with his head in a puddle of blood.

Old Man Richardson come limping toward me with tears running down his face. "Mexicans!" he blubbered. "They hit us like a harrycane jest a little while ago! They shot Jack down like he was a dog! Three or four of the other boys is got knife slashes or bullet marks or bruises from loaded quirt-ends! As they rode off they yelled they'd come back and kill us all!"

"Why'n't you throw them wagons round like I told you?" I roared.

"We didn't want no fightin'!" he bawled. "We decided to pull out of the valley and find some more peaceful place--"

"And now Jack's dead and yore stock's scattered!" I raged. "Jest because you didn't want to fight! What the hell you ever cross the Pecos for if you didn't aim to fight nobody? Set the boys to gatherin' sech stock as you got left--"

"But them Mexicans taken Betty!" he shrieked, tearing his scanty locks. "Most of 'em headed east, but six or seven grabbed Betty right out of the wagon and rode off south with her, drivin' the hosses they stole from us!"

"Well, git yore weppins and foller me!" I roared. "For Lord's sake forgit they is places where sheriffs and policemen pertecks you, and make up yore minds to fight! I'm goin' after Betty."

I HEADED SOUTH AS HARD as Cap'n Kidd could run. The reason I hadn't met them Mexicans as I rode back from the flat where I met Cousin Bearfield was because they swung around the north end of the ridge when they headed east. I hadn't gone far when I heard a sudden burst of firing, off to the east, and figgered they'd hit the Illinois camp. But I reckoned Bearfield had got there ahead of 'em. Still, it didn't seem like the shooting was far enough off to be at the other camp. But I didn't have no time to study it.

Them gal-thieves had a big start, but it didn't do no good. I hadn't rode over three miles till I heard the stolen hosses running ahead of me, and in a minute I bust out into a open flat and seen six Mexicans driving them critters at full speed, and one of 'em was holding Betty on the saddle in front of him. It was that blasted Gomez.

I come swooping down onto 'em, with a six-shooter in my right hand and a bowie knife in my left. Cap'n Kidd needed no guiding. He'd smelt blood and fire and he come like a hurricane on Jedgment Day, with his mane flying and his hoofs burning the grass.

The Mexicans seen I'd ride 'em down before they could get acrost the flat and they turnt to meet me, shooting as they come. But Mexicans always was rotten shots. As we come together I let bam three times with my .45, and: "Three!" says I.

One of 'em rode at me from the side and clubbed his rifle and hit at my head, but I ducked and made one swipe with my bowie. "Four!" says I. Then the others turnt and high-tailed it, letting the stolen hosses run where they wanted to. One of 'em headed south, but I was crowding Gomez so clost he whirled around and lit a shuck west.

"Keep back or I keel the girl!" he howled, lifting a knife, but I shot it out of his hand, and he give a yowl and let go of her and she fell off into the high grass. He kept fogging it.

I pulled up to see if Betty was hurt, but she warn't--jest scairt. The grass cushioned her fall. I seen her pap and sech of the boys as was able to ride was all coming at a high run, so I left her to 'em and taken in after Gomez again. Purty soon he looked back and seen me overhauling him, so he reched for his Winchester which he'd evidently jest thought of using, when about that time his hoss stepped into a prairie dog hole and throwed him over his head. Gomez never twitched after he hit the ground. I turnt around and rode back, cussing disgustedly, because a Elkins is ever truthful, and I couldn't honestly count Gomez in my record.

But I thought I'd scuttle that coyote that run south, so I headed in that direction. I hadn't gone far when I heard a lot of hosses running somewhere ahead of me and to the east, and then presently I bust out of the trees and come onto a flat which run to the mouth of a narrer gorge opening into the main canyon.

On the left wall of this gorge-mouth they was a ledge about fifty foot up, and they was a log cabin on that ledge with loop-holes in the walls. The only way up onto the ledge was a log ladder, and about twenty Mexicans was running their hosses toward it, acrost the flat. Jest as I reched the aidge of the bushes, they got to the foot of the wall and jumped off their

hosses and run up that ladder like monkeys, letting their hosses run any ways. I seen a big feller with gold ornaments on his sombrero which I figgered was Zamora, but before I could unlimber my Winchester they was all in the cabin and slammed the door.

THE NEXT MINUTE COUSIN Bearfield busted out of the trees a few hundred yards east of where I was and started recklessly acrost the flat. Imejitely all them Mexicans started shooting at him, and he grudgingly retired into the bresh again, with terrible language. I yelled, and rode toward him, keeping to the trees.

"How many you got?" he bellered as soon as he seen me.

"Four," I says, and he grinned like a timber wolf and says: "I got five! I was ridin' for my camp when I heard the shootin' behind me, and so I knowed it was yore camp they hit first. I turnt around to go back and help you out--"

"When did I ever ast you for any help?" I bristled, but he said: "But purty soon I seen a gang of Mexicans comin' around the north end of the ridge, so I taken cover and shot five of 'em out of their saddles. They must of knowed it was me, because they high-tailed it."

"How could they know that, you conceited jackass?" I snorted. "They run off because they probably thought a whole gang had ambushed 'em."

Old Man Richardson and his boys had rode up whilst we was talking, and now he broke in with some heat, and said: "That hain't the question! The p'int is we got 'em hemmed up on that ledge for the time bein', and can git away before they come down and massacre us."

"What you talkin' about?" I roared. "They're the ones which is in need of gittin' away. If any massacrein' is did around here, we does it!"

"It's flyin' in the face of Providence!" he bleated, but I told him sternly to shet up, and Bearfield says: "Send somebody over to my camp to bring my warriors," so I told Ned to go and he pulled out.

Then me and Bearfield studied the situation, setting our hosses in the open whilst bullets from the cabin whistled all around us, and the Richardsons hid in the bresh and begged us to be keerful.

"That ledge is sheer on all sides," says Bearfield. "Nobody couldn't climb down onto it from the cliff. And anybody tryin' to climb that ladder in the teeth of twenty Winchesters would be plum crazy."

But I says, "Look, Bearfield, how the ledge overhangs about ten foot to the left of that ladder. A man could stand at the foot of the bluff there and them coyotes couldn't see to shoot him."

"And," says Bearfield, "he could sling his rope up over that spur of rock at the rim, and they couldn't shoot it off. Only way to git to it would be to come out of the cabin and rech down and cut it with a knife. Door opens toward the ladder, and they ain't no door in the wall on that side. A man could climb right up onto the ledge before they knowed it--if they didn't shoot him through the loop-holes as he come over the rim."

"You stay here and shoot 'em when they tries to cut the rope," I says.

"You go to hell!" he roared. "I see through yore hellish plot. You aims to git up there and kill all them Mexes before I has a chance at 'em. You thinks you'll outwit me! By golly, I got my rights, and--"

"Aw, shet up," I says disgustedly. "We'll both go." I hollered to Old Man Richardson: "You all lay low in the bresh and shoot at every Mex which comes outa the cabin."

"What you goin' to do now?" he hollered. "Don't be rash--"

But me and Bearfield was already headed for the ledge at a dead run.

THIS MOVE SURPRIZED the Mexicans, because they knowed we couldn't figger to ride our hosses up that ladder. Being surprized they shot wild and all they done was graze my sculp and nick Bearfield's ear. Then, jest as they begun to get their range and started trimming us clost, we swerved aside and thundered in under the overhanging rock.

We clumb off and tied our hosses well apart, otherwise they'd of started fighting each other. The Mexicans above us was yelling most amazing but they couldn't even see us, much less shoot us. I whirled my lariat, which is plenty longer and stronger than the average lasso, and roped the spur of rock which jutted up jest below the rim.

"I'll go up first," says I, and Bearfield showed his teeth and drawed his bowie knife.

"You won't neither!" says he. "We'll cut kyards! High man wins!"

So we squatted, and Old Man Richardson yelled from the trees: "For God's sake, what are you doin' now? They're fixin' to roll rocks down onto you!"

"You tend to yore own business," I advised him, and shuffled the cards which Bearfield hauled out of his britches. As it turnt out, the Mexes had a supply of boulders in the cabin. They jest opened the door and rolled 'em toward the rim. But they shot off the ledge and hit beyond us.

Bearfield cut, and yelped: "A ace! You cain't beat that!"

"I can equal it," I says, and drawed a ace of diamonds.

"I wins!" he clamored. "Hearts beats diamonds!"

"That rule don't apply here," I says. "It war a draw, and--"

"Why, you--!" says Bearfield, leaning for'ard to grab the deck, and jest then a rock about the size of a bushel basket come bounding over the ledge and hit a projection which turnt its course, so instead of shooting over us, it fell straight down and hit Bearfield smack between the ears.

It stunned him for a instant, and I jumped up and started climbing the rope, ignoring more rocks which come thundering down. I was about half-way up when Bearfield come to, and he riz with a beller of rage. "Why, you dirty, double-crossin' so-and-so!" says he, and started throwing rocks at me.

They was a awful racket, the Mexicans howling, and guns banging, and Bearfield cussing, and Old Man Richardson wailing: "They're crazy, I tell you! They're both crazy as mudhens! I think everybody west of the Pecos must be maneyacks!"

Bearfield grabbed the rope and started climbing up behind me, and about that time one of the Mexicans run to cut the rope. But for onst my idiotic follerers was on the job. He run into about seven bullets that hit him all to onst, and fell down jest above the spur where the loop was caught onto.

So when I reched my arm over the rim to pull myself up they couldn't see me on account of the body. But jest as I was pulling myself up, they let go a boulder at random and it bounded along and bounced over the dead Mexican and hit me right smack in the face. It was about as big as a pumpkin.

I give a infuriated beller and swarmed up onto the ledge and it surprized 'em so that most of them missed me clean. I only got one slug through the arm. Before they had time to shoot again I made a jump to the wall and flattened myself between the loop-holes, and grabbed the rifle barrels they poked through the loop-holes and bent 'em and rooint 'em. Bearfield was coming up the rope right behind me, so I grabbed hold of the logs and tore that whole side of the wall out, and the roof fell in and the other walls come apart.

* * * *

IN A INSTANT ALL YOU could see was logs falling and rolling and Mexicans busting out into the open. Some got pinned by the falling logs and some was shot by my embattled Kansans and Bearfield's Illinois warriors which had jest come up, and some fell offa the ledge and broke their fool necks.

One of 'em run agen me and tried to stab me so I throwed him after them which had already fell off the ledge, and hollered: "Five for me, Bearfield!"

"--!" says Bearfield, arriving onto the scene with blood in his eye and his bowie in his hand. Seeing which a big Mexican made for him with a butcher knife, which was pore jedgment on his part, and in about the flick of a mustang's tail Bearfield had a sixth man to his credit.

This made me mad. I seen some of the Mexicans was climbing down the ladder, so I run after 'em, and one turnt around and missed me so close with a shotgun he burnt my eyebrows. I taken it away from him and hit him over the head with it, and yelled: "Six for me, too, Cousin Bearfield!"

"Lookout!" he yelled. "Zamora's gittin' away!"

I seen Zamora had tied a rope to the back side of the ledge and was sliding down it. He dropped the last ten feet and run for a corral which was full of hosses back up the gorge, behind the ledge.

We seen the other Mexicans was all laid out or running off up the valley, persued by our immigrants, so I went down the ladder and Bearfield slid down my rope. Zamora's rope wouldn't of held our weight. We grabbed our hosses and lit out up the gorge, around a bend of which Zamora was jest disappearing.

He had a fast hoss and a long start, but I'd of overtook him within the first mile, only Cap'n Kidd kept trying to stop and fight Bearfield's hoss, which was about as big and mean as he was. After we'd run about five miles, and come out of the gorge onto a high plateau, I got far enough ahead of Bearfield so Cap'n Kidd forgot about his hoss, and then he settled down to business and run Zamora's hoss right off his laigs.

They was a steep slope on one side of us, and a five hundred foot drop on the other, and Zamora seen his hoss was winded, so he jumped off and started up the slope on foot. Me and Bearfield jumped off, too, and run after him. Each one of us got him by a laig as he was climbing up a ledge.

"Leggo my prisoner!" roared Bearfield.

"He's my meat," I snarled. "This makes me seven! I wins!"

"You lie!" bellered Bearfield, jerking Zamora away from me and hitting me over the head with him. This made me mad so I grabbed Zamora and throwed him in Bearfield's face. His spurs jabbed Bearfield in the belly, and my cousin give a maddened beller and fell on me fist and tush, and in the battle which follered we forgot all about Zamora till we heard a man scream. He'd snuck away and tried to mount Cap'n Kidd. We stopped fighting and looked around jest in time to see Cap'n Kidd kick him in the belly and knock him clean over the aidge of the cliff.

"Well," says Bearfield disgustedly, "that decides nothin', and our score is a draw."

"It was my hoss which done it," I said. "It ought a count for me."

"Over my corpse it will!" roared Bearfield. "But look here, it's nearly night. Le's git back to the camps before my follerers start cuttin' yore Kansans' throats. Whatever fight is to be fought to decide who owns the canyon, it's betwixt you and me, not them."

"All right," I said. "If my Kansas boys ain't already kilt all yore idjits, we'll fight this out somewhere where we got better light and more room. But I jest expect to find yore Illinoisans writhin' in their gore."

"Don't worry about them," he snarled. "They're wild as painters when they smells gore. I only hope they ain't kilt all yore Kansas mavericks."

SO WE PULLED FOR THE valley. When we got there it was dark, and as we rode outa the gorge, we seen fires going on the flat, and folks dancing around 'em, and fiddles was going at a great rate.

"What the hell is this?" bellered Bearfield, and then Old Man Richardson come up to us, overflowing with good spirits. "Glad to see you gents!" he says. "This is a great night! Jack warn't kilt, after all. Jest creased. We come out of that great fight whole and sound--"

"But what you doin'?" roared Bearfield. "What's my people doin' here?"

"Oh," says Old Man Richardson, "we got together after you gents left and agreed that the valley was big enough for both parties, so we decided to jine together into one settlement, and we're celebratin'. Them Illinois people is fine folks. They're as peace-lovin' as we are."

"Blood-thirsty painters!" I sneers to Cousin Bearfield.

"I ain't no bigger liar'n you air," he says, more in sorrer than in anger. "Come on. They ain't nothin' more we can do. We air swamped in a mess of pacifism. The race is degeneratin'. Le's head for Bear Creek. This atmosphere of brotherly love is more'n I can stand."

We set our hosses there a minnit and watched them pilgrims dance and listened to 'em singing. I squints across at Cousin Bearfield's face and doggoned if it don't look almost human in the firelight. He hauls out his plug of tobaccer and offers me first chaw. Then we headed yonderly, riding stirrup to stirrup.

Must of been ten miles before Cap'n Kidd retches over and bites Cousin Bearfield's hoss on the neck. Bearfield's hoss bites back, and by accident Cap'n Kidd kicks Cousin Bearfield on the ankle. He lets out a howl and thumps me over the head, and I hit him, and then we gits our arms around each other and roll in the bresh in a tangle.

We fit fer two hours, I reckon, and we'd been fighting yet if we hadn't scrambled under Cap'n Kidd's hoofs where he was feeding. He kicked Cousin Bearfield one way and me the other.

I got up after a while and went hunting my hat. The bresh crackled, and in the moonlight I could see Cousin Bearfield on his hands and knees. "Whar air ye, Cousin Breckinridge?" says he. "Air you all right?"

Well, mebbe my clothes was tore more'n his was and a lip split and a rib or two busted, but I could still see, which was more'n he could say with both his eyes swole that way. "Shore I'm all right," I says. "How air you, Cousin Bearfield?"

He let out a groan and tried to git up. He made 'er on the second heave and stood there swaying. "Why, I'm fine," he says. "Plumb fine. I feel a whole lot better, Breck. I was afraid fer a minnit back there, whilst we was ridin' along, that that daggone brotherly love would turn out to be catchin'."

THE END

Contents

PISTOL POLITICS

By Robert E. Howard

Politics and book-learning is bad enough took separate; together they're a blight and a curse. Take Yeller Dog for a instance, a mining camp over in the Apache River country, where I was rash enough to take up my abode in onst.

Yeller Dog was a decent camp till politics reared its head in our midst and education come slithering after. The whiskey was good and middling cheap. The poker and faro games was honest if you watched the dealers clost. Three or four piddlin' fights a night was the usual run, and a man hadn't been shot dead in more than a week by my reckoning. Then, like my Aunt Tascosa Polk would say, come the deluge.

It all begun when Forty-Rod Harrigan moved his gambling outfit over to Alderville and left our one frame building vacant, and Gooseneck Wilkerson got the idee of turning it into a city hall. Then he said we ought to have a mayor to go with it, and announced hisself as candidate. Naturally Bull Hawkins, our other leading citizen, come out agen him. The election was sot for April 11. Gooseneck established his campaign headquarters in the Silver Saddle saloon, and Bull taken up his'n in the Red Tomahawk on t'other side of the street. First thing we knowed, Yeller Dog was in the grip of politics.

The campaign got under way, and the casualties was mounting daily as public interest become more and more fatally aroused, and on the afternoon of the 9th Gooseneck come into his headquarters. and says: "We got to make a sweepin' offensive, boys. Bull Hawkins is outgeneralin' us. That shootin' match he put on for a prime beef steer yesterday made a big hit with the common herd. He's tryin' to convince Yeller Dog that if elected he'd pervide the camp with more high-class amusement than I could. Breck Elkins, will you pause in yore guzzlin' and lissen here a minute? As chief of this here political organization I demand yore attention!"

"I hear you," I says. "I was to the match, and they barred me on a tecknicality, otherwise I would of won the whole steer. It warn't so excitin', far as I could see. Only one man got shot."

"And he was one of my voters," scowled Gooseneck. "But we got to outshine Bull's efforts to seduce the mob. He's resortin' to low, onder-handed tactics by buyin' votes outright. I scorns sech measures--anyway, I've bought all I'm able to pay for. We got to put on a show which out-dazzles his dern' shootin' match."

"A rodeo, maybe," suggested Mule McGrath. "Or a good dog-fight."

"Naw, naw," says Gooseneck. "My show will be a symbol of progress and culture. We stages a spellin' match tomorrow night in the city hall. Next mornin' when the polls opens the voters'll still be so dazzled by the grandeur of our entertainment they'll eleck me by a vast majority."

"How many men in this here camp can spell good enough to git into a spellin' bee?" says I.

"I'm confident they's at least thirty-five men in this camp which can read and write," says Gooseneck. "That's plenty. But we got to find somebody to give out the words. It wouldn't look right for me--it'd be beneath my offishul dignity. Who's educated enough for the job?"

"I am!" says Jerry Brennon and Bill Garrison simultaneous. They then showed their teeth at each other. They warn't friends nohow.

"Cain't but one git the job," asserted Gooseneck. "I tests yore ability. Can either one of you spell Constantinople?"

"K-o-n--" begun Garrison, and Brennon burst into a loud and mocking guffaw, and said something pointed about ignoramuses.

"You $%#&*!" says Garrison blood-thirstily.

"Gentlemen!" squawked Gooseneck--and then ducked as they both went for their guns.

* * * *

THEY CLEARED LEATHER about the same time. When the smoke oozed away Gooseneck crawled out from under the roulette table and cussed fervently.

"Two more reliable voters gone to glory!" he raged. "Breckinridge, whyn't you stop 'em?"

"T'warn't none of my business," says I, reaching for another drink, because a stray bullet had knocked my glass out a my hand. "Hey!" I addressed the barkeep sternly. "I see you fixin' to chalk up that there spilt drink agen me. Charge it to Jerry Brennon. He spilt it."

"Dead men pays no bills," complained the bartender.

"Cease them petty squabbles!" snarled Gooseneck. "You argys over a glass of licker when I've jest lost two good votes! Drag 'em out, boys," he ordered the other members of the organization which was emerging from behind the bar and the whiskey barrels where they'd took refuge when the shooting started. "Damn!" says Gooseneck with bitterness. "This here is a deadly lick to my campaign! I not only loses two more votes, but them was the best educated men in camp, outside of me. Now who we goin' to git to conduck the spellin' match?"

"Anybody which can read can do it," says Lobo Harrison a hoss-thief with a mean face and a ingrown disposition. He'd go a mile out of his way jest to kick a dog. "Even Elkins there could do it."

"Yeah, if they was anything to read from," snorted Gooseneck. "But they ain't a line of writin' in camp except on whiskey bottles. We got to have a man with a lot of long words in his head. Breckinridge, dammit, jest because I told the barkeep to charge yore drinks onto campaign expenses ain't no reason for you to freeze onto that bar permanent. Ride over to Alderville and git us a educated man."

"How'll he know whether he's educated or not?" sneered Lobo, which seemed to dislike me passionately for some reason or another.

"Make him spell Constantinople," says Gooseneck.

"He cain't go over there," says Soapy Jackson. "The folks has threatened to lynch him for cripplin' their sheriff."

"I didn't cripple their fool sheriff," I says indignantly. "He crippled hisself fallin' through a wagon wheel when I give him a kind of a push with a rock. How you spell that there Constance Hopple word?"

Well, he spelt it thirty or forty times till I had it memorized, so I rode over to Alderville. When I rode into town the folks looked at me coldly and bunched up and whispered amongst theirselves, but I paid no attention to 'em. I never seen the deputy sheriff, unless that was him I seen climbing a white oak tree as I hove in sight. I went into the White Eagle saloon and drunk me a dram, and says to the barkeep: "Who's the best educated man in Alderville?"

Says he: "Snake River Murgatroyd, which deals monte over to the Elite Amusement Palace." So I went over there and jest as I went through the door I happened to remember that Snake River had swore he was going to shoot me on sight next time he seen me, account of some trouble we'd had over a card game. But sech things is too trivial to bother about. I went up to where he was setting dealing monte, and I says: "Hey!"

"Place your bet," says he. Then he looked up and said: "You! $#/0&*@!" and reched for his gun, but I got mine out first and shoved the muzzle under his nose.

"Spell Constantinople!" I tells him.

He turnt pale and said: "Are you crazy?"

"Spell it!" I roared, and he says: "C-o-n-s-t-a-n-t-i-n-o-p-l-e! What the hell?"

"Good," I said, throwing his gun over in the corner out of temptation's way. "We wants you to come over to Yeller Dog and give out words at a spellin' match."

EVERYBODY IN THE PLACE was holding their breath. Snake River moved his hands nervous-like and knocked a jack of diamonds off onto the floor. He stooped like he was going to pick it up, but instead he jerked a bowie out of his boot and tried to stab me in the belly. Well, much as I would of enjoyed shooting him, I knowed it would spile the spelling match, so merely taken the knife away from him, and held him upside down to shake out whatever other weppins he might have hid, and he begun to holler: "Help! Murder! Elkins is killin' me!"

"It's a Yeller Dog plot!" somebody howled, and the next instant the air was full of beer mugs and cuspidors. Some of them spittoons was quite heavy, and when one missed me and went bong on Snake River's head, he curled up like a angleworm which has been tromped on.

"Lookit there!" they hollered, like it was my fault. "He's tryin' to kill Snake River! Git him, boys!"

They then fell on me with billiard sticks and chair laigs in a way which has made me suspicious of Alderville's hospitality ever since.

Argyment being useless, I tucked Snake River under my left arm and started knocking them fool critters right and left with my right fist, and I reckon that was how the bar got wrecked. I never seen a bar a man's head would go through easier'n that'n. So purty soon the survivors abandoned the fray and run out of the door hollering: "Help! Murder! Rise up, citizens! Yeller Dog is at our throats! Rise and defend yore homes and loved ones!"

You would of thought the Apaches was burning the town, the way folks was hollering and running for their guns and shooting at me, as I clumb aboard Cap'n Kidd and headed for Yeller Dog. I left the main road and headed through the bresh for a old trail I knowed about, because I seen a whole army of men getting on their hosses to lick out after me, and while I knowed they couldn't catch Cap'n Kidd, I was a feared they might hit Snake River with a stray bullet if they got within range. The bresh was purty thick and I reckon it was the branches slapping him in the face which brung him to, because all to onst he begun hollering blue murder.

"You ain't takin' me to Yeller Dog!" he yelled. "You're takin' me out in the hills to murder me! Help! Help!"

"Aw, shet up," I snorted. "This here's a short cut."

"You can't get across Apache River unless you follow the road to the bridge," says he.

"I can, too," I says. "We'll go acrost on the foot-bridge."

With that he give a scream of horror and a convulsive wrench which tore hisself clean out of his shirt which I was holding onto. The next thing I knowed all I had in my hand was a empty shirt and he was on the ground and scuttling through the bushes. I taken in after him, but he was purty tricky dodging around stumps and trees, and I begun to believe I was going to have to shoot him in the hind laig to catch him, when he made the mistake to trying to climb a tree. I rode up onto him before he could get out of rech, and reched up and got him by the laig and pulled him down, and his langwidge was painful to hear.

It was his own fault he slipped outa my hand, he kicked so vi'lent. I didn't go to drop him on his head.

But jest as I was reching down for him, I heard hosses running, and looked up and here come that derned Alderville posse busting through the bresh right on me. I'd lost so much time chasing Snake River they'd catched up with me. So I scooped him up and hung him over my saddle horn, because he was out cold, and headed for Apache River. Cap'n Kidd drawed away from them hosses like they was hobbled, so they warn't scarcely in pistol-range of us when we busted out on the east bank. The river was up, jest a-foaming and a-b'ling, and the footbridge warn't nothing only jest a log.

But Cap'n Kidd's sure-footed as a billy goat. We started acrost it, and everything went all right till we got about the middle of it, and then Snake River come to and seen the water booming along under us. He lost his head and begun to struggle and kick and holler, and his spurs scratched Cap'n Kidd's hide. That made Cap'n Kidd mad, and he turnt his head and tried to bite my laig, because he always blames me for everything that happens, and lost his balance and fell off.

That would of been all right, too, because as we hit the water I got hold of Cap'n Kidd's tail with one hand, and Snake River's undershirt with the other'n, and Cap'n Kidd hit out for the west bank. They is very few streams he cain't swim, flood or not. But jest as we was nearly acrost the posse appeared on the hind bank and started shooting at me, and they was apparently in some doubt as to which head in the water was me, because some of 'em shot at Snake River, too, jest to make sure. He opened his mouth to holler at 'em, and got it full of water and dern near strangled.

Then all to onst somebody in the bresh on the west shore opened up with a Winchester, and one of the posse hollered: "Look out, boys! It's a trap! Elkins has led us into a ambush!"

They turnt around and high-tailed it for Alderville.

WELL, WHAT WITH THE shooting and a gullet full of water, Snake River was having a regular fit and he kicked and thrashed so he kicked hisself clean out of his undershirt, and jest as my feet hit bottom, he slipped out of my grip and went whirling off downstream.

I jumped out on land, ignoring the hearty kick Cap'n Kidd planted in my midriff, and grabbed my lariat off my saddle. Gooseneck Wilkerson come prancing outa the bresh, waving a Winchester and yelling: "Don't let him drownd, dang you! My whole campaign depends on that spellin' bee! Do somethin'!"

I run along the bank and made a throw and looped Snake River around the ears. It warn't a very good catch, but the best I could do under the circumstances, and skin will always grow back onto a man's ears.

I hauled him out of the river, and it was plumb ungrateful for him to accuse me later of dragging him over them sharp rocks on purpose. I like to know how he figgered I could rope him outa Apache River without skinning him up a little. He'd swallered so much water he was nigh at his last gasp. Gooseneck rolled him onto his belly and jumped up and down on his back with both feet to git the water out; Gooseneck said that was artifishul respiration, but from the way Snake River hollered I don't believe it done him much good.

Anyway, he choked up several gallons of water. When he was able to threaten our lives betwixt cuss-words, Gooseneck says: "Git him on yore hoss and le's git started. Mine run off when the shootin' started. I jest suspected you'd be pursued by them dumb-wits and would take the short-cut. That's why I come to meet you. Come on. We got to git Snake River some medical attention. In his present state he ain't in no shape to conduck no spellin' match."

Snake River was too groggy to set in the saddle, so we hung him acrost it like a cow-hide over a fence, and started out, me leading Cap'n Kidd. It makes Cap'n Kidd very mad to have anybody but me on his back, so we hadn't went more'n a mile when he reched around and sot his teeth in the seat of Snake River's pants. Snake River had been groaning very weak and dismal and commanding us to stop and let him down so's he could utter his last words, but when Cap'n Kidd bit him he let out a remarkable strong yell and bust into langwidge unfit for a dying man.

"$%/#&!" quoth he passionately. "Why have I got to be butchered for a Yeller Dog holiday?"

We was reasoning with him, when Old Man Jake Hanson hove out of the bushes. Old Jake had a cabin a hundred yards back from the trail. He was about the width of a barn door, and his whiskers was marvelous to behold. "What's this ungodly noise about?" he demanded. "Who's gittin' murdered?"

"I am!" says Snake River fiercely. "I'm bein' sacrificed to the passions of the brutal mob!"

"You shet up," said Gooseneck severely. "Jake, this is the gent we've consented to let conduck the spellin' match."

"Well, well!" says Jake, interested. "A educated man, hey? Why, he don't look no different from us folks, if the blood war wiped offa him. Say, lissen, boys, bring him over to my cabin! I'll dress his wounds and feed him and take keer of him and git him to the city hall tomorrer night in time for the spellin' match. In the meantime he can teach my datter Salomey her letters."

"I refuse to tutor a dirty-faced cub--" began Snake River w hen he seen a face peeking eagerly at us from the trees. "Who's that?" he demanded.

"My datter Salomey," says Old Jake. "Nineteen her last birthday and cain't neither read nor write. None of my folks ever could, far back as family history goes, but I wants her to git some education."

"It's a human obligation," says Snake River. "I'll do it!"

So we left him at Jake's cabin, propped up on a bunk, with Salomey feeding him spoon-vittles and whiskey, and me and Gooseneck headed for Yeller Dog, which warn't hardly a mile from there.

Gooseneck says to me: "We won't say nothin' about Snake River bein' at Jake's shack. Bull Hawkins is sweet on Salomey and he's so dern jealous-minded it makes him mad for another man to even stop there to say hello to the folks. We don't want nothin' to interfere with our show."

"You ack like you got a lot of confidence in it," I says.

"I banks on it heavy," says he. "It's a symbol of civilization."

WELL, JEST AS WE COME into town we met Mule McGrath with fire in his eye and corn-juice on his breath. "Gooseneck, lissen!" says he. "I jest got wind of a plot of Hawkins and Jack Clanton to git a lot of our voters so drunk election day that they won't be able to git to the polls. Le's call off the spellin' match and go over to the Red Tomahawk and clean out that rat-nest!"

"Naw," says Gooseneck, "we promised the mob a show, and we keeps our word. Don't worry; I'll think of a way to circumvent the heathen."

Mule headed back for the Silver Saddle, shaking his head, and Gooseneck sot down on the aidge of a hoss-trough and thunk deeply. I'd begun to think he'd drapped off to sleep, when he riz up and said: "Breck, git hold of Soapy Jackson and tell him to sneak out of camp and stay hid till the mornin' of the eleventh. Then he's to ride in jest before the polls open and spread the news that they has been a big gold strike over in Wild Ross Gulch. A lot of fellers will stampede for there without waitin' to vote. Meanwhile you will have circulated amongst the men you know air goin' to vote for me, and let 'em know we air goin' to work this campaign strategy. With all my men in camp, and most of Bull's headin' for Wild Ross Gulch, right and justice triumphs and I wins."

So I went and found Soapy and told him what Gooseneck said, and on the strength of it he imejitly headed for the Silver Saddle, and begun guzzling on campaign credit. I felt it was my duty to go along with him and see that he didn't get so full he forgot what he was supposed to do, and we was putting down the sixth dram apiece when in come Jack McDonald, Jim Leary, and Tarantula Allison, all Hawkins men. Soapy focused his wandering eyes on 'em, and says: "W-who's this here clutterin' up the scenery? Whyn't you mavericks stay over to the Red Tomahawk whar you belong?"

"It's a free country," asserted Jack McDonald. "What about this here derned spellin' match Gooseneck's braggin' about all over town?"

"Well, what about it?" I demanded, hitching my harness for'ard. The political foe don't live which can beard a Elkins in his lair.

"We demands to know who conducks it," stated Leary. "At least half the men in camp eligible to compete is in our crowd. We demands fair play!"

"We're bringin' in a cultured gent from another town," I says coldly.

"Who?" demanded Allison.

"None of yore dang business!" trumpeted Soapy, which gets delusions of valor when he's full of licker. "As a champion of progress and civic pride I challenges the skunk-odored forces of corrupt politics, and--"

Bam! McDonald swung with a billiard ball and Soapy kissed the sawdust.

"Now look what you done," I says peevishly. "If you coyotes cain't ack like gents, you'll oblige me by gittin' to hell outa here."

"If you don't like our company suppose you tries to put us out!" they challenged.

So when I'd finished my drink I taken their weppins away from 'em and throwed 'em headfirst out the side door. How was I to know somebody had jest put up a new cast-iron hitching-rack out there? Their friends carried 'em over to the Red Tomahawk to sew up their sculps, and I went back into the Silver Saddle to see if Soapy had come to yet. Jest as I reched the door he come weaving out, muttering in his whiskers and waving his six-shooter.

"Do you remember what all I told you?" I demanded.

"S-some of it!" he goggled, with his glassy eyes wobbling in all directions.

"Well, git goin' then," I urged, and helped him up onto his hoss. He left town at full speed, with both feet outa the stirrups and both arms around the hoss' neck.

"Drink is a curse and a delusion," I told the barkeep in disgust. "Look at that sickenin' example and take warnin'! Gimme me a bottle of rye."

WELL, GOOSENECK DONE a good job of advertising the show. By the middle of the next afternoon men was pouring into town from claims all up and down the creek. Half an hour before the match was sot to begin the hall was full. The benches was moved back from the front part, leaving a space clear all the way acrost the hall. They had been a lot of argyment about who was to compete, and who was to choose sides, but when it was finally settled, as satisfactory as anything ever was settled in Yeller Dog, they was twenty men to compete, and Lobo Harrison and Jack Clanton was to choose up.

By a peculiar coincidence, half of that twenty men was Gooseneck's, and half was Bull's. So naturally Lobo choosed his pals, and Clanton chosed his'n.

"I don't like this," Gooseneck whispered to me. "I'd ruther they'd been mixed up. This is beginnin' to look like a contest between my gang and Bull's. If they win, it'll make me look cheap. Where the hell is Snake River?"

"I ain't seen him," I said, "You ought to of made 'em take off their guns."

"Shucks," says he. "What could possibly stir up trouble at sech a lady-like affair as a spellin' bee. Dang it, where is Snake River? Old Jake said he'd git him here on time."

"Hey, Gooseneck!" yelled Bull Hawkins from where he sot amongst his coharts. "Why'n't you start the show?"

Bull was a big broad-shouldered hombre with black mustashes like a walrus. The crowd begun to holler and cuss and stomp their feet and this pleased Bull very much.

"Keep 'em amused," hissed Gooseneck. "I'll go look for Snake River."

He snuck out a side door and I riz up and addressed the throng. "Gents," I said, "be patient! They is a slight delay, but it won't be long. Meantime I'll be glad to entertain you all to the best of my ability. Would you like to hear me sing Barbary Allen?"

"No, by grab!" they answered in one beller.

"Well, yo're a-goin' to!" I roared, infuriated by this callous lack of the finer feelings. "I will now sing," I says, drawing my .45s "and I blows the brains out of the first coyote which tries to interrupt me."

I then sung my song without interference, and when I was through I bowed and waited for the applause, but all I heard was Lobo Harrison saying: "Imagine what the pore wolves on Bear Creek has to put up with!"

This cut me to the quick, but before I could make a suitable reply, Gooseneck slid in, breathing heavy. "I can't find Snake River," he hissed. "But the bar-keep gimme a book he found somewheres. Most of the leaves is tore out, but there's plenty left. I've marked some of the longest words, Breck. You can read good enough to give 'em out. You got to! If we don't start the show right away, this mob'll wreck the place. Yo're the only man not in the match which can even read a little, outside of me and Bull. It wouldn't look right for me to do it, and I shore ain't goin' to let Bull run my show."

I knew I was licked.

"Aw, well, all right," I said. "I might of knew I'd be the goat. Gimme the book."

"Here it is," he said. "'The Adventures of a French Countess.' Be dern shore you don't give out no words except them I marked."

"Hey!" bawled Jack Clanton. "We're gittin' tired standin' up here. Open the ball."

"All right," I says. "We commences."

"Hey!" said Bull. "Nobody told us Elkins was goin' to conduck the ceremony. We was told a cultured gent from outa town was to do it."

"Well," I says irritably, "Bear Creek is my home range, and I reckon I'm as cultured as any snake-hunter here. If anybody thinks he's better qualified than me, step up whilst I stomp his ears off."

Nobody volunteered, so I says "All right. I tosses a dollar to see who gits the first word." It fell for Harrison's gang, so I looked in the book at the first word marked, and it was a gal's name.

"Catharine," I says.

Nobody said nothing.

"Catharine!" I roared, glaring at Lobo Harrison.

"What you lookin' at me for?" he demanded. "I don't know no gal by that name."

"%$&*@!" I says with passion. "That's the word I give out. Spell it, dammit!"

"Oh," says he. "All right. K-a-t-h-a-r-i-n-n."

"That's wrong," I says.

"What you mean wrong?" he roared. "That's right!"

"'Tain't accordin' to the book," I said.

"Dang the book," says he. "I knows my rights and I ain't to be euchered by no ignorant grizzly from Bear Creek!"

"Who you callin' ignorant?" I demanded, stung, "Set down! You spelt it wrong."

"You lie!" he howled, and went for his gun. But I fired first.

WHEN THE SMOKE CLEARED away I seen everybody was on their feet preparing for to stampede, sech as warn't trying to crawl under the benches, so I said: "Set down, everybody. They ain't nothin' to git excited about. The spellin' match continues--and I'll shoot the first scoundrel which tries to leave the hall before the entertainment's over."

Gooseneck hissed fiercely at me: "Dammit, be careful who you shoot, cain't'cha? That was another one of my voters!"

"Drag him out!" I commanded, wiping off some blood where a slug had notched my ear. "The spellin' match is ready to commence again."

They was a kind of tension in the air, men shuffling their feet and twisting their mustashes and hitching their gun-belts, but I give no heed. I now approached the other side, with my hand on my pistol, and says to Clanton: "Can you spell Catharine?"

"C-a-t-h-a-r-i-n-e!" says he.

"Right, by golly!" I says, consulting The French Countess, and the audience cheered wildly and shot off their pistols into the roof.

"Hey!" says Bill Stark, on the other side. "That's wrong. Make him set down! It spells with a 'K'!"

"He spelt it jest like it is in the book," I says. "Look for yoreself."

"I don't give a damn!" he yelled, rudely knocking The French Countess outa my hand. "It's a misprint! It spells with a 'K' or they'll be more blood on the floor! He spelt it wrong and if he don't set down I shoots him down!"

"I'm runnin' this show!" I bellered, beginning to get mad. "You got to shoot me before you shoots anybody else!"

"With pleasure!" snarled he, and went for his gun.... Well, I hit him on the jaw with my fist and he went to sleep amongst a wreckage of busted benches. Gooseneck jumped up with a maddened shriek.

"Dang yore soul, Breckinridge!" he squalled. "Quit cancelin' my votes! Who air you workin' for--me or Hawkins?"

"Haw! haw! haw!" bellered Hawkins. "Go on with the show! This is the funniest thing I ever seen!"

Wham! The door crashed open and in pranced Old Jake Hanson, waving a shotgun.

"Welcome to the festivities, Jake," I greeted him, "Where's--"

"You son of a skunk!" quoth he, and let go at me with both barrels. The shot scattered remarkable. I didn't get more'n five or six of 'em and the rest distributed freely amongst the crowd. You ought to of heard 'em holler--the folks, I mean, not the buckshot.

"What in tarnation air you doin'?" shrieked Gooseneck. "Where's Snake River?"

"Gone!" howled Old Jake. "Run off! Eloped with my datter!"

Bull Hawkins riz with a howl of anguish, convulsively clutching his whiskers.

"Salomey?" he bellered. "Eloped?"

"With a cussed gambolier they brung over from Alderville!" bleated Old Jake, doing a war-dance in his passion. "Elkins and Wilkerson persuaded me to take that snake into my boozum! In spite of my pleas and protests they forced him into my peaceful $# %* household, and he stole the pore, mutton-headed innercent's blasted heart with his cultured airs and his slick talk! They've run off to git married!"

"It's a political plot!" shrieked Hawkins, going for his gun, "Wilkerson done it a-purpose!"

I shot the gun out of his hand, but Jack Clanton crashed a bench down on Gooseneck's head and Gooseneck kissed the floor. Clanton come down on top of him, out cold, as Mule McGrath swung with a pistol butt, and the next instant somebody lammed Mule with a brick bat and he flopped down acrost Clanton. And then the fight was on. Them rival political factions jest kind of riz up and rolled together in a wave of profanity, gun-smoke and splintering benches.

I HAVE ALWAYS NOTICED that the best thing to do in sech cases is to keep yore temper, and that's what I did for some time, in spite of the efforts of nine or ten wild-eyed Hawkinites. I didn't even shoot one of 'em; I kept my head and battered their skulls with a joist I tore outa the floor, and when I knocked 'em down I didn't stomp 'em hardly any. But they kept coming, and Jack McDonald was obsessed with the notion that he could ride me to the floor by jumping up astraddle of my neck. So he done it, and having discovered his idee was a hallucination, he got a fistful of my hair with his left, and started beating me in the head with his pistol-barrel.

It was very annoying. Simultaneous, several other misfits got hold of my laigs, trying to rassle me down, and some son of Baliol stomped severely on my toe. I had bore my afflictions as patient as Job up to that time, but this perfidy maddened me.

I give a roar which loosened the shingles on the roof, and kicked the toe-stomper in the belly with sech fury that he curled up on the floor with a holler groan and taken no more interest in the proceedings. I likewise busted my timber on somebody's skull, and reched up and pulled Jack McDonald off my neck like pulling a tick off a bull's hide, and hev him through a convenient winder. He's a liar when he says I aimed him deliberate at that rain barrel. I didn't even know they was a rain barrel till I heard his head crash through the staves. I then shaken nine or ten idjits loose from my shoulders and shook the blood outa my eyes and preceived that Gooseneck's men was getting the worst of it, particularly including Gooseneck hisself. So I give another roar and prepared to wade through them fool Hawkinites like a b'ar through a pack of hound-dogs, when I discovered that some perfidious side-winder had got my spur tangled in his whiskers.

I stooped to ontangle myself, jest as a charge of buckshot ripped through the air where my head had been a instant before. Three or four critters was rushing me with bowie knives, so I give a wrench and tore loose by main force. How could I help it if most of the whiskers come loose too? I grabbed me a bench to use for a club, and I mowed the whole first rank down with one swipe, and then as I drawed back for another lick, I heard somebody yelling above the melee.

"Gold!" he shrieked.

Everybody stopped like they was froze in their tracks. Even Bull Hawkins shook the blood outa his eyes and glared up from where he was kneeling on Gooseneck's wishbone with one hand in Gooseneck's hair and a bowie in the other'n. Everybody quit fighting everybody else, and looked at the door--and there was Soapy Jackson, a-reeling and a-weaving with a empty bottle in one hand, and hollering.

"Big gold strike in Wild Hoss Gulch," he blats. "Biggest the West ever seen! Nuggets the size of osteridge aigs--gulp!"

He disappeared in a wave of frenzied humanity as Yeller Dog's population abandoned the fray and headed for the wide open spaces. Even Hawkins ceased his efforts to sculp Gooseneck alive and j'ined the stampede. They tore the whole front out of the city hall in their flight, and even them which had been knocked stiff come to at the howl of "Gold!" and staggered wildly after the mob, shrieking pitifully for their picks, shovels and jackasses. When the dust had settled and the thunder of boot-heels had faded in the distance, the only human left in the city hall was me and Gooseneck, and Soapy Jackson, which riz unsteadily with the prints of hob-nails all over his homely face. They shore trompled him free and generous in their rush.

Gooseneck staggered up, glared wildly about him, and went into convulsions. At first he couldn't talk at all; he jest frothed at the mouth. When he found speech his langwidge was shocking.

"What you spring it this time of night for?" he howled. "Breckinridge, I said tell him to bring the news in the mornin', not tonight!"

"I did tell him that," I says.

"Oh, so that was what I couldn't remember!" says Soapy. "That lick McDonald gimme so plumb addled my brains I knowed they was somethin' I forgot, but couldn't remember what it was."

"Oh sole mio!" gibbered Gooseneck, or words to that effeck.

"Well, what you kickin' about?" I demanded peevishly, having jest discovered that somebody had stabbed me in the hind laig during the melee. My boot was full of blood, and they was brand-new boots. "It worked, didn't it?" I says. "They're all headin' for Wild Hoss Gulch, includin' Hawkins hisself, and they cain't possibly git back afore day after tomorrer."

"Yeah!" raved Gooseneck. "They're all gone, includin' my gang! The damn camp's empty! How can I git elected with nobody here to hold the election, and nobody to vote?"

"Oh," I says. "That's right. I hadn't thunk of that."

He fixed me with a awful eye.

"Did you," says he in a blood-curdling voice, "did you tell my voters Soapy was goin' to enact a political strategy?"

"By golly!" I said. "You know it plumb slipped my mind! Ain't that a joke on me?"

"Git out of my life!" says Gooseneck, drawing his gun.

That was a genteel way for him to ack, trying to shoot me after all I'd did for him! I taken his gun away from him as gentle as I knowed how and it was his own fault he got his arm broke. But to hear him rave you would of thought he considered I was to blame for his misfortunes or something. I was so derned disgusted I clumb onto Cap'n Kidd and shaken the dust of that there camp offa my boots, because I seen they was no gratitude in Yeller Dog.

I likewise seen I wasn't cut out for the skullduggery of politics. I had me a notion one time that I'd make a hiyu sheriff but I learnt my lesson. It's like my pap says, I reckon.

"All the law a man needs," says he, "is a gun tucked into his pants. And the main l'arnin' he needs is to know which end of that gun the bullet comes out of."

What's good enough for pap, gents, is good enough for me.

THE END

Contents

SHARP'S GUN SERENADE

By Robert E. Howard

I was heading for War Paint, jogging along easy and comfortable, when I seen a galoot coming up the trail in a cloud of dust, jest aburning the breeze. He didn't stop to pass the time of day. He went past me so fast Cap'n Kidd missed the snap he made at his hoss, which shows he was sure hightailing it. I recognized him as Jack Sprague, a young waddy which worked on a spread not far from War Paint. His face was pale and sot in a look of desprut resolution, like a man which has jest bet his pants on a pair of deuces, and he had a rope in his hand though I couldn't see nothing he might be aiming to lasso. He went fogging on up the trail into the mountains and I looked back to see if I could see the posse. Because about the only time a outlander ever heads for the high Humbolts is when he's about three jumps and a low whoop ahead of a necktie party.

I seen another cloud of dust, all right, but it warn't big enough for more'n one man, and purty soon I seen it was Bill Glanton of War Paint. But that was good enough reason for Sprague's haste, if Bill was on the prod. Glanton is from Texas, original, and whilst he is a sentimental cuss in repose he's a ring-tailed whizzer with star-spangled wheels when his feelings is ruffled. And his feelings is ruffled tolerable easy.

As soon as he seen me he yelled, "Where'd he go?"

"Who?" I says. Us Humbolt folks ain't overflowing with casual information.

"Jack Sprague!" says he. "You must of saw him. Where'd he go?"

"He didn't say," I says.

Glanton ground his teeth slightly and says, "Don't start yore derned hillbilly stallin' with me! I ain't got time to waste the week or so it takes to git information out of a Humbolt Mountain varmint. I ain't chasin' that misguided idjit to do him injury. I'm pursooin' him to save his life! A gal in War Paint has jilted him and he's so broke up about it he's threatened to ride right over the mortal ridge. Us boys has been watchin' him and follerin' him around and takin' pistols and rat-pizen and the like away from him, but this mornin' he give us the slip and taken to the hills. It was a waitress in the Bawlin' Heifer Restawrant which put me on his trail. He told her he was goin' up in the hills where he wouldn't be interfered with and hang hisself!"

"So that was why he had the rope," I says. "Well, it's his own business, ain't it?"

"No, it ain't," says Bill sternly. "When a man is in his state he ain't responsible and it's the duty of his friends to look after him. He'll thank us in the days to come. Anyway, he owes me six bucks and if he hangs hisself I'll never git paid. Come on, dang it! He'll lynch hisself whilst we stands here jawin'."

"Well, all right," I says. "After all, I got to think about the repertation of the Humbolts. They ain't never been a suicide committed up here before."

"Quite right," says Bill. "Nobody never got a chance to kill hisself up here, somebody else always done it for him."

BUT I IGNORED THIS SLANDER and reined Cap'n Kidd around jest as he was fixing to bite off Bill's hoss's ear. Jack had left the trail but he left sign a blind man could foller. He had a long start on us, but we both had better hosses than his'n and after awhile we come to where he'd tied his hoss amongst the bresh at the foot of Cougar Mountain. We tied our hosses too, and pushed through the bresh on foot, and right away we seen him. He was climbing up the slope toward a ledge which had a tree growing on it. One limb stuck out over the aidge and was jest right to make a swell gallows, as I told Bill.

But Bill was in a lather.

"He'll git to that ledge before we can ketch him!" says he. "What'll we do?"

"Shoot him in the laig," I suggested, but Bill says, "No, dern it! He'll bust hisself fallin' down the slope. And if we start after him he'll hustle up to that ledge and hang hisself before we can git to him. Look there, though--they's a thicket growin' up the slope west of the ledge. You circle around and crawl up through it whilst I git out in the open and attracts his attention. I'll try to keep him talkin' till you can git up there and grab him from behind."

So I ducked low in the bresh and ran around the foot of the slope till I come to the thicket. Jest before I div into the tangle I seen Jack had got to the ledge and was fastening his rope to the limb which stuck out over the aidge. Then I couldn't see him no more because that thicket was so dense and full of briars it was about like crawling through a pile of fighting bobcats. But as I wormed my way up through it I heard Bill yell, "Hey, Jack, don't do that, you dern fool!"

"Lemme alone!" Jack hollered. "Don't come no closer. This here is a free country! I got a right to hang myself if I wanta!"

"But it's a dam fool thing to do," wailed Bill.

"My life is rooint!" asserted Jack. "My true love has been betrayed. I'm a wilted tumble-bug--I mean tumble-weed--on the sands of Time! Destiny has slapped the Zero brand on my flank! I--"

I dunno what else he said because at that moment I stepped into something which let out a ear-splitting squall and attached itself vi'lently to my hind laig. That was jest my luck. With all the thickets they was in the Humbolts, a derned cougar had to be sleeping in that'n. And of course it had to be me which stepped on him.

Well, no cougar is a match for a Elkins in a stand-up fight, but the way to lick him (the cougar, I mean; they ain't no way to lick a Elkins) is to git yore lick in before he can clinch with you. But the bresh was so thick I didn't see him till he had holt of me and I was so stuck up with them derned briars I couldn't hardly move nohow. So before I had time to do anything about it he had sunk most of his tushes and claws into me and was reching for new holts as fast as he could rake. It was old Brigamer, too, the biggest, meanest and oldest cat in the Humbolts. Cougar Mountain is named for him and he's so dang tough he ain't even scairt of Cap'n Kidd, which is plumb pizen to all cat-animals.

Before I could git old Brigamer by the neck and haul him loose from me he had clawed my clothes all to pieces and likewise lacerated my hide free and generous. In fact he made me so mad that when I did git him loose I taken him by the tail and mowed down the bresh in a fifteen foot circle around me with him, till the hair wore off of his tail and it slipped out of my hands. Old Brigamer then laigged it off down the mountain squalling fit to bust yore ear-drums. He was the maddest cougar you ever seen, but not mad enough to renew the fray. He must of recognized me.

At that moment I heard Bill yelling for help up above me so I headed up the slope, swearing loudly and bleeding freely, and crashing through them bushes like a wild bull. Evidently the time for stealth and silence was past. I busted into the open and seen Bill hopping around on the aidge of the ledge trying to git holt of Jack which was kicking like a grasshopper on the end of the rope, jest out of rech.

"Whyn't you sneak up soft and easy like I said?" howled Bill. "I was jest about to argy him out of the notion. He'd tied the rope around his neck and was standin' on the aidge, when that racket bust loose in the bresh and scairt him so bad he fell offa the ledge! Do somethin'."

"Shoot the rope in two," I suggested, but Bill said, "No, you cussed fool! He'd fall down the cliff and break his neck!"

BUT I SEEN IT WARN'T a very big tree so I went and got my arms around it and give it a heave and loosened the roots, and then kinda twisted it around so the limb that Jack was hung to was over the ledge now. I reckon I busted most of the roots in the process, jedging from the noise. Bill's eyes popped out when he seen that, and he reched up kind of dazed like and cut the rope with his bowie. Only he forgot to grab Jack before he cut it, and Jack hit the ledge with a resounding thud.

"I believe he's dead," says Bill despairingful. "I'll never git that six bucks. Look how purple he is."

"Aw," says I, biting me off a chew of terbacker, "all men which has been hung looks that way. I remember onst the Vigilantes hung Uncle Jeppard Grimes, and it taken us three hours to bring him to after we cut him down. Of course, he'd been hangin' a hour before we found him."

"Shet up and help me revive him," snarled Bill, gitting the noose off of his neck. "You seleck the damndest times to converse about the sins of yore infernal relatives--look, he's comin' too!"

Because Jack had begun to gasp and kick around, so Bill brung out a bottle and poured a snort down his gullet, and pretty soon Jack sot up and felt of his neck. His jaws wagged but didn't make no sound.

Glanton now seemed to notice my disheveled condition for the first time. "What the hell happened to you?" he ast in amazement.

"Aw, I stepped on old Brigamer," I scowled.

"Well, whyn't you hang onto him?" he demanded. "Don't you know they's a big bounty on his pelt? We could of split the dough."

"I've had a bellyfull of old Brigamer," I replied irritably. "I don't care if I never see him again. Look what he done to my best britches! If you wants that bounty, you go after it yoreself."

"And let me alone!" onexpectedly spoke up Jack, eyeing us balefully. "I'm free, white and twenty-one. I hangs myself if I wants to."

"You won't neither," says Bill sternly. "Me and yore paw is old friends and I aim to save yore wuthless life if I have to kill you to do it."

"I defies you!" squawked Jack, making a sudden dive betwixt Bill's laigs and he would of got clean away if I hadn't snagged the seat of his britches with my spur. He then displayed startling ingratitude by hitting me with a rock and, whilst we was tying him up with the hanging rope, his langwidge was scandalous.

"Did you ever see sech a idjit?" demands Bill, setting on him and fanning hisself with his Stetson. "What we goin' to do with him? We cain't keep him tied up forever."

"We got to watch him clost till he gits out of the notion of killin' hisself," I says. "He can stay at our cabin for a spell."

"Ain't you got some sisters?" says Jack.

"A whole cabin-full," I says with feeling. "You cain't hardly walk without steppin' on one. Why?"

"I won't go," says he bitterly. "I don't never want to see no woman again, not even a mountain-woman. I'm a embittered man. The honey of love has turnt to tranchler pizen. Leave me to the buzzards and cougars."

"I got it," says Bill. "We'll take him on a huntin' trip way up in the high Humbolts. They's some of that country I'd like to see myself. Reckon yo're the only white man which has ever been up there, Breck--if we was to call you a white man."

"What you mean by that there remark?" I demanded heatedly. "You know damn well I h'ain't got nary a drop of Injun blood in me--hey, look out!"

I glimpsed a furry hide through the bresh, and thinking it was old Brigamer coming back, I pulled my pistols and started shooting at it, when a familiar voice yelled wrathfully, "Hey, you cut that out, dern it!"

THE NEXT INSTANT A pecooliar figger hove into view--a tall ga'nt old ranny with long hair and whiskers, with a club in his hand and a painter hide tied around his middle. Sprague's eyes bugged out and he says: "Who in the name uh God's that?"

"Another victim of feminine wiles," I says. "That's old Joshua Braxton, of Chawed Ear, the oldest and the toughest batchelor in South Nevada. I jedge that Miss Stark, the old maid schoolteacher, has renewed her matrimonical designs onto him. When she starts rollin' sheep's eyes at him he always dons that there grab and takes to the high sierras."

"It's the only way to perteck myself," snarled Joshua. "She'd marry me by force if I didn't resort to strategy. Not many folks comes up here and sech as does don't recognize me in this rig. What you varmints disturbin' my solitude for? Yore racket woke me up, over in my cave. When I seen old Brigamer high tailin' it for distant parts I figgered Elkins was on the mountain."

"We're here to save this young idjit from his own folly," says Bill. "You come up here because a woman wants to marry you. Jack comes up here to decorate a oak limb with his own carcass because one wouldn't marry him."

"Some men never knows their luck," says old Joshua enviously. "Now me, I yearns to return to Chawed Ear which I've been away from for a month. But whilst that old mudhen of a Miss Stark is there I haunts the wilderness if it takes the rest of my life."

"Well, be at ease, Josh," says Bill. "Miss Stark ain't there no more. She pulled out for Arizona three weeks ago."

"Halleloojah!" says Joshua, throwing away his club. "Now I can return and take my place among men--Hold on!" says he, reching for his club again, "likely they'll be gittin' some other old harridan to take her place. That new-fangled schoolhouse they got at Chawed Ear is a curse and a blight. We'll never be shet of husband-huntin' 'rithmetic shooters. I better stay up here after all."

"Don't worry," says Bill. "I seen a pitcher of the gal that's comin' from the East to take Miss Stark's place and I can assure you that a gal as young and pretty as her wouldn't never try to slap her brand on no old buzzard like you."

"Young and purty you says?" I ast with sudden interest.

"As a racin' filly!" he declared. "First time I ever knowed a school-marm could be less'n forty and have a face that didn't look like the beginnin's of a long drouth. She's due into Chawed Ear on the evenin' stage, and the whole town turns out to welcome her. The mayor aims to make a speech if he's sober enough, and they've got up a band to play."

"Damn foolishness!" snorted Joshua. "I don't take no stock in eddication."

"I dunno," says I. That was before I got educated. "They's times when I wisht I could read and write. We ain't never had no school on Bear Creek."

"What would you read outside of the labels onto whiskey bottles?" snorted old Joshua.

"Funny how a purty face changes a man's viewp'int," remarked Bill. "I remember onst Miss Stark ast you how you folks up on Bear Creek would like for her to come up there and teach yore chillern, and you taken one look at her face and told her it was agen the principles of Bear Creek to have their peaceful innercence invaded by the corruptin' influences of education. You said the folks was all banded together to resist sech corruption to the last drop of blood."

"It's my duty to Bear Creek to pervide culture for the risin' generation," says I, ignoring them slanderous remarks. "I feels the urge for knowledge a-heavin' and a-surgin' in my boozum. We're goin' to have a school on Bear Creek, by golly, if I have to lick every old mossback in the Humbolts. I'll build a cabin for the schoolhouse myself."

"Where'll you git a teacher?" ast Joshua. "Chawed Ear ain't goin' to let you have their'n."

"Chawed Ear is, too," I says. "If they won't give her up peaceful I resorts to force. Bear Creek is goin' to have culture if I have to wade fetlock deep in gore to pervide it. Le's go! I'm r'arin' to open the ball for arts and letters. Air you-all with me?"

"No!" says Jack, plenty emphatic.

"What we goin' to do with him?" demands Glanton.

"Aw," I said, "we'll tie him up some place along the road and pick him up as we come back by."

"All right," says Bill, ignoring Jack's impassioned protests. "I jest as soon. My nerves is frayed ridin' herd on this young idjit and I needs a little excitement to quiet 'em. You can always be counted on for that. Anyway, I'd like to see that there school-marm gal myself. How about you, Joshua?"

"YO'RE BOTH CRAZY," growls Joshua. "But I've lived up here on nuts and jackrabbits till I ain't shore of my own sanity. Anyway, I know the only way to disagree successfully with Elkins is to kill him, and I got strong doubts of bein' able to do that. Lead on! I'll do anything within reason to help keep eddication out of Chawed Ear. T'ain't only my personal feelin's regardin' schoolteachers. It's the principle of the thing."

"Git yore clothes and le's hustle then," I says.

"This painter hide is all I got," says he.

"You cain't go down into the settlements in that rig," I says.

"I can and will," says he. "I look as civilized as you do, with yore clothes all tore to rags account of old Brigamer. I got a hoss clost by. I'll git him if old Brigamer ain't already."

So Joshua went to git his hoss and me and Bill toted Jack down the slope to where our hosses was. His conversation was plentiful and heated, but we ignored it, and was jest tying him onto his hoss when Joshua arrov with his critter. Then the trouble started. Cap'n Kidd evidently thought Joshua was some kind of a varmint because every time Joshua come nigh him he taken in after him and run him up a tree. And every time Joshua tried to come down, Cap'n Kidd busted loose from me and run him back up again.

I didn't git no help from Bill. All he done was laugh like a spotted hyener till Cap'n Kidd got irritated at them guffaws and kicked him in the belly and knocked him clean through a clump of spruces. Time I got him ontangled he looked about as disreputable as what I did because most of his clothes was tore off of him. We couldn't find his hat, neither, so I tore up what was left of my shirt and he tied the pieces around his head, like a Apache. Exceptin' Jack, we was sure a wild-looking bunch.

But I was disgusted thinking about how much time we was wasting whilst all the time Bear Creek was wallering in ignorance, so the next time Cap'n Kidd went for Joshua I took and busted him betwixt the ears with my six-shooter and that had some effect onto him--a little.

So we sot out, with Jack tied onto his hoss and cussing something terrible, and Joshua on a ga'nt old nag he rode bareback with a hackamore. I had Bill to ride betwixt him and me so's to keep that painter hide as far away from Cap'n Kidd as possible, but every time the wind shifted and blowed the smell to him, Cap'n Kidd reched over and taken a bite at Joshua, and sometimes he bit Bill's hoss by accident, and sometimes he bit Bill, and the langwidge Bill directed at that pore animal was shocking to hear.

We was aiming for the trail that runs down from Bear Creek into the Chawed Ear road, and we hit it a mile west of Bowie Knife Pass. We left Jack tied to a nice shady oak tree in the pass and told him we'd be back for him in a few hours, but some folks is never satisfied. 'Stead of being grateful for all the trouble we'd went to for him, he acted right nasty and called us some names I wouldn't of endured if he'd been in his right mind.

But we tied his hoss to the same tree and hustled down the trail and presently come out onto the War Paint-Chawed Ear road, some miles west of Chawed Ear. And there we sighted our first human--a feller on a pinto mare and when he seen us he give a shriek and took out down the road toward Chawed Ear like the devil had him by the britches.

"Le's ast him if the teacher's got there yet," I suggested, so we taken out after him, yelling for him to wait a minute. But he jest spurred his hoss that much harder and before we'd gone any piece, Joshua's fool hoss jostled agen Cap'n Kidd, which smelt that painter skin and got the bit betwixt his teeth and run Joshua and his hoss three miles through the bresh before I could stop him. Bill follered us, and of course, time we got back to the road, the feller on the pinto mare was out of sight long ago.

SO WE HEADED FOR CHAWED Ear but everybody that lived along the road had run into their cabins and bolted the doors, and they shot at us through the winders as we rode by. Bill said irritably, after having his off-ear nicked by a buffalo rifle, he says, "Dern it, they must know we aim to steal their schoolteacher."

"Aw, they couldn't know that," I says. "I bet they is a war on betwixt Chawed Ear and War Paint."

"Well, what they shootin' at me for, then?" demanded Joshua.

"How could they recognize you in that rig?" I ast. "What's that?"

Ahead of us, away down the road, we seen a cloud of dust, and here come a gang of men on hosses, waving guns and yelling.

"Well, whatever the reason is," says Bill, "we better not stop to find out! Them gents is out for blood, and," says he as the bullets begun to knock up the dust around us, "I jedge it's our blood!"

"Pull into the bresh," says I. "I goes to Chawed Ear in spite of hell, high water and all the gunmen they can raise."

So we taken to the bresh, and they lit in after us, about forty or fifty of 'em, but we dodged and circled and taken short cuts old Joshua knowed about, and when we emerged into the town of Chawed Ear, our pursewers warn't nowheres in sight. In fack, they warn't nobody in sight. All the doors was closed and the shutters up on the cabins and saloons and stores and everything. It was pecooliar.

As we rode into the clearing somebody let bam at us with a shotgun from the nearest cabin, and the load combed Joshua's whiskers. This made me mad, so I rode at the cabin and pulled my foot out'n the stirrup and kicked the door in, and whilst I was doing this, the feller inside hollered and jumped out the winder, and Bill grabbed him by the neck. It was Esau Barlow, one of Chawed Ear's confirmed citizens.

"What the hell's the matter with you buzzards?" roared Bill.

"Is that you, Glanton?" gasped Esau, blinking his eyes.

"A-course it's me!" roared Bill. "Do I look like a Injun?"

"Yes?ow! I mean, I didn't know you in that there turban," says Esau. "Am I dreamin' or is that Josh Braxton and Breck Elkins?"

"Shore it's us," snorted Joshua. "Who you think?"

"Well," says Esau, rubbing his neck and looking sidewise at Joshua's painter skin. "I didn't know!"

"Where is everybody?" Joshua demanded.

"Well," says Esau, "a little while ago Dick Lynch rode into town with his hoss all of a lather and swore he'd jest outrun the wildest war-party that ever come down from the hills!"

"Boys,' says Dick, 'they ain't neither Injuns nor white men! They're wild men, that's what! One of 'em's big as a grizzly b'ar, with no shirt on, and he's ridin' a hoss bigger'n a bull moose! One of the others is as ragged and ugly as him, but not so big, and wearin' a Apache headdress. T'other'n's got nothin' on but a painter's hide and a club and his hair and whiskers falls to his shoulders. When they seen me,' says Dick, 'they sot up awful yells and come for me like a gang of man-eatin' cannibals. I fogged it for town,' says Dick, warnin' everybody along the road to fort theirselves in their cabins."

"Well," says Esau, "when he says that, sech men as was left in town got their hosses and guns and they taken out up the road to meet the war-party before it got into town."

"Well, of all the fools!" I says. "Say, where's the new teacher?"

"The stage ain't arriv yet," says he. "The mayor and the band rode out to meet it at the Yaller Creek crossin' and escort her in to town in honor. They'd left before Dick brung news of the war-party."

"Come on!" I says to my warriors. "We likewise meets that stage!"

So we fogged it on through the town and down the road, and purty soon we heard music blaring ahead of us, and men yipping and shooting off their pistols like they does when they're celebrating, so we jedged they'd met the stage and was escorting it in.

"What you goin' to do now?" ast Bill, and about that time a noise bust out behind us and we looked back and seen that gang of Chawed Ear maniacs which had been chasing us dusting down the road after us, waving their Winchesters. I knowed they warn't no use to try to explain to them that we warn't no war-party of cannibals. They'd salivate us before we could git clost enough to make 'em hear what we was saying. So I yelled: "Come on. If they git her into town they'll fort theirselves agen us. We takes her now! Foller me!"

SO WE SWEPT DOWN THE road and around the bend and there was the stage coach coming up the road with the mayor riding alongside with his hat in his hand, and a whiskey bottle sticking out of each saddle bag and his hip pocket. He was orating at the top of his voice to make hisself heard above the racket the band was making. They was blowing horns and banging drums and twanging on Jews harps, and the hosses was skittish and shying and jumping. But we heard the mayor say, "--And so we welcomes you, Miss Devon, to our peaceful little community where life runs smooth and tranquil and men's souls is overflowin' with milk and honey--" And jest then we stormed around the bend and come tearing down on 'em with the mob right behind us yelling and cussing and shooting free and fervent.

The next minute they was the damndest mix-up you ever seen, what with the hosses bucking their riders off, and men yelling and cussing, and the hosses hitched to the stage running away and knocking the mayor off'n his hoss. We hit 'em like a cyclone and they shot at us and hit us over the head with their music horns, and right in the middle of the fray the mob behind us rounded the bend and piled up amongst us before they could check their hosses, and everybody was so confused they started fighting everybody else. Nobody knowed what it was all about but me and my warriors. But Chawed Ear's motto is: "When in doubt, shoot!"

So they laid into us and into each other free and hearty. And we was far from idle. Old Joshua was laying out his feller-townsmen right and left with his ellum club, saving Chawed Ear from education in spite of itself, and Glanton was beating the band over their heads with his six-shooter, and I was trompling folks in my rush for the stage.

The fool hosses had whirled around and started in the general direction of the Atlantic Ocean, and the driver and the shotgun guard couldn't stop 'em. But Cap'n Kidd overtook it in maybe a dozen strides and I left the saddle in a flying leap and landed on it. The guard tried to shoot me with his shotgun so I throwed it into a alder clump and he didn't let go of it quick enough so he went along with it.

I then grabbed the ribbons out of the driver's hands and swung them fool hosses around on their hind laigs, and the stage kind of revolved on one wheel for a dizzy instant, and then settled down again and we headed back up the road lickety-split and in a instant was right amongst the fracas that was going on around Bill and Joshua.

About that time I noticed that the driver was trying to stab me with a butcher knife so I kind of tossed him off the stage and there ain't no sense in him going around threatening to have me arrested account of him landing headfirst in the bass horn so it taken seven men to pull him out. He ought to watch where he falls when he gits throwed off of a stage going at a high run.

I also feels that the mayor is prone to carry petty grudges or he wouldn't be so bitter about me accidentally running over him with all four wheels. And it ain't my fault he was stepped on by Cap'n Kidd, neither. Cap'n Kidd was jest follering the stage because he knowed I was on it. And it naturally irritates him to stumble over somebody and that's why he chawed the mayor's ear.

As for them other fellers which happened to git knocked down and run over by the stage, I didn't have nothing personal agen 'em. I was jest rescuing Joshua and Bill which was outnumbered about twenty to one. I was doing them Chawed Ear idjits a favor, if they only knowed it, because in about another minute Bill would of started using the front ends of his six-shooters instead of the butts and the fight would of turnt into a massacre. Bill has got a awful temper.

Him and Joshua had did the enemy considerable damage but the battle was going agen 'em when I arriv on the field of carnage. As the stage crashed through the mob I reched down and got Joshua by the neck and pulled him out from under about fifteen men which was beating him to death with their gun butts and pulling out his whiskers by the handfulls and I slung him up on top of the other luggage. About that time we was rushing past the dogpile which Bill was the center of and I reched down and snared him as we went by, but three of the men which had holt of him wouldn't let go, so I hauled all four of 'em up onto the stage. I then handled the team with one hand and used the other'n to pull them idjits loose from Bill like pulling ticks off'n a cow's hide, and then throwed 'em at the mob which was chasing us.

MEN AND HOSSES PILED up in a stack on the road which was further messed up by Cap'n Kidd plowing through it as he come busting along after the stage, and by the time we sighted Chawed Ear again, our enemies was far behind us, though still rambunctious.

We tore through Chawed Ear in a fog of dust and the women and chillern which had ventured out of their shacks squalled and run back again, though they warn't in no danger. But Chawed Ear folks is pecooliar that way.

When we was out of sight of Chawed Ear I give the lines to Bill and swung down on the side of the stage and stuck my head in. They was one of the purtiest gals I ever seen in there, all huddled up in a corner and looking so pale and scairt I was afraid she was going to faint, which I'd heard Eastern gals has a habit of doing.

"Oh, spare me!" she begged. "Please don't scalp me!"

"Be at ease, Miss Devon," I reassured her. "I ain't no Injun, nor no wild man neither. Neither is my friends here. We wouldn't none of us hurt a flea. We're that refined and soft-hearted you wouldn't believe it--" At that instant a wheel hit a stump and the stage jumped into the air and I bit my tongue and roared in some irritation, "Bill, you condemned son of a striped polecat, stop this stage before I comes up there and breaks yore cussed neck!"

"Try, you beef headed lummox," he invites, but he pulled up the hosses and I taken off my hat and opened the door. Bill and Joshua clumb down and peered over my shoulder. Miss Devon looked tolerable sick. Maybe it was something she et.

"Miss Devon," I says, "I begs yore pardon for this here informal welcome. But you sees before you a man whose heart bleeds for the benighted state of his native community. I'm Breckinridge Elkins, of Bear Creek, where hearts is pure and motives is lofty, but culture is weak.

"You sees before you," says I, growing more enthusiastic about education the longer I looked at them big brown eyes of her'n, "a man which has growed up in ignorance. I cain't neither read nor write. Joshua here, in the painter skin, he cain't neither, and neither can Bill"

"That's a lie," says Bill. "I can read and--ooomp!" I'd kind of stuck my elbow in his stummick. I didn't want him to spile the effeck of my speech. Miss Devon was gitting some of her color back.

"Miss Devon," I says, "will you please ma'm come up to Bear Creek and be our schoolteacher?"

"Why," says she bewilderedly, "I came West expecting to teach at Chawed Ear, but I haven't signed any contract, and--"

"How much was them snake-hunters goin' to pay you?" I ast.

"Ninety dollars a month," says she.

"We pays you a hundred," I says. "Board and lodgin' free."

"Hell's fire," says Bill. "They never was that much hard cash money on Bear Creek."

"We all donates coon hides and corn licker," I snapped. "I sells the stuff in War Paint and hands the dough to Miss Devon. Will you keep yore snout out of my business."

"But what will the people of Chewed Ear say?" she wonders.

"Nothin'," I told her heartily. "I'll tend to them!"

"It seems so strange and irregular," says she weakly. "I don't know."

"Then it's all settled!" I says. "Great! Le's go!"

"Where?" she gasped, grabbing holt of the stage as I clumb onto the seat.

"Bear Creek!" I says. "Varmints and hoss-thieves, hunt the bresh! Culture is on her way to Bear Creek!" And we went fogging it down the road as fast as the hosses could hump it. Onst I looked back at Miss Devon and seen her getting pale again, so I yelled above the clatter of the wheels, "Don't be scairt, Miss Devon! Ain't nothin' goin' to hurt you. B. Elkins is on the job to perteck you, and I aim to be at yore side from now on!"

At this she said something I didn't understand. In fack, it sounded like a low moan. And then I heard Joshua say to Bill, hollering to make hisself heard, "Eddication my eye! The big chump's lookin' for a wife, that's what! Ten to one she gives him the mitten!"

"I takes that," bawled Bill, and I bellered, "Shet up that noise! Quit discussin' my private business so dern public! I--what's that?"

It sounded like firecrackers popping back down the road. Bill yelled, "Holy smoke, it's them Chawed Ear maniacs! They're still on our trail and they're gainin' on us!"

CUSSING HEARTILY I poured leather into them fool hosses, and jest then we hit the mouth of the Bear Creek trail and I swung into it. They'd never been a wheel on that trail before, and the going was tolerable rough. It was all Bill and Joshua could do to keep from gitting throwed off, and they was seldom more'n one wheel on the ground at a time. Naturally the mob gained on us and when we roared up into Bowie Knife Pass they warn't more'n a quarter mile behind us, whooping bodacious.

I pulled up the hosses beside the tree where Jack Sprague was still tied up to. He gawped at Miss Devon and she gawped back at him.

"Listen," I says, "here's a lady in distress which we're rescuin' from teachin' school in Chawed Ear. A mob's right behind us. This ain't no time to think about yoreself. Will you postpone yore sooicide if I turn you loose, and git onto this stage and take the young lady up the trail whilst the rest of us turns back the mob?"

"I will!" says he with more enthusiasm than he'd showed since we stopped him from hanging hisself. So I cut him loose and he clumb onto the stage.

"Drive on to Kiowa Canyon," I told him as he picked up the lines. "Wait for us there. Don't be scairt, Miss Devon! I'll soon be with you! B. Elkins never fails a lady fair!"

"Gup!" says Jack, and the stage went clattering and banging up the trail and me and Joshua and Bill taken cover amongst the big rocks that was on each side of the trail. The pass was jest a narrer gorge, and a lovely place for a ambush as I remarked.

Well, here they come howling up the steep slope yelling and spurring and shooting wild, and me and Bill give 'em a salute with our pistols. The charge halted plumb sudden. They knowed they was licked. They couldn't git at us because they couldn't climb the cliffs. So after firing a volley which damaged nothing but the atmosphere, they turnt around and hightailed

it back towards Chawed Ear.

"I hope that's a lesson to 'em," says I as I riz. "Come! I cain't wait to git culture started on Bear Creek!"

"You cain't wait to git to sparkin' that gal," snorted Joshua. But I ignored him and forked Cap'n Kidd and headed up the trail, and him and Bill follered, riding double on Jack Sprague's hoss.

"Why should I deny my honorable intentions?" I says presently. "Anybody can see Miss Devon is already learnin' to love me! If Jack had my attraction for the fair sex, he wouldn't be luggin' around a ruint life. Hey, where's the stage?" Because we'd reched Kiowa Canyon and they warn't no stage.

"Here's a note stuck on a tree," says Bill. "I'll read it--well, for Lord's sake!" he yelped, "Lissen to this:

"'Dere boys: I've desided I ain't going to hang myself, and Miss Devon has desided she don't want to teach school at Bear Creek. Breck gives her the willies. She ain't altogther shore he's human. With me it's love at first site and she's scairt if she don't marry somebody Breck will marry her, and she says I'm the best looking prospeck she's saw so far. So we're heading for War Paint to git married.

Yores trooly, Jack Sprague.'"

"Aw, don't take it like that," says Bill as I give a maddened howl and impulsively commenced to rip up all the saplings in rech. "You've saved his life and brung him happiness!"

"And what have I brung me?" I yelled, tearing the limbs off a oak in a effort to relieve my feelings. "Culture on Bear Creek is shot to hell and my honest love has been betrayed! Bill Glanton, the next ranny you chase up into the Humbolts to commit sooicide he don't have to worry about gittin bumped off--I attends to it myself, persona!!"

THE END

Contents

TEXAS JOHN ALDEN

By Robert E. Howard

I hear the citizens of War Whoop has organized theirselves into a committee of public safety which they says is to pertect the town agen me, Breckinridge Elkins. Sech doings as that irritates me. You'd think I was a public menace or something.

I'm purty dern tired of their slanders. I didn't tear down their cussed jail; the buffalo-hunters done it. How could I when I was in it at the time?

As for the Silver Boot saloon and dance hall, it wouldn't of got shot up if the owner had showed any sense. It was Ace Middleton's own fault he got his hind laig busted in three places, and if the city marshal had been tending to his own business instead of persecuting a pore, helpless stranger, he wouldn't of got the seat of his britches full of buckshot.

Folks which says I went to War Whoop a-purpose to wreck the town, is liars. I never had no idea at first of going there at all. It's off the railroad and infested with tinhorn gamblers and buffalo-hunters and sech-like varmints, and no place for a trail-driver.

My visit to this lair of vice come about like this: I'd rode p'int on a herd of longhorns clean from the lower Pecos to Goshen, where the railroad was. And I stayed there after the trail-boss and the other boys headed south, to spark the belle of the town, Betty Wilkinson, which gal was as purty as a brand-new bowie knife. She seemed to like me middling tolerable, but I had rivals, notably a snub-nosed Arizona waddy by the name of Bizz Ridgeway.

This varmint's persistence was so plumb aggravating that I come in on him sudden-like one morning in the back room of the Spanish Mustang, in Goshen, and I says:

"Lissen here, you sand-burr in the pants of progress, I'm a peaceable man, generous and retirin' to a fault. But I'm reachin' the limit of my endurance. Ain't they no gals in Arizona, that you got to come pesterin' mine? Whyn't yuh go on back home where you belong anyhow? I'm askin' yuh like a gent to keep away from Betty Wilkinson before somethin' onpleasant is forced to happen to yuh."

He kind of r'ared up, and says: "I ain't the only gent which is sparkin' Betty. Why don't you make war-talk to Rudwell Shapley, Jr.?"

"He ain't nothin' but a puddin'-headed tenderfoot," I responded coldly. "I don't consider him in no serious light. A gal with as much sense as Betty wouldn't pay him no mind. But you got a slick tongue and might snake yore way ahead of me. So I'm tellin' you--"

He started to git up in a hurry, and I reached for my bowie, but then he sunk back down in his chair and to my amazement he busted into tears.

"What in thunder's the matter with you?" I demanded, shocked.

"Woe is me!" moaned he. "Yuh're right, Breck. I got no business hangin' around Betty. But I didn't know she was yore gal. I ain't got no matrimonial intentions onto her. I'm jest kind of consolin' myself with her company, whilst bein' parted by croocl Fate from my own true love."

"Hey," I says, pricking up my ears and uncocking my pistol. "You ain't in love with Betty? You got another gal?"

"A pitcher of divine beauty!" vowed he, wiping his eyes on my bandanner. "Gloria La Venner, which sings in the Silver Boot, over to War Whoop. We was to wed--"

Here his emotions overcome him and he sobbed loudly.

"But Fate interfered," he moaned. "I was banished from War Whoop, never to return. In a thoughtless moment I kind of pushed a bartender with a clawhammer, and he had a stroke of apperplexity or somethin' and died, and they blamed me. I was forced to flee without tellin' my true love where I was goin'.

"I ain't dared to go back because them folks over there is so prejudiced agen' me they threatens to arrest me on sight. My true love is eatin' her heart out, waitin' for me to come and claim her as my bride, whilst I lives here in exile!"

Bizz then wept bitterly on my shoulder till I throwed him off in some embarrassment.

"Whyn't yuh write her a letter, yuh dad-blamed fool?" I ast.

"I can't write, nor read, neither," he said. "And I don't trust nobody to send word to her by. She's so beautiful, the critter I'd send would probably fall in love with her hisself, the lowdown polecat!" Suddenly he grabbed my hand with both of his'n, and said, "Breck, you got a honest face, and I never did believe all they say about you, anyway. Whyn't you go and tell her?"

"I'll do better'n that if it'll keep you away from Betty," I says. "I'll bring this gal over here to Goshen."

"Yuh're a gent!" says he, wringing my hand. "I wouldn't entrust nobody else with sech a sacred mission. Jest go to the Silver Boot and tell Ace Middleton you want to see Gloria La Venner alone."

"All right," I said. "I'll rent a buckboard to bring her back in."

"I'll be countin' the hours till yuh heaves over the horizen with my true love!" declaimed he, reaching for the whiskey bottle.

So I hustled out, and who should I run into but that pore sapified shrimp of a Rudwell Shapley Joonyer in his monkey jacket and tight riding pants and varnished English boots. We like to had a collision as I barged through the swinging doors and he squeaked and staggered back and hollered: "Don't shoot!"

"Who said anything about shootin'?" I ast irritably, and he kind of got his color back and looked me over like I was a sideshow or something, like he always done.

"Your home," says he, "is a long way from here, is it not, Mister Elkins?"

"Yeah," I said. "I live on Wolf Mountain, 'way down near whar the Pecos runs into the Rio Grande."

"Indeed!" he says kind of hopefully. "I suppose you'll be returning soon?"

"Naw, I ain't," I says. "I'll probably stay here all fall."

"Oh!" says he dejectedly, and went off looking like somebody had kicked him in the pants. I wondered why he should git so down-in-the-mouth jest because I warn't goin' home. But them tenderfoots ain't got no sense and they ain't no use wasting time trying to figger out why they does things, because they don't generally know theirselves.

For instance, why should a object like Rudwell Shapley Jr. come to Goshen, I want to know? I ast him once p'int blank and he says it was a primitive urge so see life in the raw, whatever that means. I thought maybe he was talking about grub, but the cook at the Laramie Restaurant said he takes his beefsteaks well done like the rest of us.

Well, anyway, I got onto my hoss Cap'n Kidd and pulled for War Whoop which laid some miles west of Goshen. I warn't wasting no time, because the quicker I got Gloria La Venner to Goshen, the quicker I'd have a clear field with Betty. Of course it would of been easier and quicker jest to shoot Bizz, but I didn't know how Betty'd take it. Women is funny that way.

I figgered to eat dinner at the Half-Way House, a tavern which stood on the prairie about half-way betwix Goshen and War Whoop, but as I approached it I met a most pecooliar-looking object heading east.

I presently recognized it as a cowboy name Tump Garrison, and he looked like he'd been through a sorghum mill. His hat brim was pulled loose from the crown and hung around his neck like a collar, his clothes hung in rags. His face was skint all over, and one ear showed signs of having been chawed on long and earnestly.

"Where was the tornado?" I ast, pulling up.

He give me a suspicious look out of the eye he could still see with.

"Oh, it's you Breck," he says then. "My brains is so addled, I didn't recognize you at first. In fact," says he, tenderly caressing a lump on his head the size of a turkey aig, "It's jest a few minutes ago that I managed to remember my own name."

"What happened?" I ast with interest.

"I ain't shore," says he, spitting out three or four loose tushes. "Leastways I ain't shore jest what happened after that there table laig was shattered over my head. Things is a little foggy after that. But up to that time my memory is flawless.

"Briefly, Breck," says he, rising in his stirrups to rub his pants where they was the print of a boot heel, "I diskivered that I warn't welcome at the Half-Way House, and big as you be, I advises yuh to avoid it like yuh would the yaller j'indus."

"It's a public tavern," I says.

"It was," says he, working his right laig to see if it was still in j'int. "It was till Moose Harrison, the buffalo-hunter, arrove there to hold a private celebration of his own. He don't like cattle nor them which handles 'em. He told me so hisself, jest before he hit me with the bung-starter.

"He said he warn't aimin' to be pestered by no dern Texas cattle-pushers whilst he's enjoyin' a little relaxation. It was jest after issuin' this statement that he throwed me through the roulette wheel."

"You ain't from Texas," I said. "Yuh're from the Nations."

"That's what I told him whilst he was doin' a war-dance on my brisket," says Tump. "But he said he was too broadminded to bother with technicalities. Anyway, he says cowboys was the plague of the range, irregardless of where they come from."

"Oh, he did, did he?" I says irritably. "Well, I ain't huntin' trouble. I'm on a errand of mercy. But he better not shoot off his big mouth to me. I eats my dinner at the Half-Way House, regardless of all the buffler-hunters north of the Cimarron."

"I'd give a dollar to see the fun," says Tump. "But my other eye is closin' fast and I got to git amongst friends."

So he pulled for Goshen and I rode on to the Half-Way House, where I seen a big bay hoss tied to the hitch-rack. I watered Cap'n Kidd and went in. "Hssss!" the bartender says. "Git out as quick as yuh can! Moose Harrison's asleep in the back room!"

"I'm hongry," I responded, setting down at a table which stood nigh the bar. "Bring me a steak with pertaters and onions and a quart of coffee and a can of cling peaches. And whilst the stuff's cookin' gimme nine or ten bottles of beer to wash the dust out of my gullet."

"Lissen!" says the barkeep. "Reflect and consider. Yuh're young and life is sweet. Don't yuh know that Moose Harrison is pizen to anything that looks like a cowpuncher? When he's on a whiskey-tear, as at present, he's more painter than human. He's kilt more men--"

"Will yuh stop blattin' and bring me my rations?" I requested.

He shakes his head sad-like and says: "Well, all right. After all, it's yore hide. At least, try not to make no racket. He's swore to have the life blood of anybody which wakes him up."

I said I didn't want no trouble with nobody, and he tiptoed back to the kitchen and whispered my order to the cook, and then brung me nine or ten bottles of beer and slipped back behind the bar and watched me with morbid fascination.

I drunk the beer and whilst drinking I got to kind of brooding about Moose Harrison having the nerve to order everybody to keep quiet whilst he slept. But they're liars which claims I throwed the empty bottles at the door of the back room a-purpose to wake Harrison up.

When the waiter brung my grub I wanted to clear the table to make room for it, so I jest kind of tossed the bottles aside, and could I help it if they all busted on the back-room door? Was it my fault that Harrison was sech a light sleeper?

But the bartender moaned and ducked down behind the bar, and the waiter run through the kitchen and follered the cook in a sprint acrost the prairie, and a most remarkable beller burst forth from the back room.

The next instant the door was tore off the hinges and a enormous human come bulging into the barroom. He wore buckskins, his whiskers bristled, and his eyes was red as a drunk Comanche's.

"What in tarnation?" remarked he in a voice which cracked the winder panes. "Does my gol-blasted eyes deceive me? Is that there a cussed cowpuncher settin' there wolfin' beefsteak as brash as if he was a white man?"

"You ride herd on them insults!" I roared, rising sudden, and his eyes kind of popped when he seen I was about three inches taller'n him. "I got as much right here as you have."

"Name yore weppins," blustered he. He had a butcher knife and two six-shooters in his belt.

"Name 'em yoreself," I snorted. "If you thinks yuh're sech a hell-whizzer at fist-and-skull, why, shuck yore weppin-belt and I'll claw yore ears off with my bare hands!"

"That suits me!" says he. "I'll festoon that bar with yore innards," and he takes hold of his belt like he was going to unbuckle it--then, quick as a flash, he whipped out a gun. But I was watching for that and my right-hand .45 banged jest as his muzzle cleared leather.

The barkeep stuck his head up from behind the bar.

"Heck," he says wild-eyed, "you beat Moose Harrison to the draw, and him with the aidge! I wouldn't of believed it was possible if I hadn't saw it! But his friends will ride yore trail for this!"

"Warn't it self-defence?" I demanded.

"A clear case," says he. "But that won't mean nothin' to them wild and woolly buffalo-skinners. You better git back to Goshen where yuh got friends."

"I got business in War Whoop," I says. "Dang it, my coffee's cold. Dispose of the carcass and heat it up, will yuh?"

So he drug Harrison out, cussing because he was so heavy, and claiming I ought to help him. But I told him it warn't my tavern, and I also refused to pay for a decanter which Harrison's wild shot had busted. He got mad and said he hoped the buffalo-hunters did hang me. But I told him they'd have to ketch me without my guns first, and I slept with them on.

Then I finished my dinner and pulled for War Whoop.

It was about sundown when I got there, and I was purty hongry again. But I aimed to see Bizz's gal before I done anything else. So I put my hoss in the livery stable and seen he had a big feed, and then I headed for the Silver Boot, which was the biggest j'int in town.

There was plenty hilarity going on, but I seen no cowboys. The revelers was mostly gamblers, or buffalo-hunters, or soldiers, or freighters. War Whoop warn't popular with cattlemen. They warn't no buyers nor loading pens there, and for pleasure it warn't nigh as good a town as Goshen, anyway. I ast a barman where Ace Middleton was, and he p'inted out a big feller with a generous tummy decorated with a fancy vest and a gold watch chain about the size of a trace chain. He wore mighty handsome clothes and a diamond hoss-shoe stick pin and waxed mustache.

So I went up to him. He looked me over with very little favor.

"Oh, a cowpuncher, eh? Well, your money's as good as anybody's. Enjoy yourself, but don't get wild."

"I ain't aimin' to git wild," I says. "I want to see Gloria La Venner."

When I says that, he give a convulsive start and choked on his cigar. Everybody nigh us stopped laughing and talking and turned to watch us.

"What did you say?" he gurgled, gagging up the cigar. "Did I honestly hear you asking to see Gloria La Venner?"

"Shore," I says. "I aim to take her back to Goshen to git married--"

"You $&*!" says he, and grabbed up a table, broke off a laig and hit me over the head with it. It was most unexpected and took me plumb off guard.

I hadn't no idee what he was busting the table up for, and I was too surprised to duck. If it hadn't been for my Stetson it might of cracked my head. As it was, it knocked me back into the crowd, but before I could git my balance three or four bouncers grabbed me and somebody jerked my pistol out of the scabbard.

"Throw him out!" roared Ace, acting like a wild man. He was plumb purple in the face. "Steal my girl, will he? Hold him while I bust him in the snoot!"

He then rushed up and hit me very severely in the nose, whilst them bouncers was holding my arms. Well, up to that time I hadn't made no resistance. I was too astonished. But this was going too far, even if Ace was loco, as it appeared.

Nobody warn't holding my laigs, so I kicked Ace in the stummick and he curled up on the floor with a strangled shriek. I then started spurring them bouncers in the laigs and they yelled and let go of me, and somebody hit me in the ear with a blackjack.

That made me mad, so I reched for my bowie in my boot, but a big red-headed maverick kicked me in the face when I stooped down. That straightened me up, so I hit him on the jaw and he fell down acrost Ace which was holding his stummick and trying to yell for the city marshal.

Some low-minded scoundrel got a strangle-holt around my neck from behind and started beating me on the head with a pair of brass knucks. I ducked and throwed him over my head. Then I kicked out backwards and knocked over a couple more. But a scar-faced thug with a baseball bat got in a full-armed lick about that time and I went to my knees feeling like my skull was dislocated.

Six or seven of them then throwed theirselves onto me with howls of joy, and I seen I'd have to use vi'lence in spite of myself. So I drawed my bowie and started cutting my way through 'em. They couldn't of let go of me quicker if I'd been a cougar. They scattered every which-a-way, spattering blood and howling blue murder, and I riz r'aring and rampacious.

Somebody shot at me jest then, and I wheeled to locate him when a man run in at the door and p'inted a pistol at me. Before I could sling my knife through him, which was my earnest intention, he hollered:

"Drap yore deadly weppin! I'm the city marshal and yuh're under arrest!"

"What for?" I demanded. "I ain't done nothing."

"Nothing!" says Ace Middleton fiercely, as his menials lifted him onto his feet. "You've just sliced pieces out of five or six of our leading citizens! And there's my head bouncer, Red Croghan, out cold with a busted jaw. To say nothing of pushing my stomach through my spine. Ow! You must have mule blood in you, blast your soul!"

"Santry," he ordered the marshal, "he came in here drunk and raging and threatening, and started a fight for nothing. Do your duty! Arrest the cussed outlaw!"

Well, pap always tells me not to never resist no officer of the law, and anyway the marshal had my gun, and so many people was hollering and cussing and talking it kind of confused me. When they's any thinking to be did, I like to have a quiet place to do it and plenty of time.

So the first thing I knowed Santry had handcuffs on me and he hauls me off down the street with a big crowd follering and making remarks which is supposed to be funny. They come to a log hut with bars on the back winder, take off the handcuffs, shove me in and lock the door. There I was in jail without even seeing Gloria La Venner. It was plumb disgustful.

The crowd all hustled back to the Silver Boot to watch them fellers git sewed up which had fell afoul of my bowie, all but one fat cuss which said he was a guard, and he sot down in front of the jail with a double-barreled shotgun acrost his lap and went to sleep.

Well, there warn't nothing in the jail but a bunk with a hoss blanket on it, and a wooden bench. The bunk was too short for me to sleep on with any comfort, being built for a six foot man, so I sot down on it and waited for somebody to bring me some grub.

So after a while the marshal come and looked in at the winder and cussed me.

"It's a good thing for you," he says, "that yuh didn't kill none of them fellers. As it is, maybe we won't hang yuh."

"Yuh won't have to hang me if yuh don't bring me some grub purty soon," I said. "Are yuh goin' to let me starve in this dern jail?"

"We don't encourage crime in our town by feedin' criminals," he says. "If yuh want grub, gimme the money to buy it with."

I told him I didn't have but five bucks and I thought I'd pay my fine with that. He said five bucks wouldn't begin to pay my fine, so I gave him the five-spot to buy grub with, and he took it and went off.

I waited and waited, and he didn't come. I hollered to the guard, but he kept on snoring. Then purty soon somebody said: "Psst!" at the winder. I went over and looked out, and they was a woman standing behind the jail. The moon had come up over the prairie as bright as day, and though she had a cloak with a hood throwed over her, by what I could see of her face she was awful purty.

"I'm Gloria La Venner," says she. "I'm risking my life coming here, but I wanted to get a look at the man who was crazy enough to tell Ace Middleton he wanted to see me."

"What's crazy about that?" I ast.

"Don't you know Ace has killed three men already for trying to flirt with me?" says she. "Any man who can break Red Croghan's jaw like you did must be a bear-cat--but it was sheer madness to tell Ace you wanted to marry me."

"Aw, he never give me time to explain about that," I says. "It warn't me which wants to marry yuh. But what business is it of Middleton's? This here's a free country."

"That's what I thought till I started working for him," she says bitterly. "He fell in love with me, and he's so insanely jealous he won't let anybody even speak to me. He keeps me practically a prisoner and watches me like a hawk. I can't get away from him. Nobody in town dares to help me. They won't even rent me a horse at the livery stable.

"You see Ace owns most of the town, and lots of people are in debt to him. The rest are afraid of him. I guess I'll have to spend the rest of my life under his thumb," she says despairfully.

"Yuh won't, neither," I says. "As soon as I can git word to my friends in Goshen to send me a loan to pay my fine and git me out of this fool jail, I'll take yuh to Goshen where yore true love is pinin' for yuh."

"My true love?" says she, kind of startled-like. "What do you mean?"

"Bizz Ridgeway is in Goshen," I says. "He don't dare come after yuh hisself, so he sent me to fetch yuh."

She didn't say nothing for a spell, and then she spoke kind of breathless.

"All right, I must get back to the Silver Boot now, or Ace will miss me and start looking for me. I'll find Santry and pay your fine tonight. When he lets you out, come to the back door of the Silver Boot and wait in the alley. I'll come to you there as soon as I can slip away."

So I said all right, and she went away. The guard setting in front of the jail with his shotgun acrost his knees hadn't never woke up. But he did wake up about fifteen minutes after she left. A gang of men came up the street, whooping and cussing, and he jumped to his feet.

"Curses! Here comes Brant Hanson and a mob of them buffler-hunters, and they got a rope! They're headin' for the jail!"

"Who do yuh reckon they're after?" I inquired.

"They ain't nobody in jail but you," he suggested p'intedly. "And in about a minute they ain't goin' to be nobody nigh it but you and them. When Hanson and his bunch is in licker they don't care who they shoots!"

He then laid down his shotgun and lit a shuck down a back alley as hard as he could leg it.

So about a dozen buffalo-hunters in buckskins and whiskers come surging up to the jail and kicked on the door. They couldn't get the door open so they went around behind the shack and looked in at the winder.

"It's him, all right," said one of 'em. "Let's shoot him through the winder."

But the others said, "Naw, let's do the job in proper order," and I ast them what they wanted.

"We aims to hang yuh!" they answered enthusiastically.

"You cain't do that," I says. "It's agen the law."

"You kilt Moose Harrison!" said the biggest one, which they called Hanson.

"Well, it was a even break, and he tried to git the drop on me," I says.

Then Hanson says: "Enough of sech quibblin'. We made up our mind to hang yuh, so le's don't hear no more argyments about it. Here," he says to his pals, "tie a rope to the bars and we'll jerk the whole winder out. It'll be easier'n bustin' down the door. And hustle up, because I'm in a hurry to git back to that poker game in the R'arin' Buffalo."

So they tied a rope onto the bars and all laid onto it and heaved and grunted, and some of the bars come loose at one end. I picked up the bench aiming to bust their fool skulls with it as they clumb through the winder, but jest then another feller run up.

"Wait, boys," he hollered, "don't waste yore muscle. I jest seen Santry down at the Topeka Queen gamblin' with the money he taken off that dern cowboy, and he gimme the key to the door."

So they abandoned the winder and surged arount to the front of the jail, and I quick propped the bench agen the door, and run to the winder and tore out them bars which was already loose. I could hear 'em rattling at the door, and as I clumb through the winder one of 'em said: "The lock's turned but the door's stuck. Heave agen it."

So whilst they hev I run around the jail and picks up the guard's shotgun where he'd dropped it when he run off. Jest then the bench inside give way and the door flew open, and all them fellers tried to crowd through. As a result they was all jammed in the door and cussin' something fierce.

"Quit crowdin'," yelled Hanson. "Holy catamount, he's gone! The jail's empty!"

I then up with my shotgun and give 'em both barrels in the seat of their britches, which was the handiest to aim at, and they let out a most amazing squall and busted loose and fell headfirst into the jail. Some of 'em kept on going head-down like they'd started and hit the back wall so hard it knocked 'em stiff, and the others fell over 'em.

They was all tangled in a pile cussing and yelling to beat the devil, so I slammed the door and locked it and run around behind the jail house. Hanson was trying to climb out the winder, so I hit him over the head with my shotgun and he fell back inside and hollered.

"Halp! I'm mortally injured!"

"Shet up that unseemly clamor," I says sternly. "Ain't none of yuh hurt bad. Throw yore guns out the winder and lay down on the floor. Hustle, before I gives you another blast through the winder."

They didn't know the shotgun was empty, so they throwed their weppins out in a hurry and laid down, but they warn't quiet about it. They seemed to consider they'd been subjected to crooel and onusual treatment, and the birdshot in their sterns must of been a-stinging right smart, because the language they used was plumb painful to hear. I stuck a couple of their pistols in my belt.

"If one of you shows his head at that winder within a hour," I said, "he'll git it blowed off."

I then snuck back into the shadders and headed for the livery stable.

The livery stable man was reading a newspaper by a lantern, and he looked surprised and said he thought I was in jail. I ignored this remark, and told him to hitch me a fast hoss to a buckboard whilst I saddled Cap'n Kidd.

"Wait a minute!" says he. "I hear tell yuh told Ace Middleton yuh aimed to elope with Gloria La Venner. Yuh takin' this rig for her?"

"Yes, I am," I says.

"Well I'm a friend of Middleton's," he says, "and I won't rent yuh no rig under no circumstances."

"Then git outa my way," I said. "I'll hitch the hoss up myself."

He then drawed a bowie so I clinched with him, and as we was rasseling around he sort of knocked his head agen a swingletree I happen to have in my hand at the time, and collapses with a low gurgle. So I tied him up and rolled him under a oats bin. I also rolled out a buckboard and hitched the best-looking harness hoss I could find to it, but them folks is liars which is going around saying I stole that there outfit. It was sent back later.

I saddles my hoss and tied him on behind the buckboard and got in and started for the Silver Boot, wondering how long it would take them fool buffalo-hunters to find out I was jest bluffing, and warn't lying out behind the jail to shoot 'em as they climb out.

I turnt into the alley which run behind the Silver Boot and then tied the hosses and went up to the back door and peeked in. Gloria was there. She grabbed me and I could feel her trembling.

"I thought you'd never come!" she whispered. "It'll be time for my singing-act again in just a few minutes. I've been waiting here ever since I paid Santry your fine. What kept you so long? He left the Silver Boot as soon as I gave him the money."

"He never turned me out, the low-down skunk," I muttered. "Some--er--friends got me out. Come on, git in the buckboard."

I helped her up and gave her the lines.

"I got a debt to settle before I leave town," I said. "You go on and wait for me at that clump of cottonwoods east of town. I'll be on purty soon."

So she pulled out in a hurry and I got onto Cap'n Kidd. I rode him around to the front of the Silver Boot, tied him to the hitch-rack and dismounted. The Silver Boot was crowded. I could see Ace strutting around chawing a big black cigar, and joking and slapping folks on the back.

Everybody was having sech a hilarious time nobody noticed me as I stood in the doorway, so I pulled the buffalo-hunters' .45's, and let bam at the mirror behind the bar. The barman yelped and ducked the flying glass, and everybody whirled and gaped, and Ace jerked his cigar out of his mouth and bawled:

"It's that dern cowpuncher again! Get him!"

But them bouncers had seen my guns, and they was shying away, all except the scar-faced thug which had hit me with the bat, and he whipped a gun from under his vest. So I shot him through the right shoulder, and he fell over behind the monte table.

I begun to spray the crowd with hot lead free and generous and they stampeded every which-a-way. Some went through the winder, glass and all, and some went out the side doors, and some busted down the back door in their flight.

I likewise riddled the mirror behind the bar and shot down some of the hanging lamps and busted most of the bottles on the shelves.

Ace ducked behind a stack of beer kaigs and opened fire on me, but he showed pore judgement in not noticing he was right under a hanging lamp. I shot if off the ceiling and it fell down on his head, and you ought to of heard him holler when the burning ile run down his wuthless neck.

He come prancing into the open, wiping his neck with one hand and trying to shoot me with the other'n, and I drilled him through the hind laig. He fell down and bellered like a bull with its tail cotched in a fence gate.

"You dern murderer!" says he passionately. "I'll have yore life for this!"

"Shet up!" I snarled. "I'm jest payin' yuh back for all the pain and humiliation I suffered in this den of iniquity--"

At this moment a bartender riz up from behind a billiard table with a sawed-off shotgun, but I shot it out of his hands before he could cock it, and he fell over backwards hollering: "Spare my life!" Jest then somebody yelled: "Halt, in the name of the law!" and I looked around and it was that tinhorn marshal named Santry with a gun in his hand.

"I arrests you again!" he bawled. "Lay down yore weppins!"

"I'll lay yore carcase down," I responded. "Yuh ain't fitten for to be no law-officer. Yuh gambled away the five dollars I give yuh for grub, and yuh took the fine-money Miss La Venner give yuh, and didn't turn me out, and yuh give the key to them mobsters which wanted to hang me. You ain't no law. Yuh're a dern outlaw yoreself. Now yuh got a gun in yore hand same as me. Either start shootin' or throw it down!"

Well, he hollered, "Don't shoot!" and throwed it down and h'isted his hands. I seen he had my knife and pistol stuck in his belt, so I took them off of him, and tossed the .45's I'd been using onto the billiard table and said, "Give these back to the buffalo-hunters."

But jest then he whipped out a .38 he was wearing under his arm, and shot at me and knocked my hat off, and then he turnt and run around the end of the bar, all bent over to git his head below it. So I grabbed the bartender's shotgun and let bam with both barrels jest as his rear end was going out of sight.

He shrieked blue ruin and started having a fit behind the bar, so I throwed the shotgun through the roulette wheel and stalked forth, leaving Ace and the bouncer and the marshal wailing and wallering on the floor. It was plumb disgustful the way they wept and cussed over their trifling injuries.

I come out on the street so sudden that them cusses which was hiding behind the hoss trough to shoot me as I come out, was took by surprise and only grazed me in a few places, so I throwed a few slugs amongst 'em and they took to their heels.

I got on Cap'n Kidd and headed east down the street, ignoring the shots fired at me from the alleys and winders. That is, I ignored 'em except to shoot back at 'em as I run, and I reckon that's how the mayor got the lobe of his ear shot off. I thought I heard somebody holler when I answered a shot fired at me from behind the mayor's board fence.

Well, when I got to the clump of cottonwoods there warn't no sign of Gloria, the hoss, or the buckboard, but there was a note stuck up on a tree which I grabbed and read by the light of the moon.

It said:

Dear Tejano:

Your friend must have been kidding you. I never even knew anybody named Bizz Ridgeway. But I'm taking this chance of getting away from Ace. I'm heading for Trevano Springs, and I'll send back the buckboard from there. Thank you for everything.

Gloria La Venner.

I got to Goshen about sunup, having loped all the way. Bizz Ridgeway was at the bar of the Spanish Mustang, and when he seen me he turned pale and dived for the winder, but I grabbed him.

"What you mean by tellin' me that lie about you and Gloria La Venner?" I demanded wrathfully. "Was you tryin' to git me kilt?"

"Well," says he, "to tell the truth, Breck, I was. All's fair in love or war, yuh know. I wanted to git yuh out of the way so I'd have a clear field with Betty Wilkinson, and I knowed about Ace Middleton and Gloria, and figgered he'd do the job if I sent yuh over there. But yuh needn't git mad. It didn't do me no good. Betty's already married."

"What?" I yelled.

He ducked instinctively.

"Yeah!" he says. "He took advantage of yore absence to pop the question, and she accepted him, and they're on their way to Kansas City for their honeymoon. He never had the nerve to ast her when you was in town, for fear yuh'd shoot him. They're goin' to live in the East because he's too scairt of you to come back."

"Who?" I screamed, foaming slightly at the mouth.

"Rudwell Shapley Jr.," says he. "It's all yore fault--"

It was at this moment that I dislocated Bizz Ridgeway's hind laig. I likewise defies the criticism which has been directed at this perfectly natural action. A Elkins with a busted heart is no man to trifle with.

THE END

Contents

THE APACHE MOUNTAIN WAR

By Robert E. Howard

Some day, maybe, when I'm old and gray in the whiskers, I'll have sense enough not to stop when I'm riding by Uncle Shadrach Polk's cabin, and Aunt Tascosa Polk hollers at me. Take the last time, for instance. I ought to of spurred Cap'n Kidd into a high run when she stuck her head out'n the winder and yelled: "Breckinridge! Oh, Breckinridddgggge!"

But I reckon pap's right when he says Nater gimme so much muscle she didn't have no room left for brains. Anyway, I reined Cap'n Kidd around, ignoring his playful efforts to bite the muscle out of my left thigh, and I rode up to the stoop and taken off my coonskin-cap. I said: "Well, Aunt Tascosa, how air you all?"

"You may well ast how air we," she said bitterly. "How should a pore weak woman be farin' with a critter like Shadrach for a husband? It's a wonder I got a roof over my head, or so much as a barr'l of b'ar meat put up for the winter. The place is goin' to rack and rooin. Look at that there busted axe-handle, for a instance. Is a pore weak female like me got to endure sech abuse?"

"You don't mean to tell me Uncle Shadrach's been beatin' you with that axe-handle?" I says, scandalized.

"No," says this pore weak female. "I busted it over his head a week ago, and he's refused to mend it. It's licker is been Shadrach's rooin. When he's sober he's a passable figger of a man, as men go. But swiggin' blue rooin is brung him to shame an' degradation."

"He looks fat and sassy," I says.

"Beauty ain't only skin-deep," she scowls. "Shadrach's like Dead Sea fruit--fair and fat-bellied to look on, but ready to dissolve in dust and whiskey fumes when prodded. Do you know whar he is right now?" And she glared at me so accusingly that Cap'n Kidd recoiled and turned pale.

"Naw," says I. "Whar?"

"He's over to the Apache Mountain settlement a-lappin' up licker," she snarled. "Just a-rootin' and a-wallerin' in sin and corn juice, riskin' his immortal soul and blowin' in the money he got off'n his coon hides. I had him locked in the corn crib, aimin' to plead with him and appeal to his better nater, but whilst I was out behind the corral cuttin' me a hickory club to do the appealin' with, he kicked the door loose and skun out. I know whar he's headin'--to Joel Garfield's stillhouse, which is a abomination in the sight of the Lord and oughta be burnt to the ground and the ashes skwenched with the blood of the wicked. But I cain't stand here listenin' to yore gab. I got hominy to make. What you mean wastin' my time like this for? I got a good mind to tell yore pap on you. You light a shuck for Apache Mountain and bring Shadrach home."

"But--" I said.

"Don't you give me no argyments, you imperdent scoundrel!" she hollered. "I should think you'd be glad to help a pore, weak female critter 'stead of wastin' yore time gamblin' and fightin', in such dens of iniquity as War Paint. I want you to fix some way so's to disgust Shadrach with drink for the rest of his nateral life, and if you don't you'll hear from me, you good-for-nothin'--"

"All right!" I yelled. "All right! Anything for a little peace! I'll git him and bring him home, and make a teetotaler outa him if I have to strangle the old son of a--"

"How dast you use sech langwidge in front of me?" she hollered. "Ain't you got no respect for a lady? I'll be #4%*@?-!'d if I know what the &%$@* world's comin' to! Git outa here and don't show yore homely mug around here again onless you git Shadrach off of rum for good!"

WELL, IF UNCLE SHADRACH ever took a swig of rum in his life it was because they warn't no good red corn whiskey within reach, but I didn't try to argy with Aunt Tascosa. I lit out down the trail feeling like I'd been tied up to a Apache stake with the whole tribe sticking red-hot Spanish daggers into my hide. Aunt Tascosa affects a man that way. I heard Cap'n Kidd heave a sigh of relief plumb up from his belly, too, as we crossed a ridge and her distant voice was drowned out by the soothing noises of a couple of bobcats fighting with a timber wolf. I thought what ca'm and happy lives them simple critters lived, without no Aunt Tascosa.

I rode on, forgetting my own troubles in feeling sorry for pore Uncle Shadrach. They warn't a mean bone in his carcass. He was just as good-natered and hearty a critter as you'd ever meet even in the Humbolts. But his main object in life seemed to be to stow away all the corn juice they is in the world.

As I rode along I racked my brain for a plan to break Uncle Shadrach of this here habit. I like a dram myself, but in moderation, never more'n a gallon or so at a time, unless it's a special occasion. I don't believe in a man making a hawg out of hisself, and anyway I was sick and tired running Uncle Shadrach down and fetching him home from his sprees.

I thought so much about it on my way to Apache Mountain that I got so sleepy I seen I was gitting into no state to ride Cap'n Kidd. He got to looking back at me now and then, and I knowed if he seen me dozing in the saddle he'd try his derndest to break my neck. I was passing Cousin Bill Gordon's barn about that time, so I thought I'd go in and take me a nap up in the hayloft, and maybe I'd dream about a way to make a water-drinker out of Uncle Shadrach or something.

I tied Cap'n Kidd and started into the barn, and what should I see but Bill's three youngest boys engaged in daubing paint on Uncle Jeppard Grimes' favorite jackass, Joshua.

"What air you all a-doin' to Joshua?" I demanded, and they jumped back and looked guilty. Joshua was a critter which Uncle Jeppard used for a pack-mule when he went prospecting. He got the urge maybe every three or four year, and between times Joshua just et and slept. He was the sleepin'est jackass I ever seen. He was snoozing now, whilst them young idjits was working on him.

I seen what they was at. Bill had loaned a feller some money which had a store down to War Paint, and the feller went broke, and give Bill a lot of stuff outa the store for pay. They was a lot of paint amongst it. Bill packed it home, though I dunno what he aimed to do with it, because all the houses in the Humbolts was log cabins which nobody ever painted, or if they did, they just white-washed 'em. But anyway, he had it all stored in his barn, and his boys was smearing it on Joshua.

He was the derndest sight you ever seen. They'd painted a big stripe down his spine, like a Spanish mustang, only this stripe was green instead of black, and more stripes curving over his ribs and down under his belly, red, white and blue, and they'd painted his ears green.

"What you all mean by sech doin's?" I ast. "Uncle Jeppard'll plumb skin you all alive. He sets a lot of store by that there jack."

"Aw, it's just funnin'," they said. "He won't know who done it."

"You go scrub that paint off," I ordered 'em. "Joshua'll lick it off and git pizened."

"It won't hurt him," they assured me. "He got in here yesterday and et three cans of paint and a bucket of whitewash. That's what give us the idee. He kin eat anything. Eatin'est jack you ever seen."

"Heh, heh, heh!" snickered one of 'em. "He looks like a drunkard's dream!"

Instantly a idee hit me.

"Gimme that jackass!" I exclaimed. "He's just what I need to kyore Uncle Shadrach Polk of drinkin' licker. One glimpse of that there jack in his present state and Uncle Shadrach'll think he's got the delerious trimmin's and git so scairt he'll swear off whiskey for life."

"If you aims to lead Joshua to Joel's stillhouse," they said, "you'll be all day gittin' there. You cain't hustle Joshua."

"I ain't goin to lead him," I said. "You all hitch a couple of mules to yore pa's spring wagon. I'll leave Cap'n Kidd here till I git back."

"We'll put him in the corral behind the barn," they says. "Them posts are set four foot deep in concrete and the fence is braced with railroad iron, so maybe it'll hold him till you git back, if you ain't gone too long."

WHEN THEY GOT THE mules hitched, I tied Joshua's laigs and laid him in the wagon bed, where he went to sleep, and I climbed onto the seat and lit out for Apache Mountain. I hadn't went far when I run over a rock and woke Joshua up and he started braying and kept it up till I stopped and give him a ear of corn to chew on. As I started off again I seen Dick Grimes' youngest gal peeping at me from the bresh, and when I called to her she run off. I hoped she hadn't heard Joshua braying. I knowed she couldn't see him, laying down in the

wagon bed, but he had a very pecooliar bray and anybody in the Humbolts could recognize him by it. I hoped she didn't know I had Joshua, because she was the derndest tattletale in the Bear Creek country, and Uncle Jeppard is such a cross-grained old cuss you can't explain nothing to him. He was born with the notion that the whole world was plotting agen him.

It hadn't been much more'n good daylight when I rode past Uncle Shadrach's house, and I'd pushed Cap'n Kidd purty brisk from there; the mules made good time, so it warn't noon yet when I come to Apache Mountain. As I approached the settlement, which was a number of cabins strung up and down a breshy run, I swung wide of the wagon-road and took to the trails, because I didn't want nobody to see me with Joshua. It was kind of tough going, because the trails was mostly footpaths and not wide enough for the wagon, and I had to stop and pull up saplings every few yards. I was scairt the noise would wake up Joshua and he'd start braying again, but that jackass could sleep through a bombardment, long as he warn't being jolted personal.

I was purty close to the settlement when I had to git out of the wagon and go ahead and break down some bresh so the wheels wouldn't foul, and when I laid hold of it, a couple of figgers jumped up on the other side. One was Cousin Buckner Kirby's gal Kit, and t'other'n was young Harry Braxton from the other side of the mountain, and no kin to none of us.

"Oh!" says Kit, kind of breathless.

"What you all doin' out here?" I scowled, fixing Harry with a eye which made him shiver and fuss with his gun-belt. "Air yore intentions honorable, Braxton?"

"I dunno what business it is of yore'n," said Kit bitterly.

"I makes it mine," I assured her. "If this young buck cain't come sparkin' you at a respectable place and hour, why, I figgers--"

"Yore remarks is ignorant and insultin'," says Harry, sweating profusely, but game. "I aims to make this here young lady my wife, if it warn't for the toughest prospective father-in-law ever blighted young love's sweet dream with a number twelve boot in the seat of the pants."

"To put it in words of one syllable so's even you can understand, Breckinridge," says Kit, "Harry wants to marry me, but pap is too derned mean and stubborn to let us. He don't like the Braxtons account of one of 'em skun him in a hoss-swap thirty years ago."

"I don't love 'em myself," I grunted. "But go on."

"Well," she says, "after pap had kicked Harry out of the house five or six times, and dusted his britches with birdshot on another occasion, we kind of got the idee that he was prejudiced agen Harry. So we has to take this here method of seein' each other."

"Whyn't you all run off and git married anyway?" I ast.

Kit shivered. "We wouldn't dare try it. Pap might wake up and catch us, and he'd shoot Harry. I taken a big chance sneakin' out here today. Ma and the kids are all over visitin' a few days with Aunt Ouachita, but pap wouldn't let me go for fear I'd meet Harry over there. I snuck out here for a few minutes--pap thinks I'm gatherin' greens for dinner--but if I don't hustle back he'll come lookin' for me with a hickory gad."

"Aw, shucks," I said. "You all got to use yore brains like I do. You leave it to me. I'll git yore old man out of the way for the night, and give you a chance to skip."

"How'll you do that?" Kit ast skeptically.

"Never mind," I told her, not having the slightest idee how I was going to do it. "I'll 'tend to that. You git yore things ready, and you, Harry, you come along the road in a buckboard just about moonrise, and Kit'll be waitin' for you. You all can git hitched over to War Paint. Buckner won't do nothin' after yo're hitched."

"Will you, shore enough?" says Harry, brightening up.

"Shore I will," I assured him. "Vamoose now, and git that buckboard."

HE HUSTLED OFF, AND I said to Kit: "Git in the wagon and ride to the settlement with me. This time tomorrer you'll be a happy married woman shore enough."

"I hope so," she said sad-like. "But I'm bettin' somethin' will go wrong and pap'll catch us, and I'll eat my meals off the mantel-board for the next week."

"Trust me," I assured her, as I helped her in the wagon.

She didn't seem much surprised when she looked down in the bed and seen Joshua all tied up and painted and snoring his head off. Humbolt folks expects me to do onusual things.

"You needn't look like you thought I was crazy," I says irritably. "That critter is for Uncle Shadrach Polk."

"If Uncle Shadrach sees that thing," says she, "he'll think he's seein' worse'n snakes."

"That's what I aim for him to think," I says. "Who's he stayin' with?"

"Us," says she.

"Hum!" I says. "That there complicates things a little. Whar-at does he sleep?"

"Upstairs," she says.

"Well," I says, "he won't interfere with our elopement none. You git outa here and go on home, and don't let yore pap suspect nothin'."

"I'd be likely to, wouldn't I?" says she, and clumb down and pulled out.

I'd stopped in a thicket at the aidge of the settlement, and I could see the roof of Cousin Buckner's house from where I was. I could also hear Cousin Buckner bellering: "Kit! Kit! Whar air you? I know you ain't in the garden. If I have to come huntin' you, I 'low I'll--"

"Aw, keep yore britches on," I heard Kit call. "I'm a-comin'!"

I heard Cousin Buckner subside into grumblings and rumblings like a grizzly talking to hisself. I figgered he was out on the road which run past his house, but I couldn't see him and neither he couldn't see me, nor nobody could which might happen to be passing along the road. I onhitched the mules and tied 'em where they could graze and git water, and I h'isted Joshua outa the wagon, and taken the ropes offa his laigs and tied him to a tree, and fed him and the mules with some corn I'd brung from Cousin Bill Gordon's. Then I went through the bresh till I come to Joel Garfield's stillhouse, which was maybe half a mile from there, up the run. I didn't meet nobody.

Joel was by hisself in the stillhouse, for a wonder, but he was making up for lack of trade by his own personal attention to his stock.

"Ain't Uncle Shadrach Polk nowhere around?" I ast, and Joel lowered a jug of white corn long enough to answer me.

"Naw," he says, "he ain't right now. He's likely still sleepin' off the souse he was on last night. He didn't leave here till after midnight," says Joel, with another pull at the jug, "and he was takin' all sides of the road to onst. He'll pull in about the middle of the afternoon and start in to fillin' his hide so full he can just barely stagger back to Buckner Kirby's house by midnight or past. I bet he has a fine old time navigatin' them stairs Buckner's got into his house. I'd be afeared to tackle 'em myself, even when I was sober. A pole ladder is all I want to git into a loft with, but Buckner always did have high-falutin' idees. Lately he's been argyin' with Uncle Shadrach to cut down on his drinkin'--specially when he's full hisself."

"Speakin' of Cousin Buckner," I says, "has he been around for his regular dram yet?"

"Not yet," says Joel. "He'll be in right after dinner, as usual."

"He wouldn't if he knowed what I knowed," I opined, because I'd thought up a way to git Cousin Buckner out of the way that night. "He'd be headin' for Wolf Canyon fast as he could spraddle. I just met Harry Braxton with a pack-mule headin' for there."

"You don't mean somebody's made a strike in Wolf Canyon?" says Joel, pricking up his ears.

"You never heard nothin' like it," I assured him. "Alder Gulch warn't nothin' to this."

"Hum!" says Joel, absent-mindedly pouring hisself a quart-size tin cup full of corn juice.

"I'm a Injun if it ain't!" I says, and dranken me a dram and went back to lay in the bresh and watch the Kirby house. I was well pleased with myself, because I knowed what a wolf Cousin Buckner was after gold. If anything could draw him away from home and his daughter, it would be news of a big strike. I was willing to bet my six-shooters against a prickly pear that as soon as Joel told him the news, he'd light out for Wolf Canyon. More especially as he'd think Harry Braxton was going there, too, and no chance of him sneaking off with Kit whilst the old man was gone.

* * * *

AFTER A WHILE I SEEN Cousin Buckner leave the house and go down the road towards the stillhouse, and purty soon Uncle Shadrach emerged and headed the same way. Purty well satisfied with myself, I went back to where I left Cousin Bill's wagon, and fried me five or six pounds of venison I'd brung along for provisions and et it, and drunk at the creek, and then laid down and slept for a few hours.

It was right at sundown when I woke up. I went on foot through the bresh till I come out behind Buckner's cow-pen and seen Kit milking. I ast her if anybody was in the house.

"Nobody but me," she said. "And I'm out here. I ain't seen neither pap nor Uncle Shadrach since they left right after dinner. Can it be yore scheme is actually workin' out?"

"Certainly," I says. "Uncle Shadrach'll be swillin' at Joel's stillhouse till past midnight, and yore pap is ondoubtedly on his way towards Wolf Canyon. You git through with yore chores, and git ready to skip. Don't have no light in yore room, though. It's just likely yore pap told off one of his relatives to lay in the bresh and watch the house--him bein' of a suspicious nater. We don't want to have no bloodshed. When I hear Harry's buckboard I'll come for you. And if you hear any pecooliar noises before he gits here, don't think nothin' of it. It'll just be me luggin' Joshua upstairs."

"That critter'll bray fit to wake the dead," says she.

"He won't, neither," I said. "He'll go to sleep and keep his mouth shet. Uncle Shadrach won't suspect nothin' till he lights him a candle to go to bed by. Or if he's too drunk to light a candle, and just falls down on the bed in the dark, he'll wake up durin' the night some time to git him a drink of water. He's bound to see Joshua some time between midnight and mornin'. All I hope is the shock won't prove fatal. You go git ready to skip now."

I went back to the wagon and cooked me some more venison, also about a dozen aigs Kit had give me along with some corn pone and a gallon of buttermilk. I managed to make a light snack out of them morsels, and then, as soon as it was good and dark, I hitched up the mules and loaded Joshua into the wagon and went slow and easy down the road. I stopped behind the corral and tied the mules.

The house was dark and still. I toted Joshua into the house and carried him upstairs. I heard Kit moving around in her room, but they warn't nobody else in the house.

COUSIN BUCKNER HAD regular stairs in his house like what they have in big towns like War Paint and the like. Most folks in the Bear Creek country just has a ladder going up through a trap-door, and some said they would be a jedgment onto Buckner account of him indulging in such vain and sinful luxury, but I got to admit that packing a jackass up a flight of stairs was a lot easier than what it would have been to lug him up a ladder.

Joshua didn't bray nor kick none. He didn't care what was happening to him so long as he didn't have to do no work personal. I onfastened his laigs and tied a rope around his neck and t'other end to the foot of Uncle Shadrach's bunk, and give him a hat I found on a pag to chaw on till he went to sleep, which I knowed he'd do pronto.

I then went downstairs and heard Kit fussing around in her room, but it warn't time for Harry, so I went back out behind the corral and sot down and leaned my back agen the fence, and I reckon I must of gone to sleep. Just associating with Joshua give a man the habit. First thing I knowed I heard a buckboard rumbling over a bridge up the draw, and knowed it was Harry coming in fear and trembling to claim his bride. The moon warn't up yet but they was a glow above the trees on the eastern ridges.

I jumped up and ran quick and easy to Kit's winder--I can move light as a cougar in spite of my size--and I said: "Kit, air you ready?"

"I'm ready!" she whispered, all of a tremble. "Don't talk so loud!"

"They ain't nothin' to be scairt of," I soothed her, but lowered my voice just to humor her. "Yore pap is in Wolf Canyon by this time. Ain't nobody in the house but us. I been watchin' out by the corral."

Kit sniffed.

"Warn't that you I heard come into the house while ago?" she ast.

"You been dreamin'," I said. "Come on! That's Harry's buckboard comin' up the road."

"Lemme get just a few more things together!" she whispered, fumbling around in the dark. That's just like a woman. No matter how much time they has aforehand, they always has something to do at the last minute.

I waited by the winder and Harry druv on past the house a few rods and tied the hoss and come back, walking light and soft, and plenty pale in the starlight.

"Go on out the front door and meet him," I told her. "No, wait!"

Because all to onst Harry had ducked back out of the road, and he jumped over the fence and come to the winder where I was. He was shaking like a leaf.

"Somebody comin' up the road afoot!" he says.

"It's pap!" gasped Kit. Her and Harry was shore scairt of the old man. They hadn't said a word above a whisper you could never of heard three yards away, and I was kinda suiting my voice to their'n.

"Aw, it cain't be!" I said. "He's in Wolf Canyon. That's Uncle Shadrach comin' home to sleep off his drunk, but he's back a lot earlier'n what I figgered he would be. He ain't important, but we don't want no delay. Here, Kit, gimme that bag. Now lemme lift you outa the winder. So! Now you all skin out. I'm goin' to climb this here tree whar I can see the fun. Git!"

They crope out the side-gate of the yard just as Uncle Shadrach come in at the front gate, and he never seen 'em because the house was between 'em. They went so soft and easy I thought if Cousin Buckner had been in the house he wouldn't of woke up. They was hustling down the road towards the buckboard as Uncle Shadrach was coming up on the porch and going into the hall. I could hear him climbing the stair. I could of seen him if they'd been a light in the house, because I could look into a winder in his room and one in the downstairs hall, too, from the tree where I was setting.

He got into his room about the time the young folks reached their buckboard, and I seen a light flare up as he struck a match. They warn't no hall upstairs. The stairs run right up to the door of his room. He stood in the doorway and lit a candle on a shelf by the door. I could see Joshua standing by the bunk with his head down, asleep, and I reckon the light must of woke him up, because he throwed up his head and give a loud and ringing bray. Uncle Shadrach turned and seen Joshua and he let out a shriek and fell backwards downstairs.

THE CANDLE LIGHT STREAMED down into the hall, and I got the shock of my life. Because as Uncle Shadrach went pitching down them steps, yelling bloody murder, they sounded a bull's roar below, and out of the room at the foot of the stair come prancing a huge figger waving a shotgun in one hand and pulling on his britches with the other'n. It was Cousin Buckner which I thought was safe in Wolf Canyon! That'd been him which Kit heard come in and go to bed awhile before!

"What's goin' on here?" he roared. "What you doin', Shadrach?"

"Git outa my way!" screamed Uncle Shadrach. "I just seen the devil in the form of a zebray jackass! Lemme outa here!"

He busted out of the house, and jumped the fence and went up the road like a quarter-hoss, and Cousin Buckner run out behind him. The moon was just comin' up, and Kit and Harry was just starting down the road. When she seen her old man irrupt from the house, Kit screeched like a scairt catamount, and Buckner heard her. He whirled and seen the buckboard rattling down the road and he knowed what was happening. He give a beller and let bam at 'em with his shotgun, but it was too long a range.

"Whar's my hoss?" he roared, and started for the corral. I knowed if he got astraddle of that derned long-laigged bay gelding of his'n, he'd ride them pore infants down before they'd went ten miles. I jumped down out of the tree and yelled: "Hey, there, Cousin Buckner! Hey, Buck--"

He whirled and shot the tail offa my coonskin cap before he seen who it was.

"What you mean jumpin' down on me like that?" he roared. "What you doin' up that tree? Whar you come from?"

"Never-mind that," I said. "You want to catch Harry Braxton before he gits away with yore gal, don't you? Don't stop to saddle a hoss. I got a light wagon hitched up behind the corral. We can run 'em down easy in that."

"Let's go!" he roared, and in no time at all we was off, him standing up in the bed and cussing and waving his shotgun.

"I'll have his sculp!" he roared. "I'll pickle his heart and feed it to my houn' dawgs! Cain't you go no faster?"

Them dern mules was a lot faster than I'd thought. I didn't dare hold 'em back for fear Buckner would git suspicious, and the first thing I knowed we was overhauling the buckboard foot by foot. Harry's critters warn't much account, and Cousin Bill Gordon's mules was laying their bellies to the ground.

I dunno what Kit thought when she looked back and seen us tearing after 'em, but Harry must of thought I was betraying 'em, otherwise he wouldn't of opened up on me with his six-shooter. But all he done was to knock some splinters out of the wagon and nick my shoulder. The old man would of returned the fire with his shotgun but he was scairt he might hit Kit, and both vehicles was bounding and bouncing along too fast and furious for careful aiming.

All to onst we come to a place where the road forked, and Kit and Harry taken the right-hand turn. I taken the left.

"Are you crazy, you blame fool?" roared Cousin Buckner. "Turn back and take the other road!"

"I cain't!" I responded. "These mules is runnin' away!"

"Yo're a liar!" howled Cousin Buckner. "Quit pourin' leather into them mules, you blasted #$%&@*, and turn back! Turn back, cuss you!" With that he started hammering me in the head with the stock of his shotgun.

WE WAS THUNDERING along a road which run along the rim of a sloping bluff, and when Buckner's shotgun went off accidentally the mules really did git scairt and started running away, just about the time I reached back to take the shotgun away from Cousin Buckner. Being beat in the head with the butt was getting awful monotonous, because he'd been doing nothing else for the past half mile.

I yanked the gun out of his hand and just then the left hind wheel hit a stump and the hind end of the wagon went straight up in the air and the pole splintered. The mules run right out of the harness and me and the wagon and Cousin Buckner went over the bluff and down the slope in a whirling tangle of wheels and laigs and heads and profanity.

We brung up against a tree at the bottom, and I throwed the rooins off of me and riz, swearing fervently when I seen how much money I'd have to pay Cousin Bill Gordon for his wagon. But Cousin Buckner give me no time for meditation. He'd ontangled hisself from a hind wheel and was doing a war-dance in the moonlight and frothing at the mouth.

"You done that on purpose!" he raged. "You never aimed to ketch them wretches! You taken the wrong road on purpose! You turned us over on purpose! Now I'll never ketch the scoundrel which run away with my datter--the pore, dumb, trustin' #$%&f!@* innercent!"

"Be ca'm, Cousin Buckner," I advised. "He'll make her a good husband. They're well onto their way to War Paint and a happy married life. Best thing you can do is forgive 'em and give 'em yore blessin'."

"Well," he snarled, "you ain't neither my datter nor my son-in-law. Here's my blessin' to you!"

It was a pore return for all the trouble I'd taken for him to push me into a cactus bed and hit me with a rock the size of a watermelon. However, I taken into consideration that he was overwrought and not hisself, so I ignored his incivility and made no retort whatever, outside of splintering a wagon spoke over his head.

I then clumb the bluff, making no reply to his impassioned and profane comments, and looked around for the mules. They hadn't run far. I seen 'em grazing down the road, and I started after 'em, when I heard horses galloping back up the road toward the settlement, and around a turn in the road come Uncle Jeppard Grimes with his whiskers streaming in the moonlight, and nine or ten of his boys riding hard behind him.

"Thar he is!" he howled, impulsively discharging his six-shooter at me. "Thar's the fiend in human form! Thar's the kidnaper of helpless jassacks! Boys, do yore duty!"

They pulled up around me and started piling off their horses with blood in their eyes and weppins in their hands.

"Hold on!" I says. "If it's Joshua you fools are after--"

"He admits the crime!" howled Uncle Jeppard. "Is it Joshua, says you! You know dern well it is! We been combin' the hills for you, ever since my gran'datter brought me the news! What you done with him, you scoundrel?"

"Aw," I said, "he's all right. I was just goin' to--"

"He evades the question!" screamed Uncle Jeppard. "Git him, boys!"

"I TELL YOU HE'S ALL right!" I roared, but they give me no chance to explain. Them Grimeses is all alike; you cain't tell 'em nothing. You got to knock it into their fool heads. They descended on me with fence rails and rocks and wagon spokes and loaded quirts and gun stocks in a way which would of tried the patience of a saint. I always try to be as patient with my erring relatives as I can be. I merely taken their weppins away from 'em and kind of pushed 'em back away from me, and if they'd looked where they fell Jim and Joe and Erath wouldn't of fell down that bluff and broke their arms and laigs and Bill wouldn't of fractured his skull agen that tree.

I handled 'em easy as babies, and kept my temper in spite of Uncle Jeppard dancing around on his hoss and yelling: "Lay into him, boys! Don't be scairt of the big grizzly! He cain't hurt us!" and shooting at me every time he thought he could shoot without hitting one of his own offspring. He did puncture two or three of 'em, and then blamed me for it, the old jackass.

Nobody could of acted with more restraint than I did when Dick Grimes broke the blade of his bowie knife off on my hip bone, and the seven fractured ribs I give his brother Jacob was a mild retaliation for chawing my ear like he done. But it was a ill-advised impulse which prompted Esau Grimes to stab me in the seat of the britches with a pitchfork. There ain't nothing which sours the milk of human kindness in a man's veins any more'n getting pitchforked by a raging relative behind his back.

I give a beller which shook the acorns out of the oaks all up and down the run, and whirled on Esau so quick it jerked the pitchfork out of his hands and left it sticking in my hide. I retched back and pulled it out and wrapped the handle around Esau's neck, and then I taken him by the ankles and started remodeling the landscape with him. I mowed down a sapling thicket with him, and leveled a cactus bed with him, and swept the road with him, and when his brothers tried to rescue him, I beat 'em over the head with him till they was too groggy to do anything but run in circles.

Uncle Jeppard come spurring at me, trying to knock me down with his hoss and trample me, and Esau was so limp by this time he warn't much good for a club no more, so I whirled him around my head a few times and throwed him at Uncle Jeppard. Him and Uncle Jeppard and the hoss all went down in a heap together, and from the way Uncle Jeppard hollered you'd of thought somebody was trying to injure him. It was plumb disgusting.

Five or six of his boys recovered enough to surge onto me then, and I knocked 'em all down on top of him and Esau and the hoss, and the hoss was trying to git up, and kicking around right and left, and his hoofs was going bam, bam, bam on human heads, and Uncle Jeppard was hollering so loud I got to thinking maybe he was hurt or something. So I retched down in the heap and got him by the whiskers and pulled him out from under the hoss and four or five of his fool boys.

"Air you hurt, Uncle Jeppard?" I inquired.

"#$%&@*!" responded Uncle Jeppard, rewarding my solicitude by trying to stab me with his bowie knife. This ingratitude irritated me, and I tossed him from me fretfully, and as he was pulling hisself out of the prickley pear bed where he landed, he suddenly give a louder scream than ever. Something come ambling up the road and I seen it was that fool jackass Joshua, which had evidently et his rope and left the house looking for more grub. He looked like a four-laigged nightmare in the moonlight, but all Uncle Jeppard noticed was the red paint on him.

"Halp! Murder!" howled Uncle Jeppard. "They've wounded him mortally! He's bleedin' to death! Git a tourniquet, quick!"

With that they all deserted the fray, them which was able to hobble, and run to grab Joshua and stanch his bleeding. But when he seen all them Grimeses coming for him, Joshua got scairt and took out through the bresh. They all pelted after him, and the last thing I heard as they passed out of hearing was Uncle Jeppard wailing: "Joshua! Stop, dern it! This here's yore friends! Pull up, dang you! We wants to help you, you cussed fool!"

I turned to see what I could do for the casualties which lay groaning in the road and at the foot of the bluff, but they said unanamous they didn't want no help from a enemy--which they meant me. They one and all promised to pickle my heart and eat it as soon as they was able to git about on crutches, so I abandoned my efforts and headed for the settlement.

THE FIGHTING HAD SCAIRT the mules up the road a ways, but I catched 'em and made a hackamore outa one of my galluses, and rode one and led t'other'n, and lit out straight through the bresh for Bear Creek. I'd had a belly-full of Apache Mountain. But I swung past Joel's stillhouse to find out how come Cousin Buckner didn't go to Wolf Canyon. When I got there the stillhouse was dark and the door was shet, and they was a note on the door. I could read a little by then, and I spelt it out. It said:

Gone to Wolf Canyon.

Joel Garfield.

That selfish polecat hadn't told Cousin Buckner nor nobody about the strike. He'd got hisself a pack-mule and lit out for Wolf Canyon hisself. A hell of a relative he was, maybe doing pore Cousin Buckner out of a fortune, for all he knowed.

A mile from the settlement I met Jack Gordon coming from a dance on t'other side of the mountain, and he said he seen Uncle Shadrach Polk fogging down the trail on a mule he was riding bare-back without no bridle, so I thought well, anyway my scheme for scairing him out of a taste for licker worked. Jack said Uncle Shadrach looked like he'd saw a herd of ha'nts.

It was about daylight when I stopped at Bill Gordon's ranch to leave him his mules. I paid him for his wagon and also for the damage Cap'n Kidd had did to his corral. Bill had to build a new one, and Cap'n Kidd had also run his prize stallion offa the ranch, an chawed the ears off of a longhorn bull, and busted into the barn and gobbled up about ten dollars worth of oats. When I lit out for Bear Creek again I warn't feeling in no benevolent mood, but, thinks I, it's worth it if it's made a water-swigger outa Uncle Shadrach.

It was well along toward noon when I pulled up at the door and called for Aunt Tascosa. Jedge my scandalized amazement when I was greeted by a deluge of b'iling water from the winder and Aunt Tascosa stuck her head out and says: "You buzzard in the form of a human bein'! How you got the brass to come bulgin' around here? If I warn't a lady I'd tell you just what I thought of you, you $#*&?@! Git, before I opens up on you with this here shotgun!"

"Why, Aunt Tascosa, what you talkin' about?" I ast, combing the hot water outa my hair with my fingers.

"You got the nerve to ast!" she sneered. "Didn't you promise me you'd kyore Shadrach of drinkin' rum? Didn't you, hey? Well, come in here and look at him! He arriv home about daylight on one of Buckner Kirby's mules and it about ready to drop, and he's been rasslin' every since with a jug he had hid. I cain't git no sense out'n him."

I went in and Uncle Shadrach was setting by the back door and he had hold of that there jug like a drownding man clutching a straw-stack.

"I'm surprized at you, Uncle Shadrach," I said. "What in the--"

"Shet the door, Breckinridge," he says. "They is more devils onto the earth than is dreamed of in our philosophy. I've had a narrer escape, Breckinridge! I let myself be beguiled by the argyments of Buckner Kirby, a son of Baliol which is without understandin'. He's been rasslin' with me to give up licker. Well, yesterday I got so tired of his argyments I said I'd try it a while, just to have some peace. I never taken a drink all day yesterday, and Breckinridge, I give you my word when I started to go to bed last night I seen a red, white and blue jackass with green ears standin' at the foot of my bunk, just as plain as I sees you now! It war the water that done it, Breckinridge," he says, curling his fist lovingly around the handle of the jug. "Water's a snare and a delusion. I drunk water all day yesterday, and look what it done to me! I don't never want to see no water no more, again."

"Well," I says, losing all patience, "you're a-goin' to, by golly, if I can heave you from here to that hoss-trough in the backyard."

I done it, and that's how come the rumor got started that I tried to drown Uncle Shadrach Polk in a hoss-trough because he refused to swear off licker. Aunt Tascosa was responsible for that there slander, which was a pore way to repay me for all I'd did for her. But people ain't got no gratitude.

THE END

Contents

THE CONQUERIN' HERO OF THE HUMBOLTS

By Robert E. Howard

I was in Sundance enjoying myself a little after a long trail-drive up from the Cimarron, when I got a letter from Abednego Raxton which said as follers:

Dear Breckinridge:

That time I paid yore fine down in Tucson for breaking the county clerk's laig you said you'd gimme a hand anytime I ever need help. Well Breckinridge I need yore assistance right now the rustlers is stealing me ragged it has got so I nail my bed-kivers to the bunk every night or they'd steal the blankets right offa me Breckinridge. Moreover a stumbling block on the path of progress by the name of Ted Bissett is running sheep on the range next to me this is more'n a man can endure Breckinridge. So I want you to come up here right away and help me find out who is stealing my stock and bust Ted Bissett's hed for him the low-minded scunk. Hoping you air the same I begs to remane as usual.

Yore abused frend.

Raxton, Esq.

P. S. That sap-headed misfit Johnny Willoughby which used to work for me down on Green River is sheriff here and he couldn't ketch flies if they was bogged down in merlasses.

Well, I didn't feel it was none of my business to mix into any row Abednego might be having with the sheepmen, so long as both sides fit fair, but rustlers was a different matter. A Elkins detests a thief. So I mounted Cap'n Kidd, after the usual battle, and headed for Lonesome Lizard, which was the nighest town to his ranch.

I found myself approaching this town a while before noon one blazing hot day, and as I crossed a right thick timbered creek, shrieks for aid and assistance suddenly bust the stillness. A hoss also neighed wildly, and Cap'n Kidd begun to snort and champ like he always does when they is a b'ar or a cougar in the vicinity. I got off and tied him, because if I was going to have to fight some critter like that, I didn't want him mixing into the scrap; he was jest as likely to kick me as the varmint. I then went on foot in the direction of the screams, which was growing more desperate every minute, and I presently come to a thicket with a big tree in the middle of it, and there they was. One of the purtiest gals I ever seen was roosting in the tree and screeching blue murder, and they was a cougar climbing up after her.

"Help!" says she wildly. "Shoot him!"

"I jest wish some of them tender-foots which calls theirselves naturalists could see this," I says, taking off my Stetson. A Elkins never forgits his manners. "Some of 'em has tried to tell me cougars never attacks human beings nor climbs trees, nor prowls in the daytime. I betcha this would make 'em realize they don't know it all. Jest like I said to that'n which I seen in War Paint, Nevada, last summer--"

"Will you stop talkin' and do somethin'?" she says fiercely. "Ow!"

Because he had reched up and made a pass at her foot with his left paw. I seen this had went far enough, so I told him sternly to come down, but all he done was look down at me and spit in a very insulting manner. So I reched up and got him by the tail and yanked him down, and whapped him agen the ground three or four times, and when I let go of him he run off a few yards, and looked back at me in a most pecooliar manner. Then he shaken his head like he couldn't believe it hisself, and lit a shuck as hard as he could peel it in the general direction of the North Pole.

"Whyn't you shoot him?" demanded the gal, leaning as far out as she could to watch him.

"Aw, he won't come back," I assured her. "Hey, look out! That limb's goin' to break--"

Which it did jest as I spoke and she come tumbling down with a shriek of despair. She still held onto the limb with a desperate grip, however, which is why it rapped me so severe on the head when I catched her.

"Oh!" says she, letting go of the limb and grabbing me. "Am I hurt?"

"I dunno," I says, "You better let me carry you to wherever you want to go."

"No," says she, gitting her breath back. "I'm all right. Lemme down."

So I done so, and she says: "I got a hoss tied over there behind that fir. I was ridin' home from Lonesome Lizard and stopped to poke a squirrel out of a holler tree. It warn't a squirrel, though. It was that dang lion. If you'll git my hoss for me, I'll be ridin' home. Pap's ranch is jest over that ridge to the west. I'm Margaret Brewster."

"I'm Breckinridge Elkins, of Bear Creek, Nevada," I says. "I'm headin' for Lonesome Lizard, but I'll be ridin' back this way before long. Can I call on you?"

"Well," she says, "I'm engaged to marry a feller, but it's conditional. I got a suspicion he's a spineless failure, and I told him flat if he didn't succeed at the job's he's workin' on now, not to come back. I detests a failure. That's why I likes yore looks," says she, giving me a admiring glance. "A man which can rassle a mountain lion with his b'ar hands is worth any gal's time. I'll send you word at Lonesome Lizard; if my fiansay flops like it looks he's goin' to do, I'd admire to have you call."

"I'll be awaitin' yore message with eager heart and honest devotion," I says, and she blushed daintily and clumb on her hoss and pulled her freight. I watched her till she was clean out of sight, and then hove a sigh that shook the acorns out of the surrounding oaks, and wended my way back to Cap'n Kidd in a sort of rose-colored haze. I was so entranced I started to git onto Cap'n Kidd on the wrong end and never noticed till he kicked me vi'lently in the belly.

"Love, Cap'n Kidd," I says to him dreamily, batting him between the eyes with my pistol butt, "is youth's sweet dream."

But he made no response, outside of stomping on my corns; Cap'n Kidd has got very little sentiment.

SO I MOUNTED AND PULLED for Lonesome Lizard, which I arriv at maybe a hour later. I put Cap'n Kidd in the strongest livery stable I could find and seen he was fed and watered, and warned the stable-hands not to antagonize him, and then I headed for the Red Warrior saloon. I needed a little refreshments before I started for Abednego's ranch.

I taken me a few drams and talked to the men which was foregathered there, being mainly cowmen. The sheepmen patronized the Bucking Ram, acrost the street. That was the first time I'd ever been in Montana, and them fellers warn't familiar with my repertation, as was showed by their manner.

Howthesomever, they was perlite enough, and after we'd downed a few fingers of corn scrapings, one of 'em ast me where I was from, proving they considered me a honest man with nothing to conceal. When I told 'em, one of 'em said: "By golly, they must grow big men in Nevada, if yo're a sample. Yo're the biggest critter I ever seen in the shape of a human."

"I bet he's as stout as Big Jon," says one, and another'n says: "That cain't be. This gent is human, after all. Big Jon ain't."

I was jest fixing to ast 'em who this Jon varmint was, when one of 'em cranes his neck toward the winder and says: "Speak of the devil and you gits a whiff of brimstone! Here comes Jon acrost the street now. He must of seen this gent comin' in, and is on his way to make his usual challenge. The sight of a man as big as him is like wavin' a red flag at a bull."

I looked out the winder and seen a critter about the size of a granary coming acrost the street from the Bucking Ram, follered by a gang of men which looked like him, but not nigh as big.

"What kind of folks air they?" I ast with interest. "They ain't neither Mexicans nor Injuns, but they sure ain't white men, neither."

"Aw, they're Hunkies," says a little sawed-off cowman. "Ted Bissett brung 'em in here to herd sheep for him. That big 'un's Jon. He ain't got no sense, but you never seen sech a hunk of muscle in yore life."

"Where they from?" I ast. "Canader?"

"Naw," says he. "They come originally from a place called Yurrop. I dunno where I it is, but I jedge it's somewhere's east of Chicago."

But I knowed them fellers never originated nowheres on this continent. They was rough-dressed and wild-looking, with knives in their belts, and they didn't look like no folks I'd ever saw before. They come into the barroom and the one called Jon bristled up to me very hostile with his little beady black eyes. He stuck out his chest about a foot and hit it with his fist which was about the size of a sledge hammer. It sounded like a man beating a bass drum.

"You strong man," says he. "I strong too. We rassle, eh?"

"Naw," I says, "I don't care nothin' about rasslin'."

He give a snort which blowed the foam off of every beer glass on the bar, and looked around till he seen a iron rod laying on the floor. It looked like the handle of a branding iron, and was purty thick. He grabbed this and bent it into a V, and throwed it down on the bar in front of me, and all the other Hunkies jabbered admiringly.

This childish display irritated me, but I controlled myself and drunk another finger of whiskey, and the bartender whispered to me: "Look out for him! He aims to prod you into a fight. He's nearly kilt nine or ten men with his b'ar hands. He's a mean 'un."

"Well," I says, tossing a dollar onto the bar and turning away, "I got more important things to do than rassle a outlandish foreigner in a barroom. I got to eat my dinner and git out to the Raxton ranch quick."

But at that moment Big Jon chose to open his bazoo. There are some folks which cain't never let well enough alone.

"'Fraid!" jeered he. "Yah, yah!"

The Hunkies all whooped and guffawed, and the cattlemen scowled.

"What you mean, afraid?" I gasped, more dumbfounded than mad. It'd been so long since anybody's made a remark like that to me. I was plumb flabbergasted. Then I remembered I was amongst strangers which didn't know my repertation, and I realized it was my duty to correct that there oversight before somebody got hurt on account of ignorance.

So I said, "All right, you dumb foreign muttonhead, I'll rassle you."

But as I went up to him, he doubled up his fist and hit me severely on the nose, and them Hunkies all bust into loud, rude laughter. That warn't wise. A man had better twist a striped thunderbolt's tail than hit a Elkins onexpected on the nose. I give a roar of irritation and grabbed Big Jon and started committing mayhem on him free and enthusiastic. I swept all the glasses and bottles off of the bar with him, and knocked down a hanging lamp with him, and fanned the floor with him till he was limp, and then I throwed him the full length of the barroom. His head went through the panels of the back door, and the other Hunkies, which had stood petrified, stampeded into the street with howls of horror. So I taken the branding iron handle and straightened it out and bent it around his neck, and twisted the ends together in a knot, so he had to get a blacksmith to file it off after he come to, which was several hours later.

All them cowmen was staring at me with their eyes popped out of their heads, and seemed plumb incapable of speech, so I give a snort of disgust at the whole incerdent, and strode off to git my dinner. As I left I heard one feller, which was holding onto the bar like he was too weak to stand alone, say feebly to the dumb-founded bartender: "Gimme a drink, quick! I never thunk I'd live to see somethin' I couldn't believe when I was lookin' right smack at it."

I COULDN'T MAKE NO sense out of this, so I headed for the dining room of the Montana Hotel and Bar. But my hopes of peace and quiet was a illusion. I'd jest started on my fourth beefsteak when a big maverick in Star-top boots and store-bought clothes come surging into the dining room and bellered: "Is your name Elkins?"

"Yes, it is," I says. "But I ain't deef. You don't have to yell."

"Well, what the hell do you mean by interferin' with my business?" he squalled, ignoring my reproof.

"I dunno what yo're talkin' about," I growled, emptying the sugar bowl into my coffee cup with some irritation. It looked like Lonesome Lizard was full of maneyacks which craved destruction. "Who air you, anyhow?"

"I'm Ted Bissett, that's who!" howled he, convulsively gesturing toward his six-shooter. "And I'm onto you! You're a damn Nevada gunman old Abed' Raxton's brought up here to run me off the range! He's been braggin' about it all over town! And you starts your work by runnin' off my sheepherders!"

"What you mean, I run yore sheepherders off?" I demanded, amazed.

"They ran off after you maltreated Big Jon," he gnashed, with his face convulsed. "They're so scared of you they won't come back without double pay! You can't do this to me, you #$%&*!"

The man don't live which can call me that name with impunity. I impulsively hit him in the face with my fried steak, and he give a impassioned shriek and pulled his gun. But some grease had got in his eyes, so all he done with his first shot was bust the syrup pitcher at my elbow, and before he could cock his gun again I shot him through the arm. He dropped his gun and grabbed the place with his other hand and made some remarks which ain't fitten for to repeat.

I yelled for another steak, and Bissett yelled for a doctor, and the manager yelled for the sheriff.

The last-named individual didn't git there till after the doctor and the steak had arrove and was setting Bissett's arm--the doctor, I mean, and not the steak, which a trembling waiter brung me. Quite a crowd had gathered by this time and was watching the doctor work with great interest, and offering advice which seemed to infuriate Bissett, jedging from his langwidge. He also discussed his busted arm with considerable passion, but the doctor warn't a bit worried. You never seen sech a cheerful gent. He was jovial and gay, no matter how loud Bissett yelled. You could tell right off he was a man which could take it.

But Bissett's friends was very mad, and Jack Campbell, his foreman, was muttering something about 'em taking the law into their own hands, when the sheriff come prancing in, waving a six-shooter and hollering: "Where is he? P'int out the scoundrel to me?"

"There he is!" everybody yelled, and ducked, like they expected gunplay, but I'd already recognized the sheriff, and when he seen me he recoiled and shoved his gun out of sight like it was red hot or something.

"Breckinridge Elkins!" says he. Then he stopped and studied a while, and then he told 'em to take Bissett out to the bar and pour some licker down him. When they'd went he sot down at the table, and says: "Breck, I want you to understand that they ain't nothin' personal about this, but I got to arrest you. It's agen the law to shoot a man inside of the city limits."

"I ain't got time to git arrested," I told him. "I got to git over to old Abed' Raxton's ranch."

"But lissen, Breck," argyed the sheriff--it was Johnny Willoughby, jest like old Abed' said--"what'll folks think if I don't jail you for shootin' a leadin' citizen? Election's comin' up and my hat's in the ring," says he, gulping my coffee.

"Bissett shot at me first," I said. "Whyn't you arrest him?"

"Well, he didn't hit you," says Johnny, absently cramming half a pie into his mouth and making a stab at my pertaters. "Anyway, he's got a busted arm and ain't able to go to jail jest now. Besides, I needs the sheepmen's votes."

"Aw, I don't like jails," I said irritably, and he begun to weep.

"If you was a friend to me," sobs he, "you'd be glad to spend a night in jail to help me git re-elected. I'd do as much for you! The whole county's givin' me hell anyway, because I ain't been able to catch none of them cattle rustlers, and if I don't arrest you I won't have a Chinaman's chance at the polls. How can you do me like this, after the times we had together in the old days--"

"Aw, stop blubberin'," I says. "You can arrest me, if you want to. What's the fine?"

"I don't want to collect no fine, Breck," says he, wiping his eyes on the oil-cloth table cover and filling his pockets with doughnuts. "I figgers a jail sentence will give me more prestige. I'll let you out first thing in the mornin'. You won't tear up the jail, will you, Breck?"

I promised I wouldn't, and then he wants me to give up my guns, and I refuses.

"But good gosh, Breck," he pleaded. "It'd look awful funny for a prisoner to keep on his shootin' irons."

So I give 'em to him, jest to shet him up, and then he wanted to put his handcuffs onto me, but they warn't big enough to fit my wrists. So he said if I'd lend him some money he could have the blacksmith to make me some laig-irons, but I refused profanely, so he said all right, it was jest a suggestion, and no offense intended, so we went down to the jail. The jailer was off sleeping off a drunk somewheres, but he'd left the key hanging on the door, so we went in. Purty soon along come Johnny's deperty, Bige Gantry, a long, loose-j'inted cuss with a dangerous eye, so Johnny sent him to the Red Warrior for a can of beer, and whilst he was gone Johnny bragged on him a heap.

"Why," says he, "Bige is the only man in the county which has ever got within' shootin' distance of them dern outlaws. He was by hisself, wuss luck. If I'd been along we'd of scuppered the whole gang."

I ast him if he had any idee who they was, and he said Bige believed they was a gang up from Wyoming. So I said well, then, in that case they got a hang-out in the hills somewheres, and ought to be easier to run down than men which scattered to their homes after each raid.

BIGE GOT BACK WITH THE beer about then, and Johnny told him that when I got out of jail he was going to depertize me and we'd all go after them outlaws together. So Bige said that was great, and looked me over purty sharp, and we sot down and started playing poker. Along about supper time the jailer come in, looking tolerable seedy, and Johnny made him cook us some supper. Whilst we was eating the jailer stuck his head into my cell and said: "A gent is out there cravin' audience with Mister Elkins."

"Tell him the prisoner's busy," says Johnny.

"I done so," says the jailer, "and he says if you don't let him in purty dern quick, he's goin' to bust in and cut yore throat."

"That must be old Abed' Raxton," says Johnny. "Better let him in--Breck," says he, "I looks to you to pertect me if the old cuss gits mean."

So old Abed' come walzing into the jail with fire in his eye and corn licker on his breath. At the sight of me he let out a squall which was painful to hear.

"A hell of a help you be, you big lummox!" he hollered. "I sends for you to help me bust up a gang of rustlers and sheepherders, and the first thing you does is to git in jail!"

"T'warn't my fault," I says. "Them sheepherders started pickin' on me."

"Well," he snarls, "whyn't you drill Bissett center when you was at it?"

"I come up here to shoot rustlers, not sheepherders," I says.

"What's the difference?" he snarled.

"Them sheepmen has probably got as much right on the range as you cowmen," I says.

"Cease sech outrageous blasphermy," says he, shocked. "You've bungled things so far, but they's one good thing--Bissett had to hire back his derned Hunkie herders at double wages. He don't no more mind spendin' money than he does spillin' his own blood, the cussed tightwad. Well, what's yore fine?"

"Ain't no fine," I said. "Johnny wants me to stay in jail a while."

At this old Abed' convulsively went for his gun and Johnny got behind me and hollered: "Don't you dast shoot a ossifer of the law!"

"It's a spite trick!" gibbered old Abed'. "He's been mad at me ever since I fired him off'n my payroll. After I kicked him off'n my ranch he run for sheriff, and the night of the election everybody was so drunk they voted for him by mistake, or for a joke, or somethin', and since he's been in office he's been lettin' the sheepmen steal me right out of house and home."

"That's a lie," says Johnny heatedly. "I've give you as much pertection as anybody else, you old buzzard! I jest ain't been able to run any of them critters down, that's all. But you wait! Bige is on their trail, and we'll have 'em behind the bars before the snow falls."

"Before the snow falls in Guatemala, maybe," snorted old Abed'. "All right, blast you, I'm goin', but I'll have Breckinridge outa here if I have to burn the cussed jail! A Raxton never forgits!" So he stalked out sulphurously, only turning back to snort: "Sheriff! Bah! Seven murders in the county unsolved since you come into office! You'll let the sheepmen murder us all in our beds! We ain't had a hangin' since you was elected!"

After he'd left, Johnny brooded a while, and finally says: "The old lobo's right about them murders, only he neglected to mention that four of 'em was sheepmen. I know it's cattlemen and sheepmen killin' each other, each side accusin' the other'n of rustlin' stock, but I cain't prove nothin'. A hangin' would set me solid with the voters." Here he eyed me hungrily, and ventured: "If somebody'd jest up and confess to some of them murders--"

"You needn't to look at me like that," I says. "I never kilt nobody in Montana."

"Well," he argyed, "nobody could prove you never done 'em, and after you was hanged--"

"Lissen here, you," I says with some passion, "I'm willin' to help a friend git elected all I can, but they's a limit!"

"Oh, well, all right," he sighed. "I didn't much figger you'd be willin', anyway; folks is so dern selfish these days. All they thinks about is theirselves. But lissen here: if I was to bust up a lynchin' mob it'd be nigh as good a boost for my campaign as a legal hangin'. I tell you what--tonight I'll have some of my friends put on masks and come and take you out and pretend like they was goin' to hang you. Then when they got the rope around yore neck I'll run out and shoot in the air and they'll run off and I'll git credit for upholdin' law and order. Folks always disapproves of mobs, unless they happens to be in 'em."

So I said all right, and he urged me to be careful and not hurt none of 'em, because they was all his friends and would be mine. I ast him would they bust the door down, and he said they warn't no use in damaging property like that; they could hold up the jailer and take the key off'n him. So he went off to fix things, and after while Bige Gantry left and said he was on the trace of a clue to them cattle rustlers, and the jailer started drinking hair tonic mixed with tequila, and in about a hour he was stiffer'n a wet lariat.

WELL, I LAID DOWN ON the floor on a blanket to sleep, without taking my boots off, and about midnight a gang of men in masks come and they didn't have to hold up the jailer, because he was out cold. So they taken the key off'n him, and all the loose change and plug tobaccer out of his pockets too, and opened the door, and I ast: "Air you the gents which is goin' to hang me?" And they says: "We be!"

So I got up and ast them if they had any licker, and one of 'em gimme a good snort out of his hip flask, and I said: "All right, le's git it over with, so I can go back to sleep."

He was the only one which done any talking, and the rest didn't say a word. I figgered they was bashful. He said: "Le's tie yore hands behind you so's to make it look real," and I said all right, and they tied me with some rawhide thongs which I reckon would of held the average man all right.

So I went outside with 'em, and they was a oak tree right clost to the jail nigh some bushes. I figgered Johnny was hiding over behind them bushes.

They had a barrel for me to stand on, and I got onto it, and they throwed a rope over a big limb and put the noose around my neck, and the feller says: "Any last words?"

"Aw, hell," I says, "this is plumb silly. Ain't it about time for Johnny--"

At this moment they kicked the barrel out from under me.

Well, I was kind of surprized, but I tensed my neck muscles, and waited for Johnny to rush out and rescue me, but he didn't come, and the noose began to pinch the back of my neck, so I got disgusted and says: "Hey, lemme down!"

Then one of 'em which hadn't spoke before says: "By golly, I never heard a man talk after he'd been strung up before!"

I recognized that voice; it was Jack Campbell, Bissett's foreman! Well, I have got a quick mind, in spite of what my cousin Bearfield Buckner says, so I knowed right off something was fishy about this business. So I snapped the thongs on my wrists and reched up and caught hold of the rope I was hung with by both hands and broke it. Them scoundrels was so surprized they didn't think to shoot at me till the rope was already broke, and then the bullets all went over me as I fell. When they started shooting I knowed they meant me no good, and acted according.

I dropped right in the midst of 'em, and brung three to the ground with me, and during the few seconds to taken me to choke and batter them unconscious the others was scairt to fire for fear of hitting their friends, we was so tangled up. So they clustered around and started beating me over the head with their gun butts, and I riz up like a b'ar amongst a pack of hounds and grabbed four more of 'em and hugged 'em till their ribs cracked. Their masks came off during the process, revealing the faces of Bissett's friends; I'd saw 'em in the hotel.

Somebody prodded me in the hind laig with a bowie at that moment, which infuriated me, so I throwed them four amongst the crowd and hit out right and left, knocking over a man or so at each lick, till I seen a wagon spoke on the ground and stooped over to pick it up. When I done that somebody throwed a coat over my head and blinded me, and six or seven men then jumped onto my back. About this time I stumbled over some feller which had been knocked down, and fell onto my belly, and they all started jumping up and down on me enthusiastically. I reched around and grabbed one and dragged him around to where I could rech his left ear with my teeth. I would of taken it clean off at the first snap, only I had to bite through the coat which was over my head, but as it was I done a good job, jedging from his awful shrieks.

He put forth a supreme effort and tore away, taking the coat with him, and I shaken off the others and riz up in spite of their puny efforts, with the wagon spoke in my hand.

A wagon spoke is a good, comforting implement to have in a melee, and very demoralizing to the enemy. This'n busted all to pieces about the fourth or fifth lick, but that was enough. Them which was able to run had all took to their heels, leaving the battlefield strewed with moaning and cussing figgers.

Their remarks was shocking to hear, but I give 'em no heed. I headed for the sheriff's office, mad clean through. It was a few hundred yards east of the jail, and jest as I rounded the jail house, I run smack into a dim figger which come sneaking through the bresh making a curious clanking noise. It hit me with what appeared to be a iron bar, so I went to the ground with it and choked it and beat its head agen the ground, till the moon come out from behind a cloud and revealed the bewhiskered features of old Abednego Raxton!

"What the hell?" I demanded of the universe at large. "Is everybody in Montaner crazy? Whar air you doin' tryin' to murder me in my sleep?"

"I warn't, you jack-eared lunkhead," snarled he, when he could talk.

"Then what'd you hit me with that there pinch bar for?" I demanded.

"I didn't know it was you," says he, gitting up and dusting his britches. "I thought it was a grizzly b'ar when you riz up out of the dark. Did you bust out?"

"Naw, I never," I said. "I told you I was stayin' in jail to do Johnny a favor. And you know what that son of Baliol done? He framed it up with Bissett's friends to git me hung. Come on. I'm goin' over and interview the dern skunk right now."

So we went over to Johnny's office, and the door was unlocked and a candle burning, but he warn't in sight.

* * * *

THEY WAS A SMALL IRON safe there, which I figgered he had my guns locked up in, so I got a rock and busted it open, and sure enough there my shooting-irons was. They was also a gallon of corn licker there, and me and Abed' was discussing whether or not we had the moral right to drink it, when I heard somebody remark in a muffled voice: "Whumpff! Gfuph! Oompg!"

So we looked around and I seen a pair of spurs sticking out from under a camp cot over in the corner. I grabbed hold of the boots they was on, and pulled 'em out, and a human figger come with 'em. It was Johnny. He was tied hand and foot and gagged, and he had a lump onto his head about the size of a turkey aig.

I pulled off the gag, and the first thing he says was: "If you sons of Perdition drinks my private licker I'll have yore hearts' blood!"

"You better do some explainin'," I says resentfully. "What you mean, siccin' Bissett's friends onto me?"

"I never done no sech!" says he heatedly. "Right after I left the jail I come to the office here, and was jest fixin' to git hold of my friends to frame the fake necktie party, when somebody come in at the door and hit me over the head. I thought it was Bige comin' in and didn't look around, and then whoever it was clouted me. I jest while ago come to myself, and I was tied up like you see."

"If he's tellin' the truth," says old Abed' "--which he seems to be, much as I hates to admit it--it looks like some friend of Bissett's overheard you all talkin' about this thing, follered Johnny over and put him out of the way for the time bein', and then raised a mob of his own, knowin' Breck wouldn't put up no resistance, thinkin' they was friends. I told you--who's that?"

We all drawed our irons, and then put 'em up as Bige Gantry rushed in, holding onto the side of his head, which was all bloody.

"I jest had a bresh with the outlaws!" he hollered. "I been trailin' 'em all night! They waylaid me while ago, three miles out of town! They nearly shot my ear off! But if I didn't wing one of 'em, I'm a Dutchman!"

"Round up a posse!" howled Johnny, grabbing a Winchester and cartridge belt. "Take us back to where you had the scrape, Bige--"

"Wait a minute," I says, grabbing Bige. "Lemme see that ear!" I jerked his hand away, disregarding the spur he stuck into my laig, and bellered: "Shot, hell! That ear was chawed, and I'm the man which done it! You was one of them illegitimates which tried to hang me!"

He then whipped out his gun, but I knocked it out of his hand and hit him on the jaw and knocked him through the door. I then follered him outside and taken away the bowie he drawed as he rose groggily, and throwed him back into the office, and went in and throwed him out again, and went out and throwed him back in again.

"How long is this goin' on?" he ast.

"Probably all night," I assured him. "The way I feel right now I can keep heavin' you in and out of this office from now till noon tomorrer."

"Hold up!" gurgled he. "I'm a hard nut, but I know when I'm licked! I'll confess! I done it!"

"Done what?" I demanded.

"I hit Johnny on the head and tied him up!" he howled, grabbing wildly for the door jamb as he went past it. "I rigged the lynchin' party! I'm in with the rustlers!"

"Set him down!" hollered Abed', grabbing holt of my shirt. "Quick, Johnny! Help me hold Breckinridge before he kills a valurebull witness!"

But I shaken him off impatiently and sot Gantry onto his feet. He couldn't stand, so I helt him up by the collar and he gasped: "I lied about tradin' shots with the outlaws. I been foolin' Johnny all along. The rustlers ain't no Wyoming gang; they all live around here. Ted Bissett is the head chief of 'em--"

"Ted Bissett, hey?" whooped Abed', doing a war-dance and kicking my shins in his glee. "See there, you big lummox? What'd I tell you? What you think now, after showin' so dern much affection for them cussed sheepmen? Jest shootin' Bissett in the arm, like he was yore brother, or somethin'! S'wonder you didn't invite him out to dinner. You ain't got the--"

"Aw, shet up!" I said fretfully. "Go on, Gantry."

"He ain't a legitimate sheepman," says he. "That's jest a blind, him runnin' sheep. Ain't no real sheepmen mixed up with him. His gang is jest the scrapin's of the country, and they hide out on his ranch when things gits hot. Other times they scatters and goes home. They're the ones which has been killin' honest sheepman and cattlemen--tryin' to set the different factions agen each other, so as to make stealin' easier. The Hunkies ain't in on the deal. He jest brung 'em out to herd his sheep, because his own men wouldn't do it, and he was afeared if he hired

local sheepherders, they'd ketch onto him. Naturally we wanted you outa the way, when we knowed you'd come up here to run down the rustlers, so tonight I seen my chance when Johnny started talkin' about stagin' that fake hangin'. I follered Johnny and tapped him on the head and tied him up and went and told Bissett about the business, and we got the boys together, and you know the rest. It was a peach of a frame-up, and it'd of worked, too, if we'd been dealing with a human bein'. Lock me up. All I want right now is a good, quiet penitentiary where I'll be safe."

"Well," I said to Johnny, after he'd locked Gantry up, "all you got to do is ride over to Bissett's ranch and arrest him. He's laid up with his arm, and most of his men is crippled. You'll find a number of 'em over by the jail. This oughta elect you."

"It will!" says he, doing a war-dance in his glee. "I'm as good as elected right now! And I tell you, Breck, t'ain't the job alone I'm thinkin' about. I'd of lost my gal if I'd lost the race. But she's promised to marry me if I ketched them rustlers and got re-elected. And she won't go back on her word, neither!"

"Yeah?" I says with idle interest, thinking of my own true love. "What's her name?"

"Margaret Brewster!" says he.

"What?" I yelled, in a voice which knocked old Abed' over on his back like he'd been hit by a cyclone. Them which accuses me of vi'lent and onusual conduck don't consider how my emotions was stirred up by the knowledge that I had went through all them humiliating experiences jest to help a rival take my gal away from me. Throwing Johnny through the office winder and kicking the walls out of the building was jest a mild expression of the way I felt about the whole dern affair, and instead of feeling resentful, he ought to have been thankful I was able to restrain my natural feelings as well as I done.

THE END

Contents

THE FEUD BUSTER

By Robert E. Howard

These here derned lies which is being circulated around is making me sick and tired. If this slander don't stop I'm liable to lose my temper, and anybody in the Humbolts can tell you when I loses my temper the effect on the population is wuss'n fire, earthquake, and cyclone.

First-off, it's a lie that I rode a hundred miles to mix into a feud which wasn't none of my business. I never heard of the Hopkins-Barlow war before I come in the Mezquital country. I hear tell the Barlows is talking about suing me for destroying their property. Well, they ought to build their cabins solider if they don't want 'em tore down. And they're all liars when they says the Hopkinses hired me to exterminate 'em at five dollars a sculp. I don't believe even a Hopkins would pay five dollars for one of their mangy sculps. Anyway, I don't fight for hire for nobody. And the Hopkinses needn't bellyache about me turning on 'em and trying to massacre the entire clan. All I wanted to do was kind of disable 'em so they couldn't interfere with my business. And my business, from first to last, was defending the family honor. If I had to wipe up the earth with a couple of feuding clans whilst so doing, I can't help it. Folks which is particular of their hides ought to stay out of the way of tornadoes, wild bulls, devastating torrents, and a insulted Elkins.

But it was Uncle Jeppard Grimes' fault to begin with, like it generally is. Dern near all the calamities which takes places in southern Nevada can be traced back to that old lobo. He's got a ingrown disposition and a natural talent for pestering his feller man. Specially his relatives.

I was setting in a saloon in War Paint, enjoying a friendly game of kyards with a horse-thief and three train-robbers, when Uncle Jeppard come in and spied me, and he come over and scowled down on me like I was the missing lynx or something. Purty soon he says, just as I was all sot to make a killing, he says: "How can you set there so free and keerless, with four ace-kyards into yore hand, when yore family name is bein' besmirched?"

I flang down my hand in annoyance, and said: "Now look what you done! What you mean blattin' out information of sech a private nature? What you talkin' about, anyhow?"

"Well," he says, "durin' the three months you been away from home roisterin' and wastin' yore substance in riotous livin'--"

"I been down on Wild River punchin' cows at thirty a month!" I said fiercely. "I ain't squandered nothin' nowheres. Shut up and tell me whatever yo're a-talkin' about."

"Well," says he, "whilst you been gone young Dick Jackson of Chawed Ear has been courtin' yore sister Ellen, and the family's been expectin' 'em to set the day, any time. But now I hear he's been braggin' all over Chawed Ear about how he done jilted her. Air you goin' to set there and let yore sister become the laughin' stock of the country? When I was a young man--"

"When you was a young man Dan'l Boone warn't whelped yet!" I bellered, so mad I included him and everybody else in my irritation. They ain't nothing upsets me like injustice done to some of my close kin. "Git out of my way! I'm headin' for Chawed Ear--what you grinnin' at, you spotted hyener?" This last was addressed to the horse-thief in which I seemed to detect signs of amusement.

"I warn't grinnin'," he said.

"So I'm a liar, I reckon!" I said. I felt a impulse to shatter a demi-john over his head, which I done, and he fell under a table hollering bloody murder, and all the fellers drinking at the bar abandoned their licker and stampeded for the street hollering: "Take cover, boys! Breckinridge Elkins is on the rampage!"

So I kicked all the slats out of the bar to relieve my feelings, and stormed out of the saloon and forked Cap'n Kidd. Even he seen it was no time to take liberties with me--he didn't pitch but seven jumps--then he settled down to a dead run, and we headed for Chawed Ear.

EVERYTHING KIND OF floated in a red haze all the way, but them folks which claims I tried to murder 'em in cold blood on the road between War Paint and Chawed Ear is just narrer-minded and super-sensitive. The reason I shot everybody's hats off that I met was just to kind of ca'm my nerves, because I was afraid if I didn't cool off some by the time I hit Chawed Ear I might hurt somebody. I am that mild-mannered and retiring by nature that I wouldn't willing hurt man, beast, nor Injun unless maddened beyond endurance.

That's why I acted with so much self-possession and dignity when I got to Chawed Ear and entered the saloon where Dick Jackson generally hung out.

"Where's Dick Jackson?" I said, and everybody must of been nervous, because when I boomed out they all jumped and looked around, and the bartender dropped a glass and turned pale.

"Well," I hollered, beginning to lose patience. "Where is the coyote?"

"G--gimme time, will ya?" stuttered the bar-keep. "I--uh--he--uh--"

"So you evades the question, hey?" I said, kicking the foot-rail loose. "Friend of his'n, hey? Tryin' to pertect him, hey?" I was so overcome by this perfidy that I lunged for him and he ducked down behind the bar and I crashed into it bodily with all my lunge and weight, and it collapsed on top of him, and all the customers run out of the saloon hollering, "Help, murder, Elkins is killin' the bartender!"

This feller stuck his head up from amongst the ruins of the bar and begged: "For God's sake, lemme alone! Jackson headed south for the Mezquital Mountains yesterday."

I throwed down the chair I was fixing to bust all the ceiling lamps with, and run out and jumped on Cap'n Kidd and headed south, whilst behind me folks emerged from their cyclone cellars and sent a rider up in the hills to tell the sheriff and his deputies they could come on back now.

I knowed where the Mezquitals was, though I hadn't never been there. I crossed the Californy line about sundown, and shortly after dark I seen Mezquital Peak looming ahead of me. Having ca'med down somewhat, I decided to stop and rest Cap'n Kidd. He warn't tired, because that horse has got alligator blood in his veins, but I knowed I might have to trail Jackson clean to The Angels, and they warn't no use in running Cap'n Kidd's laigs off on the first lap of the chase.

It warn't a very thickly settled country I'd come into, very mountainous and thick timbered, but purty soon I come to a cabin beside the trail and I pulled up and hollered, "Hello!"

The candle inside was instantly blowed out, and somebody pushed a rifle barrel through the winder and bawled: "Who be you?"

"I'm Breckinridge Elkins from Bear Creek, Nevada," I said. "I'd like to stay all night, and git some feed for my horse."

"Stand still," warned the voice. "We can see you agin the stars, and they's four rifle-guns a-kiverin' you."

"Well, make up yore minds," I said, because I could hear 'em discussing me. I reckon they thought they was whispering. One of 'em said: "Aw, he can't be a Barlow. Ain't none of 'em that big." T'other'n said: "Well, maybe he's a derned gun-fighter they've sent for to help 'em out. Old Jake's nephew's been up in Nevady."

"Le's let him in," said a third. "We can mighty quick tell what he is."

So one of 'em come out and 'lowed it would be all right for me to stay the night, and he showed me a corral to put Cap'n Kidd in, and hauled out some hay for him.

"We got to be keerful," he said. "We got lots of enemies in these hills."

We went into the cabin, and they lit the candle again, and sot some corn pone and sow-belly and beans on the table and a jug of corn licker. They was four men, and they said their names was Hopkins--Jim, Bill, Joe, and Joshua, and they was brothers. I'd always heard tell the Mezquital country was famed for big men, but these fellers wasn't so big--not much over six foot high apiece. On Bear Creek they'd been considered kind of puny and undersized.

They warn't very talkative. Mostly they sot with their rifles acrost their knees and looked at me without no expression onto their faces, but that didn't stop me from eating a hearty supper, and would of et a lot more only the grub give out; and I hoped they had more licker somewheres else because I was purty dry. When I turned up the jug to take a snort of it was brim-full, but before I'd more'n dampened my gullet the dern thing was plumb empty.

When I got through I went over and sot down on a raw-hide bottomed chair in front of the fire-place where they was a small fire going, though they warn't really no need for it, and they said: "What's yore business, stranger?"

"Well," I said, not knowing I was going to get the surprize of my life, "I'm lookin' for a feller named Dick Jackson--"

By golly, the words wasn't clean out of my mouth when they was four men onto my neck like catamounts!

"He's a spy!" they hollered. "He's a cussed Barlow! Shoot him! Stab him! Hit him in the head!"

All of which they was endeavoring to do with such passion they was getting in each other's way, and it was only his over-eagerness which caused Jim to miss me with his bowie and sink it into the table instead, but Joshua busted a chair over my head and Bill would of shot me if I hadn't jerked back my head so he just singed my eyebrows. This lack of hospitality so irritated me that I riz up amongst 'em like a b'ar with a pack of wolves hanging onto him, and commenced committing mayhem on my hosts, because I seen right off they was critters which couldn't be persuaded to respect a guest no other way.

WELL, THE DUST OF BATTLE hadn't settled, the casualities was groaning all over the place, and I was just re-lighting the candle when I heard a horse galloping down the trail from the south. I wheeled and drawed my guns as it stopped before the cabin. But I didn't shoot, because the next instant they was a bare-footed gal standing in the door. When she seen the rooins she let out a screech like a catamount.

"You've kilt 'em!" she screamed. "You murderer!"

"Aw, I ain't neither," I said. "They ain't hurt much--just a few cracked ribs, and dislocated shoulders and busted laigs and sech-like trifles. Joshua's ear'll grow back on all right, if you take a few stitches into it."

"You cussed Barlow!" she squalled, jumping up and down with the hystericals. "I'll kill you! You damned Barlow!"

"I ain't no Barlow," I said. "I'm Breckinridge Elkins, of Bear Creek. I ain't never even heard of no Barlows."

At that Jim stopped his groaning long enough to snarl: "If you ain't a friend of the Barlows, how come you askin' for Dick Jackson? He's one of 'em."

"He jilted my sister!" I roared. "I aim to drag him back and make him marry her!"

"Well, it was all a mistake," groaned Jim. "But the damage is done now."

"It's wuss'n you think," said the gal fiercely. "The Hopkinses has all forted theirselves over at pap's cabin, and they sent me to git you all. We got to make a stand. The Barlows is gatherin' over to Jake Barlow's cabin, and they aims to make a foray onto us tonight. We was outnumbered to begin with, and now here's our best fightin' men laid out! Our goose is cooked plumb to hell!"

"Lift me on my horse," moaned Jim. "I can't walk, but I can still shoot." He tried to rise up, and fell back cussing and groaning.

"You got to help us!" said the gal desperately, turning to me. "You done laid out our four best fightin' men, and you owes it to us. It's yore duty! Anyway, you says Dick Jackson's yore enemy--well, he's Jake Barlow's nephew, and he come back here to help 'em clean out us Hopkinses. He's over to Jake's cabin right now. My brother Bill snuck over and spied on 'em, and he says every fightin' man of the clan is gatherin' there. All we can do is hold the fort, and you got to come help us hold it! Yo're nigh as big as all four of these boys put together."

Well, I figgered I owed the Hopkinses something, so, after setting some bones and bandaging some wounds and abrasions of which they was a goodly lot, I saddled Cap'n Kidd and we sot out.

As we rode along she said: "That there is the biggest, wildest, meanest-lookin' critter I ever seen. Where'd you git him?"

"He was a wild horse," I said. "I catched him up in the Humbolts. Nobody ever rode him but me. He's the only horse west of the Pecos big enough to carry my weight, and he's got painter's blood and a shark's disposition. What's this here feud about?"

"I dunno," she said. "It's been goin' on so long everybody's done forgot what started it. Somebody accused somebody else of stealin' a cow, I think. What's the difference?"

"They ain't none," I assured her. "If folks wants to have feuds its their own business."

We was following a winding path, and purty soon we heard dogs barking and about that time the gal turned aside and got off her horse, and showed me a pen hid in the brush. It was full of horses.

"We keep our mounts here so's the Barlows ain't so likely to find 'em and run 'em off," she said, and she turned her horse into the pen, and I put Cap'n Kidd in, but tied him over in one corner by hisself--otherwise he would of started fighting all the other horses and kicked the fence down.

Then we went on along the path and the dogs barked louder and purty soon we come to a big two-story cabin which had heavy board-shutters over the winders. They was just a dim streak of candle light come through the cracks. It was dark, because the moon hadn't come up. We stopped in the shadder of the trees, and the gal whistled like a whippoorwill three times, and somebody answered from up on the roof. A door opened a crack in the room which didn't have no light at all, and somebody said: "That you, Elizerbeth? Air the boys with you?"

"It's me," says she, starting toward the door. "But the boys ain't with me."

Then all to once he throwed open the door and hollered: "Run, gal! They's a grizzly b'ar standin' up on his hind laigs right behind you!"

"Aw, that ain't no b'ar," says she. "That there's Breckinridge Elkins, from up in Nevady. He's goin' to help us fight the Barlows."

WE WENT ON INTO A ROOM where they was a candle on the table, and they was nine or ten men there and thirty-odd women and chillern. They all looked kinda pale and scairt, and the men was loaded down with pistols and Winchesters.

They all looked at me kind of dumb-like, and the old man kept staring like he warn't any too sure he hadn't let a grizzly in the house, after all. He mumbled something about making a natural mistake, in the dark, and turned to the gal.

"Whar's the boys I sent you after?" he demanded, and she says: "This gent mussed 'em up so's they ain't fitten for to fight. Now, don't git rambunctious, pap. It war just a honest mistake all around. He's our friend, and he's gunnin' for Dick Jackson."

"Ha! Dick Jackson!" snarled one of the men, lifting his Winchester. "Just lemme line my sights on him! I'll cook his goose!"

"You won't, neither," I said. "He's got to go back to Bear Creek and marry my sister Ellen.... Well," I says, "what's the campaign?"

"I don't figger they'll git here till well after midnight," said Old Man Hopkins. "All we can do is wait for 'em."

"You means you all sets here and waits till they comes and lays siege?" I says.

"What else?" says he. "Lissen here, young man, don't start tellin' me how to conduck a feud. I growed up in this here'n. It war in full swing when I was born, and I done spent my whole life carryin' it on."

"That's just it," I snorted. "You lets these dern wars drag on for generations. Up in the Humbolts we brings such things to a quick conclusion. Mighty near everybody up there come from Texas, original, and we fights our feuds Texas style, which is short and sweet--a feud which lasts ten years in Texas is a humdinger. We winds 'em up quick and in style. Where-at is this here cabin where the Barlow's is gatherin'?"

"'Bout three mile over the ridge," says a young feller they called Bill.

"How many is they?" I ast.

"I counted seventeen," says he.

"Just a fair-sized mouthful for a Elkins," I said. "Bill, you guide me to that there cabin. The rest of you can come or stay, it don't make no difference to me."

Well, they started jawing with each other then. Some was for going and some for staying. Some wanted to go with me and try to take the Barlows by surprize, but the others said it couldn't be done--they'd git ambushed theirselves, and the only sensible thing to be did was to stay forted and wait for the Barlows to come. They given me no more heed--just sot there and augered.

But that was all right with me. Right in the middle of the dispute, when it looked like maybe the Hopkinses' would get to fighting amongst theirselves and finish each other before the Barlows could git there, I lit out with the boy Bill, which seemed to have considerable sense for a Hopkins.

He got him a horse out of the hidden corral, and I got Cap'n Kidd, which was a good thing. He'd somehow got a mule by the neck, and the critter was almost at its last gasp when I rescued it. Then me and Bill lit out.

We follered winding paths over thick-timbered mountainsides till at last we come to a clearing and they was a cabin there, with light and profanity pouring out of the winders. We'd been hearing the last mentioned for half a mile before we sighted the cabin.

We left our horses back in the woods a ways, and snuck up on foot and stopped amongst the trees back of the cabin.

"They're in there tankin' up on corn licker to whet their appetites for Hopkins blood!" whispered Bill, all in a shiver. "Lissen to 'em! Them fellers ain't hardly human! What you goin' to do? They got a man standin' guard out in front of the door at the other end of the cabin. You see they ain't no doors nor winders at the back. They's winders on each side, but if we try to rush it from the front or either side, they'll see us and fill us full of lead before we could git in a shot. Look! The moon's comin' up. They'll be startin' on their raid before long."

I'll admit that cabin looked like it was going to be harder to storm than I'd figgered. I hadn't had no idee in mind when I sot out for the place. All I wanted was to get in amongst them Barlows--I does my best fighting at close quarters. But at the moment I couldn't think of no way that wouldn't get me shot up. Of course I could just rush the cabin, but the thought of seventeen Winchesters blazing away at me from close range was a little stiff even for me, though I was game to try it, if they warn't no other way.

Whilst I was studying over the matter, all to once the horses tied out in front of the cabin snorted, and back up the hills something went Oooaaaw-w-w! And a idee hit me.

"Git back in the woods and wait for me," I told Bill, as I headed for the thicket where we'd left the horses.

I MOUNTED AND RODE up in the hills toward where the howl had come from. Purty soon I lit and throwed Cap'n Kidd's reins over his head, and walked on into the deep bresh, from time to time giving a long squall like a cougar. They ain't a catamount in the world can tell the difference when a Bear Creek man imitates one. After a while one answered, from a ledge just a few hundred feet away.

I went to the ledge and clumb up on it, and there was a small cave behind it, and a big mountain lion in there. He give a grunt of surprize when he seen I was a human, and made a swipe at me, but I give him a bat on the head with my fist, and whilst he was still dizzy I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hauled him out of the cave and lugged him down to where I left my horse.

Cap'n Kidd snorted at the sight of the cougar and wanted to kick his brains out, but I give him a good kick in the stummick hisself, which is the only kind of reasoning Cap'n Kidd understands, and got on him and headed for the Barlow hangout.

I can think of a lot more pleasant jobs than toting a full-growed mountain lion down a thick-timbered mountain side on the back of a iron jaw outlaw at midnight. I had the cat by the back of the neck with one hand, so hard he couldn't squall, and I held him out at arm's length as far from the horse as I could, but every now and then he'd twist around so he could claw Cap'n Kidd with his hind laigs, and when this would happen Cap'n Kidd would squall with rage and start bucking all over the place. Sometimes he would buck the derned cougar onto me, and pulling him loose from my hide was wuss'n pulling cockle-burrs out of a cow's tail.

But presently I arriv close behind the cabin. I whistled like a whippoorwill for Bill, but he didn't answer and warn't nowheres to be seen, so I decided he'd got scairt and pulled out for home. But that was all right with me. I'd come to fight the Barlows, and I aimed to fight 'em, with or without assistance. Bill would just of been in the way.

I got off in the trees back of the cabin and throwed the reins over Cap'n Kidd's head, and went up to the back of the cabin on foot, walking soft and easy. The moon was well up, by now, and what wind they was, was blowing toward me, which pleased me, because I didn't want the horses tied out in front to scent the cat and start cutting up before I was ready.

The fellers inside was still cussing and talking loud as I approached one of the winders on the side, and one hollered out: "Come on! Let's git started! I craves Hopkins gore!" And about that time I give the cougar a heave and throwed him through the winder.

He let out a awful squall as he hit, and the fellers in the cabin hollered louder'n he did. Instantly a most awful bustle broke loose in there and of all the whooping and bellering and shooting I ever heard, and the lion squalling amongst it all, and clothes and hides tearing so you could hear it all over the clearing, and the horses busting loose and tearing out through the bresh.

As soon as I hove the cat I run around to the door and a man was standing there with his mouth open, too surprized at the racket to do anything. So I takes his rifle away from him and broke the stock off on his head, and stood there at the door with the barrel intending to brain them Barlows as they run out. I was plumb certain they would run out, because I have noticed that the average man is funny that way, and hates to be shut up in a cabin with a mad cougar as bad as the cougar would hate to be shut up in a cabin with a infuriated settler of Bear Creek.

But them scoundrels fooled me. 'Pears like they had a secret door in the back wall, and whilst I was waiting for them to storm out through the front door and get their skulls cracked, they knocked the secret door open and went piling out that way.

BY THE TIME I REALIZED what was happening and run around to the other end of the cabin, they was all out and streaking for the trees, yelling blue murder, with their clothes all tore to shreds and them bleeding like stuck hawgs.

That there catamount sure improved the shining hours whilst he was corralled with them Barlows. He come out after 'em with his mouth full of the seats of men's britches, and when he seen me he give a kind of despairing yelp and taken out up the mountain with his tail betwixt his laigs like the devil was after him with a red-hot branding iron.

I taken after the Barlows, sot on scuttling at least a few of 'em, and I was on the p'int of letting bam at 'em with my six-shooters as they run, when, just as they reached the trees, all the Hopkins men riz out of the bresh and fell on 'em with piercing howls.

That fray was kind of peculiar. I don't remember a single shot being fired. The Barlows had dropped their guns in their flight, and the Hopkinses seemed bent on whipping out their wrongs with their bare hands and gun butts. For a few seconds they was a hell of a scramble--men cussing and howling and bellering, and rifle-stocks cracking over heads, and the bresh crashing underfoot, and then before I could get into it, the Barlows broke every which-way and took out through the woods like jack-rabbits squalling Jedgment Day.

Old Man Hopkins come prancing out of the bresh waving his Winchester and his beard flying in the moonlight and he hollered: "The sins of the wicked shall return onto 'em! Elkins, we have hit a powerful lick for righteousness this here night!"

"Where'd you all come from?" I ast. "I thought you was still back in yore cabin chawin' the rag."

"Well," he says, "after you pulled out we decided to trail along and see how you come out with whatever you planned. As we come through the woods expectin' to git ambushed every second, we met Bill here who told us he believed you had a idee of circumventin' them devils, though he didn't know what it was. So we come on and hid ourselves at the aidge of the trees to see what'd happen. I see we been too timid in our dealin's with these heathens. We been lettin' them force the fightin' too long. You was right. A good offense is the best defense.

"We didn't kill any of the varmints, wuss luck," he said, "but we give 'em a prime lickin'. Hey, look there! The boys has caught one of the critters! Take him into that cabin, boys!"

They lugged him into the cabin, and by the time me and the old man got there, they had the candles lit, and a rope around the Barlow's neck and one end throwed over a rafter.

That cabin was a sight, all littered with broke guns and splintered chairs and tables, pieces of clothes and strips of hide. It looked just about like a cabin ought to look where they has just been a fight between seventeen polecats and a mountain lion. It was a dirt floor, and some of the poles which helped hold up the roof was splintered, so most of the weight was resting on a big post in the center of the hut.

All the Hopkinses was crowding around their prisoner, and when I looked over their shoulders and seen the feller's pale face in the light of the candle I give a yell: "Dick Jackson!"

"So it is!" said Old Man Hopkins, rubbing his hands with glee. "So it is! Well, young feller, you got any last words to orate?"

"Naw," said Jackson sullenly. "But if it hadn't been for that derned lion spilin' our plans we'd of had you danged Hopkinses like so much pork. I never heard of a cougar jumpin' through a winder before."

"That there cougar didn't jump," I said, shouldering through the mob. "He was hev. I done the heavin'."

His mouth fell open and he looked at me like he'd saw the ghost of Sitting Bull. "Breckinridge Elkins!" says he. "I'm cooked now, for sure!"

"I'll say you air!" gritted the feller who'd spoke of shooting Jackson earlier in the night. "What we waitin' for? Le's string him up."

The rest started howlin'.

"Hold on," I said. "You all can't hang him. I'm goin' to take him back to Bear Creek."

"You ain't neither," said Old Man Hopkins. "We're much obleeged to you for the help you've give us tonight, but this here is the first chance we've had to hang a Barlow in fifteen year, and we aim to make the most of it. String him, boys!"

"Stop!" I roared, stepping for'ard.

IN A SECOND I WAS COVERED by seven rifles, whilst three men laid hold of the rope and started to heave Jackson's feet off the floor. Them seven Winchesters didn't stop me. But for one thing I'd of taken them guns away and wiped up the floor with them ungrateful mavericks. But I was afeared Jackson would get hit in the wild shooting that was certain to foller such a plan of action.

What I wanted to do was something which would put 'em all horse-de-combat as the French say, without killing Jackson. So I laid hold on the center-post and before they knowed what I was doing, I tore it loose and broke it off, and the roof caved in and the walls fell inwards on the roof.

In a second they wasn't no cabin at all--just a pile of lumber with the Hopkinses all underneath and screaming blue murder. Of course I just braced my laigs and when the roof fell my head busted a hole through it, and the logs of the falling walls hit my shoulders and glanced off, so when the dust settled I was standing waist-deep amongst the ruins and nothing but a few scratches to show for it.

The howls that riz from beneath the ruins was blood-curdling, but I knowed nobody was hurt permanent because if they was they wouldn't be able to howl like that. But I expect some of 'em would of been hurt if my head and shoulders hadn't kind of broke the fall of the roof and wall-logs.

I located Jackson by his voice, and pulled pieces of roof board and logs off until I come onto his laig, and I pulled him out by it and laid him on the ground to get his wind back, because a beam had fell acrost his stummick and when he tried to holler he made the funniest noise I ever heard.

I then kind of rooted around amongst the debris and hauled Old Man Hopkins out, and he seemed kind of dazed and kept talking about earthquakes.

"You better git to work extricatin' yore misguided kin from under them logs, you hoary-haired old sarpent," I told him sternly. "After that there display of ingratitude I got no sympathy for you. In fact, if I was a short-tempered man I'd feel inclined to violence. But bein' the soul of kindness and generosity, I controls my emotions and merely remarks that if I wasn't mild-mannered as a lamb, I'd hand you a boot in the pants--like this!"

I kicked him gentle.

"Owww!" says he, sailing through the air and sticking his nose to the hilt in the dirt. "I'll have the law on you, you derned murderer!" He wept, shaking his fists at me, and as I departed with my captive I could hear him chanting a hymn of hate as he pulled chunks of logs off of his bellering relatives.

Jackson was trying to say something, but I told him I warn't in no mood for perlite conversation and the less he said the less likely I was to lose my temper and tie his neck into a knot around a black jack.

CAP'N KIDD MADE THE hundred miles from the Mezquital Mountains to Bear Creek by noon the next day, carrying double, and never stopping to eat, sleep, nor drink. Them that don't believe that kindly keep their mouths shet. I have already licked nineteen men for acting like they didn't believe it.

I stalked into the cabin and throwed Dick Jackson down on the floor before Ellen which looked at him and me like she thought I was crazy.

"What you finds attractive about this coyote," I said bitterly, "is beyond the grasp of my dust-coated brain. But here he is, and you can marry him right away."

She said: "Air you drunk or sun-struck? Marry that good-for-nothin', whiskey-swiggin', card-shootin' loafer? Why, ain't been a week since I run him out of the house with a buggy whip."

"Then he didn't jilt you?" I gasped.

"Him jilt me?" she said. "I jilted him!"

I turned to Dick Jackson more in sorrer than in anger.

"Why," said I, "did you boast all over Chawed Ear about jiltin' Ellen Elkins?"

"I didn't want folks to know she turned me down," he said sulkily. "Us Jacksons is proud. The only reason I ever thought about marryin' her was I was ready to settle down, on the farm pap gave me, and I wanted to marry me a Elkins gal so I wouldn't have to go to the expense of hirin' a couple of hands and buyin' a span of mules and--"

They ain't no use in Dick Jackson threatening to have the law on me. He got off light to what's he'd have got if pap and my brothers hadn't all been off hunting. They've got terrible tempers. But I was always too soft-hearted for my own good. In spite of Dick Jackson's insults I held my temper. I didn't do nothing to him at all, except escort him in sorrow for five or six miles down the Chawed Ear trail, kicking the seat of his britches.

THE END

Contents

THE HAUNTED MOUNTAIN

By Robert E. Howard

The reason I despises tarantulas, stinging lizards, and hydrophobia skunks is because they reminds me so much of Aunt Lavaca, which my Uncle Jacob Grimes married in a absent-minded moment, when he was old enough to know better.

That-there woman's voice plumb puts my teeth on aidge, and it has the same effect on my horse, Cap'n Kidd, which don't generally shy at nothing less'n a rattlesnake. So when she stuck her head out of her cabin as I was riding by and yelled "Breckinri-i-idge," Cap'n Kidd jumped straight up in the air, and then tried to buck me off.

"Stop tormentin' that pore animal and come here," Aunt Lavaca commanded, whilst I was fighting for my life against Cap'n Kidd's spine-twisting sun-fishing. "I never see such a cruel, worthless, no-good--"

She kept right on yapping away until I finally wore him down and reined up alongside the cabin stoop and said: "What you want, Aunt Lavaca?"

She give me a scornful snort, and put her hands onto her hips and glared at me like I was something she didn't like the smell of.

"I want you should go git yore Uncle Jacob and bring him home," she said at last. "He's off on one of his idiotic prospectin' sprees again. He snuck out before daylight with the bay mare and a pack mule--I wisht I'd woke up and caught him. I'd of fixed him! If you hustle you can catch him this side of Haunted Mountain Gap. You bring him back if you have to lasso him and tie him to his saddle. Old fool! Off huntin' gold when they's work to be did in the alfalfa fields. Says he ain't no farmer. Huh! I 'low I'll make a farmer outa him yet. You git goin'."

"But I ain't got time to go chasin' Uncle Jacob all over Haunted Mountain," I protested. "I'm headin' for the rodeo over to Chawed Ear. I'm goin' to win me a prize bull-doggin' some steers--"

"Bull-doggin'!" she snapped. "A fine ockerpashun! Gwan, you worthless loafer! I ain't goin' to stand here all day argyin' with a big ninny like you be. Of all the good-for-nothin', triflin', lunkheaded--"

When Aunt Lavaca starts in like that you might as well travel. She can talk steady for three days and nights without repeating herself, her voice getting louder and shriller all the time till it nigh splits a body's eardrums. She was still yelling at me as I rode up the trail toward Haunted Mountain Gap, and I could hear her long after I couldn't see her no more.

Pore Uncle Jacob! He never had much luck prospecting, but trailing around through the mountains with a jackass is a lot better'n listening to Aunt Lavaca. A jackass's voice is mild and soothing alongside of hers.

Some hours later I was climbing the long rise that led up to the Gap, and I realized I had overtook the old coot when something went ping! up on the slope, and my hat flew off. I quick reined Cap'n Kidd behind a clump of bresh, and looked up toward the Gap, and seen a packmule's rear-end sticking out of a cluster of boulders.

"You quit that shootin' at me, Uncle Jacob!" I roared.

"You stay whar you be," his voice come back, sharp as a razor. "I know Lavacky sent you after me, but I ain't goin' home. I'm onto somethin' big at last, and I don't aim to be interfered with."

"What you mean?" I demanded.

"Keep back or I'll ventilate you," he promised. "I'm goin' for the Lost Haunted Mine."

"You been huntin' that thing for thirty years," I snorted.

"This time I finds it," he says. "I bought a map off'n a drunk Mex down to Perdition. One of his ancestors was a Injun which helped pile up the rocks to hide the mouth of the cave where it is."

"Why didn't he go find it and git the gold?" I asked.

"He's skeered of ghosts," said Uncle Jacob. "All Mexes is awful superstitious. This-un 'ud ruther set and drink, nohow. They's millions in gold in that-there mine. I'll shoot you before I'll go home. Now will you go on back peaceable, or will you throw-in with me? I might need you, in case the pack mule plays out."

"I'll come with you," I said, impressed. "Maybe you have got somethin', at that. Put up yore Winchester. I'm comin'."

He emerged from his rocks, a skinny leathery old cuss, and he said: "What about Lavacky? If you don't come back with me, she'll foller us herself. She's that strong-minded."

"I'll leave a note for her," I said. "Joe Hopkins always comes down through the Gap onct a week on his way to Chawed Ear. He's due through here today. I'll stick the note on a tree, where he'll see it and take it to her."

I had a pencil-stub in my saddle-bag, and I tore a piece of wrapping paper off'n a can of tomaters Uncle Jacob had in his pack, and I writ:

Dere Ant Lavaca:

I am takin uncle Jacob way up in the mountins dont try to foler us it wont do no good gold is what Im after. Breckinridge.

I folded it and writ on the outside:

Dere Joe: pleeze take this here note to Miz Lavaca Grimes on the Chawed Ear rode.

THEN ME AND UNCLE JACOB sot out for the higher ranges, and he started telling me all about the Lost Haunted Mine again, like he'd already did about forty times before. Seems like they was onct a old prospector which stumbled onto a cave about fifty years before then, which the walls was solid gold and nuggets all over the floor till a body couldn't walk, as big as mushmelons. But the Indians jumped him and run him out and he got lost and nearly starved in the desert, and went crazy. When he come to a settlement and finally regained his mind, he tried to lead a party back to it, but never could find it. Uncle Jacob said the Indians had took rocks and bresh and hid the mouth of the cave so nobody could tell it was there. I asked him how he knowed the Indians done that, and he said it was common knowledge. Any fool oughta know that's just what they done.

"This-here mine," says Uncle Jacob, "is located in a hidden valley which lies away up amongst the high ranges. I ain't never seen it, and I thought I'd explored these mountains plenty. Ain't nobody more familiar with 'em than me except old Joshua Braxton. But it stands to reason that the cave is awful hard to find, or somebody'd already found it. Accordin' to this-here map, that lost valley must lie just beyond Apache Canyon. Ain't many white men knows whar that is, even. We're headin' there."

We had left the Gap far behind us, and was moving along the slanting side of a sharp-angled crag whilst he was talking. As we passed it, we seen two figgers with horses emerge from the other side, heading in the same direction we was, so our trails converged. Uncle Jacob glared and reached for his Winchester.

"Who's that?" he snarled.

"The big un's Bill Glanton," I said. "I never seen t'other'n."

"And nobody else, outside of a freak museum," growled Uncle Jacob.

This other feller was a funny-looking little maverick, with laced boots and a cork sun-helmet and big spectacles. He sot his horse like he thought it was a rocking chair, and held his reins like he was trying to fish with 'em. Glanton hailed us. He was from Texas, original, and was rough in his speech and free with his weapons, but me and him had always got along very well.

"Where you-all goin'?" demanded Uncle Jacob.

"I am Professor Van Brock, of New York," said the tenderfoot, whilst Bill was getting rid of his tobaccer wad. "I have employed Mr. Glanton, here, to guide me up into the mountains. I am on the track of a tribe of aborigines, which, according to fairly well substantiated rumor, have inhabited the Haunted Mountains since time immemorial."

"Lissen here, you four-eyed runt," said Uncle Jacob in wrath, "are you givin' me the horse-laugh?"

"I assure you that equine levity is the furthest thing from my thoughts," says Van Brock. "Whilst touring the country in the interests of science, I heard the rumors to which I have referred. In a village possessing the singular appellation of Chawed Ear, I met an aged prospector who told me that he had seen one of the aborigines, clad in the skin of a wild animal and armed with a bludgeon. The wildman, he said, emitted a most peculiar and piercing cry when sighted, and fled into the recesses of the hills. I am confident that it is some survivor of a pre-Indian race, and I am determined to investigate."

"They ain't no such critter in these hills," snorted Uncle Jacob. "I've roamed all over 'em for thirty year, and I ain't seen no wildman."

"Well," says Glanton, "they's somethin' onnatural up there, because I been hearin' some funny yarns myself. I never thought I'd be huntin' wildmen," he says, "but since that hash-slinger in Perdition turned me down to elope with a travelin' salesman, I welcomes the chance to lose myself in the mountains and forgit the perfidy of women-kind. What you-all doin' up here? Prospectin'?" he said, glancing at the tools on the mule.

"Not in earnest," said Uncle Jacob hurriedly. "We're just kinda whilin' away our time. They ain't no gold in these mountains."

"Folks says that Lost Haunted Mine is up here somewhere," said Glanton.

"A pack of lies," snorted Uncle Jacob, busting into a sweat. "Ain't no such mine. Well, Breckinridge, let's be shovin'. Got to make Antelope Peak before sundown."

"I thought we was goin' to Apache Canyon," I says, and he give me a awful glare, and said: "Yes, Breckinridge, that's right, Antelope Peak, just like you said. So long, gents."

"So long," said Glanton.

So we turned off the trail almost at right-angles to our course, me follering Uncle Jacob bewilderedly. When we was out of sight of the others, he reined around again.

"When Nature give you the body of a giant, Breckinridge," he said, "she plumb forgot to give you any brains to go along with yore muscles. You want everybody to know what we're lookin' for?"

"Aw," I said, "them fellers is just lookin' for wildmen."

"Wildmen!" he snorted. "They don't have to go no further'n Chawed Ear on payday night to find more wildmen than they could handle. I ain't swallerin' no such stuff. Gold is what they're after, I tell you. I seen Glanton talkin' to that Mex in Perdition the day I bought that map from him. I believe they either got wind of that mine, or know I got that map, or both."

"What you goin' to do?" I asked him.

"Head for Apache Canyon by another trail," he said.

SO WE DONE SO AND ARRIV there after night, him not willing to stop till we got there. It was deep, with big high cliffs cut with ravines and gulches here and there, and very wild in appearance. We didn't descend into the canyon that night, but camped on a plateau above it. Uncle Jacob 'lowed we'd begin exploring next morning. He said they was lots of caves in the canyon, and he'd been in all of 'em. He said he hadn't never found nothing except b'ars and painters and rattlesnakes; but he believed one of them caves went on through into another, hidden canyon, and there was where the gold was at.

Next morning I was awoke by Uncle Jacob shaking me, and his whiskers was curling with rage.

"What's the matter?" I demanded, setting up and pulling my guns.

"They're here!" he squalled. "Daw-gone it, I suspected 'em all the time! Git up, you big lunk. Don't set there gawpin' with a gun in each hand like a idjit! They're here, I tell you!"

"Who's here?" I asked.

"That dern tenderfoot and his cussed Texas gunfighter," snarled Uncle Jacob. "I was up just at daylight, and purty soon I seen a wisp of smoke curlin' up from behind a big rock t'other side of the flat. I snuck over there, and there was Glanton fryin' bacon, and Van Brock was pertendin' to be lookin' at some flowers with a magnifyin' glass--the blame fake. He ain't no perfessor. I bet he's a derned crook. They're follerin' us. They aim to murder us and rob us of my map."

"Aw, Glanton wouldn't do that," I said. And Uncle Jacob said: "You shet up! A man will do anything whar gold is consarned. Dang it all, git up and do somethin'! Air you goin' to set there, you big lummox, and let us git murdered in our sleep?"

That's the trouble of being the biggest man in yore clan; the rest of the family always dumps all the onpleasant jobs onto yore shoulders. I pulled on my boots and headed across the flat, with Uncle Jacob's war-songs ringing in my ears, and I didn't notice whether he was bringing up the rear with his Winchester or not.

They was a scattering of trees on the flat, and about halfway across a figger emerged from amongst them, headed my direction with fire in his eye. It was Glanton.

"So, you big mountain grizzly," he greeted me rambunctiously, "you was goin' to Antelope Peak, hey? Kinda got off the road, didn't you? Oh, we're on to you, we are!"

"What you mean?" I demanded. He was acting like he was the one which oughta feel righteously indignant, instead of me.

"You know what I mean!" he says, frothing slightly at the mouth. "I didn't believe it when Van Brock first said he suspicioned you, even though you hombres did act funny yesterday when we met you on the trail. But this mornin' when I glimpsed yore fool Uncle Jacob spyin' on our camp, and then seen him sneakin' off through the bresh, I knowed Van Brock was right. Yo're after what we're after, and you-all resorts to dirty onderhanded tactics. Does you deny yo're after the same thing we are?"

"Naw, I don't," I said. "Uncle Jacob's got more right to it than you-all. And when you says we uses underhanded tricks, yo're a liar."

"That settles it!" gnashed he. "Go for yore gun!"

"I don't want to perforate you," I growled.

"I ain't hankerin' to conclude yore mortal career," he admitted. "But Haunted Mountain ain't big enough for both of us. Take off yore guns and I'll maul the livin' daylights outa you, big as you be."

I unbuckled my gun-belt and hung it on a limb, and he laid off his'n, and hit me in the stummick and on the ear and in the nose, and then he socked me in the jaw and knocked out a tooth. This made me mad, so I taken him by the neck and throwed him against the ground so hard it jolted all the wind outa him. I then sot on him and started banging his head against a convenient boulder, and his cussing was terrible to hear.

"If you all had acted like white men," I gritted, "we'd of give you a share in that there mine."

"What you talkin' about?" he gurgled, trying to haul his bowie out of his boot which I had my knee on.

"The Lost Haunted Mine, of course," I snarled, getting a fresh grip on his ears.

"Hold on," he protested. "You mean you-all are just lookin' for gold? On the level?"

I was so astonished I quit hammering his skull against the rock.

"Why, what else?" I demanded. "Ain't you-all follerin' us to steal Uncle Jacob's map which shows where at the mine is hid?"

"Git offa me," he snorted disgustfully, taking advantage of my surprize to push me off. "Hell!" he said, starting to knock the dust offa his britches. "I might of knowed that tenderfoot was wool-gatherin'. After we seen you-all yesterday, and he heard you mention 'Apache Canyon' he told me he believed you was follerin' us. He said that yarn about prospectin' was just a blind. He said he believed you was workin' for a rival scientific society to git ahead of us and capture that-there wildman yoreselves."

"What?" I said. "You mean that wildman yarn is straight?"

"So far as we're consarned," said Bill. "Prospectors is been tellin' some onusual stories about Apache Canyon. Well, I laughed at him at first, but he kept on usin' so many .45-caliber words that he got me to believin' it might be so. 'Cause, after all, here was me guidin' a tenderfoot on the trail of a wildman, and they wasn't no reason to think you and Jacob Grimes was any more sensible than me.

"Then, this mornin' when I seen Joab peekin' at me from the bresh, I decided Van Brock must be right. You-all hadn't never went to Antelope Peak. The more I thought it over, the more sartain I was that you was follerin' us to steal our wildman, so I started over to have a showdown."

"Well," I said, "we've reached a understandin' at last. You don't want our mine, and we shore don't want yore wildman. They's plenty of them amongst my relatives on Bear Creek. Le's git Van Brock and lug him over to our camp and explain things to him and my weak-minded uncle."

"All right," said Glanton, buckling on his guns. "Hey, what's that?"

From down in the canyon come a yell: "Help! Aid! Assistance!"

"It's Van Brock!" yelped Glanton. "He's wandered down into the canyon by hisself! Come on!"

RIGHT NEAR THEIR CAMP they was a ravine leading down to the floor of the canyon. We pelted down that at full speed, and emerged near the wall of the cliffs. They was the black mouth of a cave showing nearby, in a kind of cleft, and just outside this cleft Van Brock was staggering around, yowling like a hound dawg with his tail caught in the door.

His cork helmet was laying on the ground all bashed outa shape, and his specs was lying near it. He had a knob on his head as big as a turnip and he was doing a kind of ghost-dance or something all over the place.

He couldn't see very good without his specs, 'cause when he sighted us he give a shriek and starting legging it for the other end of the canyon, seeming to think we was more enemies. Not wanting to indulge in no sprint in that heat, Bill shot a heel offa his boot, and that brung him down squalling blue murder.

"Help!" he shrieked. "Mr. Glanton! Help! I am being attacked! Help!"

"Aw, shet up," snorted Bill. "I'm Glanton. Yo're all right. Give him his specs, Breck. Now what's the matter?"

He put 'em on, gasping for breath, and staggered up, wild-eyed, and p'inted at the cave and hollered: "The wildman! I saw him, as I descended into the canyon on a private exploring expedition! A giant with a panther-skin about his waist, and a club in his hand. He dealt me a murderous blow with the bludgeon when I sought to apprehend him, and fled into that cavern. He should be arrested!"

I looked into the cave. It was too dark to see anything except for a hoot-owl.

"He must of saw somethin', Breck," said Glanton, hitching his gun-harness. "Somethin' shore cracked him on the conk. I've been hearin' some queer tales about this canyon, myself. Maybe I better sling some lead in there--"

"No, no, no!" broke in Van Brock. "We must capture him alive!"

"What's goin' on here?" said a voice, and we turned to see Uncle Jacob approaching with his Winchester in his hands.

"Everything's all right, Uncle Jacob," I said. "They don't want yore mine. They're after the wildman, like they said, and we got him cornered in that there cave."

"All right, huh?" he snorted. "I reckon you thinks it's all right for you to waste yore time with such dern foolishness when you oughta be helpin' me look for my mine. A big help you be!"

"Where was you whilst I was argyin' with Bill here?" I demanded.

"I knowed you could handle the sityation, so I started explorin' the canyon," he said. "Come on, we got work to do."

"But the wildman!" cried Van Brock. "Your nephew would be invaluable in securing the specimen. Think of science! Think of progress! Think of--"

"Think of a striped skunk!" snorted Uncle Jacob. "Breckinridge, air you comin'?"

"Aw, shet up," I said disgustedly. "You both make me tired. I'm goin' in there and run that wildman out, and Bill, you shoot him in the hind-laig as he comes out, so's we can catch him and tie him up."

"But you left yore guns hangin' onto that limb up on the plateau," objected Glanton.

"I don't need 'em," I said. "Didn't you hear Van Brock say we was to catch him alive? If I started shootin' in the dark I might rooin him."

"All right," says Bill, cocking his six-shooters. "Go ahead. I figger yo're a match for any wildman that ever come down the pike."

So I went into the cleft and entered the cave, and it was dark as all get-out. I groped my way along and discovered the main tunnel split into two, so I taken the biggest one. It seemed to get darker the further I went, and purty soon I bumped into something big and hairy and it went "Wump!" and grabbed me.

Thinks I, it's the wildman, and he's on the war-path. We waded into each other and tumbled around on the rocky floor in the dark, biting and mauling and tearing. I'm the biggest and the fightingest man on Bear Creek, which is famed far and wide for its ring-tailed scrappers, but this wildman shore give me my hands full. He was the biggest hairiest critter I ever laid hands on, and be had more teeth and talons than I thought a human could possibly have. He chawed me with vigor and enthusiasm, and he waltzed up and down my frame free and hearty, and swept the floor with me till I was groggy.

For a while I thought I was going to give up the ghost, and I thought with despair of how humiliated my relatives on Bear Creek would be to hear their champion battler had been clawed to death by a wildman in a cave.

That made me plumb ashamed for weakening, and the socks I give him ought to of laid out any man, wild or tame, to say nothing of the pile-driver kicks in his belly, and butting him with my head so he gasped. I got what felt like a ear in my mouth and commenced chawing on it, and presently, what with this and other mayhem I committed on him, he give a most inhuman squall and bust away and went lickety-split for the outside world.

I riz up and staggered after him, hearing a wild chorus of yells break forth outside, but no shots. I bust out into the open, bloody all over, and my clothes hanging in tatters.

"Where is he?" I hollered. "Did you let him git away?"

"Who?" said Glanton, coming out from behind a boulder, whilst Van Brock and Uncle Jacob dropped down out of a tree nearby.

"The wildman, damn it!" I roared.

"We ain't seen no wildman," said Glanton.

"Well, what was that thing I just run outa the cave?" I hollered.

"That was a grizzly b'ar," said Glanton. "Yeah," sneered Uncle Jacob, "and that was Van Brock's 'wildman'! And now, Breckinridge, if yo're through playin', we'll--"

"No, no!" hollered Van Brock, jumping up and down. "It was a human being which smote me and fled into the cavern. Not a bear! It is still in there somewhere, unless there is another exit to the cavern."

"Well, he ain't in there now," said Uncle Jacob, peering into the mouth of the cave. "Not even a wildman would run into a grizzly's cave, or if he did, he wouldn't stay long--ooomp!"

A rock come whizzing out of the cave and hit Uncle Jacob in the belly, and he doubled up on the ground.

"Aha!" I roared, knocking up Glanton's ready six-shooter. "I know! They's two tunnels in here. He's in that smaller cave. I went into the wrong one! Stay here, you-all, and gimme room! This time I gets him!"

WITH THAT I RUSHED INTO the cave mouth again, disregarding some more rocks which emerged, and plunged into the smaller opening. It was dark as pitch, but I seemed to be running along a narrer tunnel, and ahead of me I heered bare feet pattering on the rock. I follered 'em at full lope, and presently seen a faint hint of light. The next minute I rounded a turn and come out into a wide place, which was lit by a shaft of light coming in through a cleft in the wall, some yards up. In the light I seen a fantastic figger climbing up on a ledge, trying to reach that cleft.

"Come down offa that!" I thundered, and give a leap and grabbed the ledge by one hand and hung on, and reached for his legs with t'other hand. He give a squall as I grabbed his ankle and splintered his club over my head. The force of the lick broke off the lip of the rock ledge I was holding to, and we crashed to the floor together, because I didn't let loose of him. Fortunately, I hit the rock floor headfirst which broke my fall and kept me from fracturing any of my important limbs, and his head hit my jaw, which rendered him unconscious.

I riz up and picked up my limp captive and carried him out into the daylight where the others was waiting. I dumped him on the ground and they stared at him like they couldn't believe it. He was a ga'nt old cuss with whiskers about a foot long and matted hair, and he had a mountain lion's hide tied around his waist.

"A white man!" enthused Van Brock, dancing up and down. "An unmistakable Caucasian! This is stupendous! A prehistoric survivor of a pre-Indian epoch! What an aid to anthropology! A wildman! A veritable wildman!"

"Wildman, hell!" snorted Uncle Jacob. "That-there's old Joshua Braxton, which was tryin' to marry that old maid schoolteacher down at Chawed Ear all last winter."

"I was tryin' to marry her!" said Joshua bitterly, setting up suddenly and glaring at all of us. "That-there is good, that-there is! And me all the time fightin' for my life against it. Her and all her relations was tryin' to marry her to me. They made my life a curse. They was finally all set to kidnap me and marry me by force. That's why I come away off up here, and put on this rig to scare folks away. All I craves is peace and quiet and no dern women."

Van Brock begun to cry because they wasn't no wildman, and Uncle Jacob said: "Well, now that this dern foolishness is settled, maybe I can git to somethin' important. Joshua, you know these mountains even better'n I do. I want you to help me find the Lost Haunted Mine."

"There ain't no such mine," said Joshua. "That old prospector imagined all that stuff whilst he was wanderin' around over the desert crazy."

"But I got a map I bought from a Mexican in Perdition," hollered Uncle Jacob.

"Lemme see that map," said Glanton. "Why, hell," he said, "that-there is a fake. I seen that Mexican drawin' it, and he said he was goin' to try to sell it to some old jassack for the price of a drunk."

Uncle Jacob sot down on a rock and pulled his whiskers. "My dreams is bust," he said weakly. "I'm goin' home to my wife."

"You must be desperate if it's come to that," said old Joshua acidly. "You better stay up here. If they ain't no gold, they ain't no women to torment a body, either."

"Women is a snare and a delusion," agreed Glanton. "Van Brock can go back with these fellers. I'm stayin' with Joshua."

"You-all oughta be ashamed talkin' about women that way," I reproached 'em. "What, in this here lousy and troubled world can compare to women's gentle sweetness--"

"There the scoundred is!" screeched a familiar voice. "Don't let him git away! Shoot him if he tries to run!"

WE TURNED SUDDEN. We'd been argying so loud amongst ourselves we hadn't noticed a gang of folks coming down the ravine. There was Aunt Lavaca and the sheriff of Chawed Ear with ten men, and they all p'inted sawed-off shotguns at me.

"Don't get rough, Elkins," warned the sheriff nervously. "They're all loaded with buckshot and ten-penny nails. I knows yore repertation and I takes no chances. I arrests you for the kidnapin' of Jacob Grimes."

"Are you plumb crazy?" I demanded.

"Kidnapin'!" hollered Aunt Lavaca, waving a piece of paper. "Abductin' yore pore old uncle! Aimin' to hold him for ransom! It's all writ down in yore own handwritin' right here on this-here paper! Sayin' yo're takin' Jacob away off into the mountains--warnin' me not to try to foller! Same as threatenin' me! I never heered of such doin's! Soon as that good-for-nothin' Joe Hopkins brung me that there insolent letter, I went right after the sheriff.... Joshua Braxton, what air you doin' in them ondecent togs? My land, I dunno what we're comin' to! Well, sheriff, what you standin' there for like a ninny? Why'n't you put some handcuffs and chains and shackles on him? Air you skeered of the big lunkhead?"

"Aw, heck," I said. "This is all a mistake. I warn't threatenin' nobody in that there letter--"

"Then where's Jacob?" she demanded. "Prejuice him imejitately, or--"

"He ducked into that cave," said Glanton.

I stuck my head in and roared: "Uncle Jacob! You come outa there and explain before I come in after you!"

He snuck out looking meek and down-trodden, and I says: "You tell these idjits that I ain't no kidnaper."

"That's right," he said. "I brung him along with me."

"Hell!" said the sheriff, disgustedly. "Have we come all this way on a wild goose chase? I should of knew better'n to listen to a woman--"

"You shet yore fool mouth!" squalled Aunt Lavaca. "A fine sheriff you be. Anyway--what was Breckinridge doin' up here with you, Jacob?"

"He was helpin' me look for a mine, Lavacky," he said.

"Helpin' you?" she screeched. "Why, I sent him to fetch you back! Breckinridge Elkins, I'll tell yore pap about this, you big, lazy, good-for-nothin', low-down, ornery--"

"Aw, shet up!" I roared, exasperated beyond endurance. I seldom lets my voice go its full blast. Echoes rolled through the canyon like thunder, the trees shook and the pine cones fell like hail, and rocks tumbled down the mountainsides. Aunt Lavaca staggered backwards with a outraged squall.

"Jacob!" she hollered. "Air you goin' to 'low that ruffian to use that-there tone of voice to me? I demands that you flail the livin' daylights outa the scoundrel right now!"

Uncle Jacob winked at me.

"Now, now, Lavacky," he started soothing her, and she give him a clip under the ear that changed ends with him. The sheriff and his posse and Van Brock took out up the ravine like the devil was after 'em, and Glanton bit off a chaw of tobaccer and says to me, he says: "Well, what was you fixin' to say about women's gentle sweetness?"

"Nothin'," I snarled. "Come on, let's git goin'. I yearns to find a more quiet and secluded spot than this-here'n. I'm stayin' with Joshua and you and the grizzly."

THE END

Contents

THE RIOT AT COUGAR PAW

By Robert E. Howard

I was out in the blacksmith shop by the corral beating out some shoes for Cap'n Kidd, when my brother John come sa'ntering in. He'd been away for a few weeks up in the Cougar Paw country, and he'd evidently done well, whatever he'd been doing, because he was in a first class humor with hisself, and plumb spilling over with high spirits and conceit. When he feels prime like that he wants to rawhide everybody he meets, especially me. John thinks he's a wit, but I figger he's just half right.

"Air you slavin' over a hot forge for that mangy, flea-bit hunk of buzzard-meat again?" he greeted me. "That broom-tail ain't wuth the iron you wastes on his splayed-out hooves!"

He knows the easiest way to git under my hide is to poke fun at Cap'n Kidd. But I reflected it was just envy on his part, and resisted my natural impulse to bend the tongs over his head. I taken the white-hot iron out of the forge and put it on the anvil and started beating it into shape with the sixteen-pound sledge I always uses. I got no use for the toys which most blacksmiths uses for hammers.

"If you ain't got nothin' better to do than criticize a animal which is a damn sight better hoss than you'll ever be a man," I said with dignerty, between licks, "I calls yore attention to a door right behind you which nobody ain't usin' at the moment."

He bust into loud rude laughter and said: "You call that thing a hossshoe? It's big enough for a snow plow! Here, long as yo're in the business, see can you fit a shoe for that!"

He sot his foot up on the anvil and I give it a good slam with the hammer. John let out a awful holler and begun hopping around over the shop and cussing fit to curl yore hair. I kept on hammering my iron.

Just then pap stuck his head in the door and beamed on us, and said: "You boys won't never grow up! Always playin' yore childish games, and sportin' in yore innercent frolics!"

"He's busted my toe," said John blood-thirstily, "and I'll have his heart's blood if it's the last thing I do."

"Chips off the old block," beamed pap. "It takes me back to the time when, in the days of my happy childhood, I emptied a sawed-off shotgun into the seat of brother Joel's britches for tellin' our old man it was me which put that b'ar-trap in his bunk."

"He'll rue the day," promised John, and hobbled off to the cabin with moans and profanity. A little later, from his yells, I gathered that he had persuaded maw or one of the gals to rub his toe with hoss-liniment. He could make more racket about nothing then any Elkins I ever knowed.

I went on and made the shoes and put 'em on Cap'n Kidd, which is a job about like roping and hawg-tying a mountain cyclone, and by the time I got through and went up to the cabin to eat, John seemed to have got over his mad spell. He was laying on his bunk with his foot up on it all bandaged up, and he says: "Breckinridge, they ain't no use in grown men holdin' a grudge. Let's fergit about it."

"Who's holdin' any grudge?" I ast, making sure he didn't have a bowie knife in his left hand. "I dunno why they should be so much racket over a trifle that didn't amount to nothin', nohow."

"Well," he said, "this here busted foot discommodes me a heap. I won't be able to ride for a day or so, and they is business up to Cougar Paw I ought to 'tend to."

"I thought you just come from there," I says.

"I did," he said, "but they is a man up there which has promised me somethin' which is due me, and now I ain't able to go collect. Whyn't you go collect for me, Breckinridge? You ought to, dern it, because its yore fault I cain't ride. The man's name is Bill Santry, and he lives up in the mountains a few miles from Cougar Paw. You'll likely find him in Cougar Paw any day, though."

"What's this he promised you?" I ast.

"Just ask for Bill Santry," he said. "When you find him say to him: 'I'm John Elkins' brother, and you can give me what you promised him.'"

My family always imposes onto my good nature; generally I'd rather go do what they want me to do than to go to the trouble with arguing with 'em.

"Oh, all right," I said. "I ain't got nothin' to do right now."

"Thanks, Breckinridge," he said. "I knowed I could count on you."

SO A COUPLE OF DAYS later I was riding through the Cougar Range, which is very thick-timbered mountains, and rapidly approaching Cougar Paw. I hadn't never been there before, but I was follering a winding wagon-road which I knowed would eventually fetch me there.

The road wound around the shoulder of a mountain, and ahead of me I seen a narrer path opened into it, and just before I got there I heard a bull beller, and a gal screamed: "Help! Help! Old Man Kirby's bull's loose!"

They came a patter of feet, and behind 'em a smashing and crashing in the underbrush, and a gal run out of the path into the road, and a rampaging bull was right behind her with his head lowered to toss her. I reined Cap'n Kidd between her and him, and knowed Cap'n Kidd would do the rest without no advice from me. He done so by wheeling and lamming his heels into that bull's ribs so hard he kicked the critter clean through a rail fence on the other side of the road. Cap'n Kidd hates bulls, and he's too big and strong for any of 'em. He would of then jumped on the critter and stomped him, but I restrained him, which made him mad, and whilst he was trying to buck me off, the bull ontangled hisself and high-tailed it down the mountain, bawling like a scairt yearling.

When I had got Cap'n Kidd in hand, I looked around and seen the gal looking at me very admiringly. I swept off my Stetson and bowed from my saddle and says: "Can I assist you any father, m'am?"

She blushed purty as a pitcher and said: "I'm much obliged, stranger. That there critter nigh had his hooks into my hide. Whar you headin'? If you ain't in no hurry I'd admire to have you drop by the cabin and have a snack of b'ar meat and honey. We live up the path about a mile."

They ain't nothin' I'd ruther do," I assured her. "But just at the present I got business in Cougar Paw. How far is it from here?"

"'Bout five mile down the road," says she. "My name's Joan; what's yore'n?"

"Breckinridge Elkins, of Bear Creek," I said. "Say, I got to push on to Cougar Paw, but I'll be ridin' back this way tomorrer mornin' about sun-up. If you could--"

"I'll be waitin' right here for you," she said so promptly it made my head swim. No doubt about it; it was love at first sight. "I--I got store-bought shoes," she added shyly. "I'll be a-wearin' 'em when you come along."

"I'll be here if I have to wade through fire, flood and hostile Injuns," I assured her, and rode on down the wagon-trace with my manly heart swelling with pride in my bosom. They ain't many mountain men which can awake the fire of love in a gal's heart at first sight--a gal, likewise, which was as beautiful as that there gal, and rich enough to own store-bought shoes. As I told Cap'n Kidd, they was just something about a Elkins.

It was about noon when I rode into Cougar Paw which was a tolerably small village sot up amongst the mountains, with a few cabins where folks lived, and a few more which was a grocery store and a jail and a saloon. Right behind the saloon was a good-sized cabin with a big sign onto it which said: Jonathan Middleton, Mayor of Cougar Paw.

They didn't seem to be nobody in sight, not even on the saloon porch, so I rode on to the corrals which served for a livery stable and wagon yard, and a man come out of the cabin nigh it, and took charge of Cap'n Kidd. He wanted to turn him in with a couple of mules which hadn't never been broke, but I knowed what Cap'n Kidd would do to them mules, so the feller give him a corral to hisself, and belly-ached just because Cap'n Kidd playfully bit the seat out of his britches.

He ca'med down when I paid for the britches. I ast him where I could find Bill Santry, and he said likely he was up to the store.

SO I WENT UP TO THE store, and it was about like all them stores you see in them kind of towns--groceries, and dry-goods, and grindstones, and harness and such-like stuff, and a wagon-tongue somebody had mended recent. They warn't but the one store in the town and it handled a little of everything. They was a sign onto it which said: General Store; Jonathan Middleton, Prop.

They was a bunch of fellers setting around on goods boxes and benches eating sody crackers and pickles out of a barrel, and they was a tolerable hard-looking gang. I said: "I'm lookin' for Bill Santry."

The biggest man in the store, which was setting on a bench, says: "You don't have to look no farther. I'm Bill Santry."

"Well," I says, "I'm Breckinridge Elkins, John Elkins' brother. You can give me what you promised him."

"Ha!" he says with a snort like a hungry catamount rising sudden. "They is nothin' which could give me more pleasure! Take it with my blessin'!" And so saying he picked up the wagon tongue and splintered it over my head.

It was so onexpected that I lost my footing and fell on my back, and Santry give a wolfish yell and jumped into my stummick with both feet, and the next thing I knowed nine or ten more fellers was jumping up and down on me with their boots.

Now I can take a joke as well as the next man, but it always did make me mad for a feller to twist a spur into my hair and try to tear the sculp off. Santry having did this, I throwed off them lunatics which was trying to tromp out my innards, and riz up amongst them with a outraged beller. I swept four or five of 'em into my arms and give 'em a grizzly-hug, and when I let go all they was able to do was fall on the floor and squawk about their busted ribs.

I then turned onto the others which was assaulting me with pistols and bowie knives and the butt ends of quirts and other villainous weppins, and when I laid into 'em you should of heard 'em howl. Santry was trying to dismember my ribs with a butcher knife he'd got out of the pork barrel, so I picked up the pickle barrel and busted it over his head. He went to the floor under a avalanche of splintered staves and pickles and brine, and then I got hold of a grindstone and really started getting destructive. A grindstone is a good comforting implement to have hold of in a melee, but kind of clumsy. For instance when I hove it at a feller which was trying to cock a sawed-off shotgun, it missed him entirely and knocked all the slats out of the counter and nigh squashed four or five men which was trying to shoot me from behind it. I settled the shotgun-feller's hash with a box of canned beef, and then I got hold of a double-bitted axe, and the embattled citizens of Cougar Paw quit the field with blood-curdling howls of fear--them which was able to quit and howl.

I stumbled over the thickly-strewn casualties to the door, taking a few casual swipes at the shelves as I went past, and knocking all the cans off of them. Just as I emerged into the street, with my axe lifted to chop down anybody which opposed me, a skinny looking human bobbed up in front of me and hollered: "Halt, in the name of the law!"

Paying no attention to the double-barreled shotgun he shoved in my face, I swung back my axe for a swipe, and accidentally hit the sign over the door and knocked it down on top of him. He let out a squall as he went down and let bam! with the shotgun right in my face so close it singed my eyebrows. I pulled the sign-board off of him so I could git a good belt at him with my axe, but he hollered: "I'm the sheriff! I demands that you surrenders to properly constupated authority!"

I then noticed that he had a star pinned onto one gallus, so I put down my axe and let him take my guns. I never resists a officer of the law--well, seldom ever, that is.

He p'inted his shotgun at me and says: "I fines you ten dollars for disturbin' the peace!"

About this time a lanky maverick with side-whiskers come prancing around the corner of the building, and he started throwing fits like a locoed steer.

"The scoundrel's rooint my store!" he howled. "He's got to pay me for the counters and winders he busted, and the shelves he knocked down, and the sign he rooint, and the pork-keg he busted over my clerk's head!"

"What you think he ought to pay, Mr. Middleton?" ast the sheriff.

"Five hundred dollars," said the mayor bloodthirstily.

"Five hundred hell!" I roared, stung to wrath. "This here whole dern town ain't wuth five hundred dollars. Anyway, I ain't got no money but fifty cents I owe to the feller that runs the wagon yard."

"Gimme the fifty cents," ordered the mayor. "I'll credit that onto yore bill."

"I'll credit my fist onto yore skull," I snarled, beginning to lose my temper, because the butcher knife Bill Santry had carved my ribs with had salt on the blade, and the salt got into the cuts and smarted. "I owes this fifty cents and I gives it to the man I owes it to."

"Throw him in jail!" raved Middleton. "We'll keep him there till we figures out a job of work for him to do to pay out his fine."

So the sheriff marched me down the street to the log cabin which they used for a jail, whilst Middleton went moaning around the rooins of his grocery store, paying no heed to the fellers which lay groaning on the floor. But I seen the rest of the citizens packing them out on stretchers to take 'em into the saloon to bring 'em to. The saloon had a sign; Square Deal Saloon; Jonathan Middleton, Prop. And I heard fellers cussing Middleton because he made 'em pay for the licker they poured on the victims' cut and bruises. But they cussed under their breath. Middleton seemed to pack a lot of power in that there town.

Well, I laid down on the jail-house bunk as well as I could, because they always build them bunks for ordinary-sized men about six foot tall, and I wondered what in hell Bill Santry had hit me with that wagon tongue for. It didn't seem to make no sense.

I laid there and waited for the sheriff to bring me my supper, but he didn't bring none, and purty soon I went to sleep and dreamed about Joan, with her store-bought shoes.

What woke me up was a awful racket in the direction of the saloon. I got up and looked out of the barred winder. Night had fell, but the cabins and the saloon was well lit up, but too far away for me to tell what was going on. But the noise was so familiar I thought for a minute I must be back on Bear Creek again, because men was yelling and cussing, and guns was banging, and a big voice roaring over the din. Once it sounded like somebody had got knocked through a door, and it made me right home-sick, it was so much like a dance on Bear Creek.

I pulled the bars out of the winder trying to see what was going on, but all I could see was what looked like men flying headfirst out of the saloon, and when they hit the ground and stopped rolling, they jumped up and run off in all directions, hollering like the Apaches was on their heels.

Purty soon I seen somebody running toward the jail as hard as he could leg it, and it was the sheriff. Most of his clothes was tore off, and he had blood on his face, and he was gasping and panting.

"We got a job for you, Elkins!" he panted. "A wild man from Texas just hit town, and is terrorizin' the citizens! If you'll pertect us, and layout this fiend from the prairies, we'll remit yore fine! Listen at that!"

From the noise I jedged the aforesaid wild man had splintered the panels out of the bar.

"What started him on his rampage?" I ast.

"Aw, somebody said they made better chili con carne in Santa Fe than they did in El Paso," says the sheriff. "So this maneyack starts cleanin' up the town--"

"Well, I don't blame him," I said. "That was a dirty lie and a low-down slander. My folks all come from Texas, and if you Cougar Paw coyotes thinks you can slander the State and git away with it--"

"We don't think nothin'!" wailed the sheriff, wringing his hands and jumping like a startled deer every time a crash resounded up the street. "We admits the Lone Star State is the cream of the West in all ways! Lissen, will you lick this homicidal lunatic for us? You got to, dern it. You got to work out yore fine, and--"

"Aw, all right," I said, kicking the door down before he could unlock it. "I'll do it. I cain't waste much time in this town. I got a engagement down the road tomorrer at sun-up."

The street was deserted, but heads was sticking out of every door and winder. The sheriff stayed on my heels till I was a few feet from the saloon, and then he whispered: "Go to it, and make it a good job! If anybody can lick that grizzly in there, it's you!" He then ducked out of sight behind the nearest cabin after handing me my gun-belt.

I stalked into the saloon and seen a gigantic figger standing at the bar and just fixing to pour hisself a dram out of a demijohn. He had the place to hisself, but it warn't near as much of a wreck as I'd expected.

As I come in he wheeled with a snarl, as quick as a cat, and flashing out a gun. I drawed one of mine just as quick, and for a second we stood there, glaring at each other over the barrels.

"Breckinridge Elkins!" says he. "My own flesh and blood kin!"

"Cousin Bearfield Buckner!" I says, shoving my gun back in its scabbard. "I didn't even know you was in Nevada."

"I GOT A RAMBLIN' FOOT," says he, holstering his shooting iron. "Put 'er there, Cousin Breckinridge!"

"By golly, I'm glad to see you!" I said, shaking with him. Then I recollected. "Hey!" I says. "I got to lick you."

"What you mean?" he demanded.

"Aw," I says, "I got arrested, and ain't got no money to pay my fine, and I got to work it out. And lickin' you was the job they gimme."

"I ain't got no use for law," he said grumpily. "Still and all, if I had any dough, I'd pay yore fine for you."

"A Elkins don't accept no charity," I said slightly nettled. "We works for what we gits. I pays my fine by lickin' the hell out of you, Cousin Bearfield."

At this he lost his temper; he was always hot-headed that way. His black brows come down and his lips curled up away from his teeth and he clenched his fists which was about the size of mallets.

"What kind of kinfolks air you?" he scowled. "I don't mind a friendly fight between relatives, but yore intentions is mercenary and unworthy of a true Elkins. You put me in mind of the fact that yore old man had to leave Texas account of a hoss gittin' its head tangled in a lariat he was totin' in his absent-minded way."

"That there is a cussed lie," I said with heat. "Pap left Texas because he wouldn't take the Yankee oath after the Civil War, and you know it. Anyway," I added bitingly, "nobody can ever say a Elkins ever stole a chicken and roasted it in a chaparral thicket."

He started violently and turned pale.

"What you hintin' at, you son of Baliol?" he hollered.

"Yore iniquities ain't no family secret," I assured him bitterly. "Aunt Atascosa writ Uncle Jeppard Grimes about you stealin' that there Wyandotte hen off of Old Man Westfall's roost."

"Shet up!" he bellered, jumping up and down in his wrath, and clutching his six-shooters convulsively. "I war just a yearlin' when I lifted that there fowl and et it, and I war plumb famished, because a posse had been chasin' me six days. They was after me account of Joe Richardson happenin' to be in my way when I was emptyin' my buffalo rifle. Blast yore soul, I have shot better men than you for talkin' about chickens around me."

"Nevertheless," I said, "the fact remains that yo're the only one of the clan which ever swiped a chicken. No Elkins never stole no hen."

"No," he sneered, "they prefers hosses."

Just then I noticed that a crowd had gathered timidly outside the doors and winders and was listening eagerly to this exchange of family scandals, so I said: "We've talked enough. The time for action has arriv. When I first seen you, Cousin Bearfield, the thought of committin' mayhem onto you was very distasteful. But after our recent conversation, I feels I can scramble yore homely features with a free and joyful spirit. Le's have a snort and then git down to business."

"Suits me," he agreed, hanging his gun belt on the bar. "Here's a jug with about a gallon of red licker into it."

So we each taken a medium-sized snort, which of course emptied the jug, and then I hitched my belt and says: "Which does you desire first, Cousin Bearfield--a busted laig or a fractured skull?"

"Wait a minute," he requested as I approached him. "What's, that on yore boot?"

I stooped over to see what it was, and he swung his laig and kicked me in the mouth as hard as he could, and imejitately busted into a guffaw of brutal mirth. Whilst he was thus employed I spit his boot out and butted him in the belly with a vi'lence which changed his haw-haw to a agonized grunt, and then we laid hands on each other and rolled back and forth acrost the floor, biting and gouging, and that was how the tables and chairs got busted. Mayor Middleton must of been watching through a winder because I heard him squall: "My Gawd, they're wreckin' my saloon! Sheriff, arrest 'em both."

And the sheriff hollered back: "I've took yore orders all I aim to, Jonathan Middleton! If you want to stop that double-cyclone git in there and do it yoreself!"

Presently we got tired scrambling around on the floor amongst the cuspidors, so we riz simultaneous and I splintered the roulette wheel with his carcass, and he hit me on the jaw so hard he knocked me clean through the bar and all the bottles fell off the shelves and showered around me, and the ceiling lamp come loose and spilled about a gallon of red hot ile down his neck.

Whilst he was employed with the ile I clumb up from among the debris of the bar and started my right fist in a swing from the floor, and after it traveled maybe nine feet it took Cousin Bearfield under the jaw, and he hit the oppersite wall so hard he knocked out a section and went clean through it, and that was when the roof fell in.

I started kicking and throwing the rooins off me, and then I was aware of Cousin Bearfield lifting logs and beams off of me, and in a minute I crawled out from under 'em.

"I could of got out all right," I said. "But just the same I'm much obleeged to you."

"Blood's thicker'n water," he grunted, and hit me under the jaw and knocked me about seventeen feet backwards toward the mayor's cabin. He then rushed forward and started kicking me in the head, but I riz up in spite of his efforts.

"Git away from that cabin!" screamed the mayor, but it was too late. I hit Cousin Bearfield between the eyes and he crashed into the mayor's rock chimney and knocked the whole base loose with his head, and the chimney collapsed and the rocks come tumbling down on him.

BUT BEING A TEXAS BUCKNER, Bearfield riz out of the rooins. He not only riz, but he had a rock in his hand about the size of a watermelon and he busted it over my head. This infuriated me, because I seen he had no intention of fighting fair, so I tore a log out of the wall of the mayor's cabin and belted him over the ear with it, and Cousin Bearfield bit the dust. He didn't git up that time.

Whilst I was trying to git my breath back and shaking the sweat out of my eyes, all the citizens of Cougar Paw come out of their hiding places and the sheriff yelled: "You done a good job, Elkins! Yo're a free man!"

"He is like hell!" screamed Mayor Middleton, doing a kind of war-dance, whilst weeping and cussing together. "Look at my cabin! I'm a rooint man! Sheriff, arrest that man!"

"Which 'un?" inquired the sheriff.

"The feller from Texas," said Middleton bitterly. "He's unconscious, and it won't be no trouble to drag him to jail. Run the other'n out of town. I don't never want to see him no more."

"Hey!" I said indignantly. "You cain't arrest Cousin Bearfield. I ain't goin' to stand for it."

"Will you resist a officer of the law?" ast the sheriff, sticking his gallus out on his thumb.

"You represents the law whilst you wear yore badge?" I inquired.

"As long as I got that badge on," boasts he, "I am the law!"

"Well," I said, spitting on my hands, "you ain't got it on now. You done lost it somewhere in the shuffle tonight, and you ain't nothin' but a common citizen like me! Git ready, for I'm comin' head-on and wide-open!"

I whooped me a whoop.

He glanced down in a stunned sort of way at his empty gallus, and then he give a scream and took out up the street with most of the crowd streaming out behind him.

"Stop, you cowards!" screamed Mayor Middleton. "Come back here and arrest these scoundrels--"

"Aw, shet up," I said disgustedly, and give him a kind of push and how was I to know it would dislocate his shoulder blade. It was just beginning to git light by now, but Cousin Bearfield wasn't showing no signs of consciousness, and I heard them Cougar Paw skunks yelling to each other back and forth from the cabins where they'd forted themselves, and from what they said I knowed they figgered on opening up on us with their Winchesters as soon as it got light enough to shoot good.

Just then I noticed a wagon standing down by the wagon-yard, so I picked up Cousin Bearfield and lugged him down there and throwed him into the wagon. Far be it from a Elkins to leave a senseless relative to the mercy of a Cougar Paw mob. I went into the corral where them two wild mules was and started putting harness onto 'em, and it warn't no child's play. They hadn't never been worked before, and they fell onto me with a free and hearty enthusiasm. Onst they had me down stomping on me, and the citizens of Cougar Paw made a kind of half-hearted sally. But I unlimbered my .45s and throwed a few slugs in their direction and they all hollered and run back into their cabins.

I finally had to stun them fool mules with a bat over the ear with my fist, and before they got their senses back, I had 'em harnessed to the wagon, and Cap'n Kidd and Cousin Bearfield's hoss tied to the rear end.

"He's stealin' our mules!" howled somebody, and taken a wild shot at me, as I headed down the street, standing up in the wagon and keeping them crazy critters straight by sheer strength on the lines.

"I ain't stealin' nothin'!" I roared as we thundered past the cabins where spurts of flame was already streaking out of the winders. "I'll send this here wagon and these mules back tomorrer!"

The citizens answered with blood-thirsty yells and a volley of lead, and with their benediction singing past my ears, I left Cougar Paw in a cloud of dust and profanity.

THEM MULES, AFTER A vain effort to stop and kick loose from the harness, laid their bellies to the ground and went stampeding down that crooking mountain road like scairt jackrabbits. We went around each curve on one wheel, and sometimes we'd hit a stump that would throw the whole wagon several foot into the air, and that must of been what brung Cousin Bearfield to hisself. He was laying sprawled in the bed, and finally we taken a bump that throwed him in a somersault clean to the other end of the wagon. He hit on his neck and riz up on his hands and knees and looked around dazedly at the trees and stumps which was flashing past, and bellered: "What the hell's happenin'? Where-at am I, anyway?"

"Yo're on yore way to Bear Creek, Cousin Bearfield!" I yelled, cracking my whip over them fool mules' backs. "Yippee ki-yi! This here is fun, ain't it, Cousin Bearfield?"

I was thinking of Joan waiting with her store-bought shoes for me down the road, and in spite of my cuts and bruises, I was rolling high and handsome.

"Slow up!" roared Cousin Bearfield, trying to stand up. But just then we went crashing down a steep bank, and the wagon tilted, throwing Cousin Bearfield to the other end of the wagon where he rammed his head with great force against the front-gate. "#$%&*?@!" says Cousin Bearfield. "Glug!" Because we had hit the creek bed going full speed and knocked all the water out of the channel, and about a hundred gallons splashed over into the wagon and nearly washed Cousin Bearfield out.

"If I ever git out of this alive," promised Cousin Bearfield, "I'll kill you if it's the last thing I do--"

But at that moment the mules stampeded up the bank on the other side and Cousin Bearfield was catapulted to the rear end of the wagon so hard he knocked out the end-gate with his head and nearly went out after it, only he just managed to grab hisself.

We went plunging along the road and the wagon hopped from stump to stump and sometimes it crashed through a thicket of bresh. Cap'n Kidd and the other hoss was thundering after us, and the mules was braying and I was whooping and Cousin Bearfield was cussing, and purty soon I looked back at him and hollered: "Hold on, Cousin Bearfield! I'm goin' to stop these critters. We're close to the place where my gal will be waitin' for me--"

"Look out, you blame fool!" screamed Cousin Bearfield, and then the mules left the road and went one on each side of a white oak tree, and the tongue splintered, and they run right out of the harness and kept high-tailing it, but the wagon piled up on that tree with a jolt that throwed me and Cousin Bearfield headfirst into a blackjack thicket.

Cousin Bearfield vowed and swore, when he got back home, that I picked this thicket special on account of the hornets' nest that was there, and drove into it plumb deliberate. Which same is a lie which I'll stuff down his gizzard next time I cut his sign. He claimed they was trained hornets which I educated not to sting me, but the fact was I had sense enough to lay there plumb quiet. Cousin Bearfield was fool enough to run.

Well, he knows by this time, I reckon, that the fastest man afoot can't noways match speed with a hornet. He taken out through the bresh and thickets, yelpin' and hollerin' and hoppin' most bodacious. He run in a circle, too, for in three minutes he come bellerin' back, gave one last hop and dove back into the thicket. By this time I figgered he'd wore the hornets out, so I came alive again.

I extricated myself first and locating Cousin Bearfield by his profanity, I laid hold onto his hind laig and pulled him out. He lost most of his clothes in the process, and his temper wasn't no better. He seemed to blame me for his misfortunes.

"Don't tech me," he said fiercely. "Leave me be. I'm as close to Bear Creek right now as I want to be. Whar's my hoss?"

The hosses had broke loose when the wagon piled up, but they hadn't gone far, because they was fighting with each other in the middle of the road. Bearfield's hoss was about as big and mean as Cap'n Kidd. We separated 'em and Bearfield clumb aboard without a word.

"Where you goin', Cousin Bearfield?" I ast.

"As far away from you as I can," he said bitterly. "I've saw all the Elkinses I can stand for awhile. Doubtless yore intentions is good, but a man better git chawed by lions than rescued by a Elkins!"

And with a few more observations which highly shocked me, and which I won't repeat, he rode off at full speed, looking very pecooliar, because his pants was about all that hadn't been tore off of him, and he had scratches and bruises all over him.

I WAS SORRY COUSIN Bearfield was so sensitive, but I didn't waste no time brooding over his ingratitude. The sun was up and I knowed Joan would be waiting for me where the path come down into the road from the mountain.

Sure enough, when I come to the mouth of the trail, there she was, but she didn't have on her store-bought shoes, and she looked flustered and scairt.

"Breckinridge!" she hollered, running up to me before I could say a word. "Somethin' terrible's happened! My brother was in Cougar Paw last night, and a big bully beat him up somethin' awful! Some men are bringin' him home on a stretcher! One of 'em rode ahead to tell me!"

"How come I didn't pass 'em on the road?" I said, and she said: "They walked and taken a short cut through the hills. There they come now."

I seen some men come into the road a few hundred yards away and come toward us, lugging somebody on a stretcher like she said.

"Come on!" she says, tugging at my sleeve. "Git down off yore hoss and come with me. I want him to tell you who done it, so you can whup the scoundrel!"

"I got a idee, I know who done it," I said, climbing down. "But I'll make sure." I figgered it was one of Cousin Bearfield's victims.

"Why, look!" said Joan. "How funny the men are actin' since you started toward 'em! They've sot down the litter and they're runnin' off into the woods! Bill!" she shrilled as we drawed nigh. "Bill, air you hurt bad?"

"A busted laig and some broke ribs," moaned the victim on the litter, which also had his head so bandaged I didn't recognize him. Then he sot up with a howl. "What's that ruffian doin' with you?" he roared, and to my amazement I recognized Bill Santry.

"Why, he's a friend of our'n, Bill--" Joan begun, but he interrupted her loudly and profanely: "Friend, hell! He's John Elkins' brother, and furthermore he's the one which is responsible for the crippled and mutilated condition in which you now sees me!"

Joan said nothing. She turned and looked at me in a very pecooliar manner, and then dropped her eyes shyly to the ground.

"Now, Joan," I begun, when all at once I saw what she was looking for. One of the men had dropped a Winchester before he run off. Her first bullet knocked off my hat as I forked Cap'n Kidd, and her second, third and fourth missed me so close I felt their hot wind. Then Cap'n Kidd rounded a curve with his belly to the ground, and my busted romance was left far behind me....

A couple of days later a mass of heartaches and bruises which might of been recognized as Breckinridge Elkins, the pride of Bear Creek, rode slowly down the trail that led to the settlements on the afore-said creek. And as I rode, it was my fortune to meet my brother John coming up the trail on foot.

"Where you been?" he greeted me hypocritically. "You look like you been rasslin' a pack of mountain lions."

I eased myself down from the saddle and said without heat: "John, just what was it that Bill Santry promised you?"

"Oh," says John with a laugh, "I skinned him in a hoss-trade before I left Cougar Paw, and he promised if he ever met me, he'd give me the lickin' of my life. I'm glad you don't hold no hard feelin's, Breck. It war just a joke, me sendin' you up there. You can take a joke, cain't you?"

"Sure," I said. "By the way, John, how's yore toe?"

"It's all right," says he.

"Lemme see," I insisted. "Set yore foot on that stump."

He done so and I give it a awful belt with the butt of my Winchester.

"That there is a receipt for yore joke," I grunted, as he danced around on one foot and wept and swore. And so saying, I mounted and rode on in gloomy grandeur. A Elkins always pays his debts.

THE END

Contents

THE ROAD TO BEAR CREEK

By Robert E. Howard

When Pap gets rheumatism, he gets remorseful. I remember one time particular. He says to me--him laying on his ba'r-skin with a jug of corn licker at his elbow--he says: "Breckinridge, the sins of my youth is ridin' my conscience heavy. When I was a young man I was free and keerless in my habits, as numerous tombstones on the boundless prairies testifies. I sometimes wonders if I warn't a trifle hasty in shootin' some of the men which disagreed with my principles. Maybe I should of controlled my temper and just chawed their ears off.

"Take Uncle Esau Grimes, for instance." And then pap hove a sigh like a bull, and took a drink, and said: "I ain't seen Uncle Esau for years. Me and him parted with harsh words and gun-smoke. I've often wondered if he still holds a grudge against me for plantin' that charge of buckshot in his hind laig."

"What about Uncle Esau?" I said.

Pap perjuiced a letter and said: "He was brung to my mind by this here letter which Jib Braxton fotched me from War Paint. It's from my sister Elizabeth, back in Devilville, Arizona, whar Uncle Esau lives. She says Uncle Esau is on his way to Californy, and is due to pass through War Paint about August the tenth--that's tomorrer. She don't know whether he intends turnin' off to see me or not, but suggests that I meet him at War Paint, and make peace with him."

"Well?" I demanded, because from the way pap combed his beard with his fingers and eyed me, I knowed he was aiming to call on me to do something for him.

Which same he was.

"Well," said pap, taking a long swig out of the jug, "I want you to meet the stage tomorrer mornin' at War Paint, and invite Uncle Esau to come up here and visit us. Don't take no for a answer. Uncle Esau is as cranky as hell, and a peculiar old duck, but I think he'll like a fine upstanding young man as big as you be. Specially if you keep yore mouth shet as much as possible, and don't expose yore ignorance."

"But I ain't never seen Uncle Esau," I protested. "How'm I goin' to know him?"

"He ain't a big man," said pap. "Last time I seen him he had a right smart growth of red whiskers. You bring him home, regardless. Don't pay no attention to his belly-achin'. He's a peculiar old cuss, like I said, and awful suspicious, because he's got lots of enermies. He burnt plenty of powder in his younger days, all the way from Texas to Californy. He was mixed up in more feuds and range-wars than any man I ever knowed. He's supposed to have considerable money hid away somewheres, but that ain't got nothin' to do with us. I wouldn't take his blasted money as a gift. All I want is to talk to him, and git his forgiveness for fillin' his hide with buckshot in a moment of youthful passion.

"If he don't forgive me," said pap, taking another pull at the jug, "I'll bend my .45 over his stubborn old skull. Git goin'."

SO I SADDLED CAP'N KIDD and hit out across the mountains, and the next morning found me eating breakfast just outside War Paint. I didn't go right into the town because I was very bashful in them days, being quite young, and scared of sheriffs and things; but I'd stopped with old Bill Polk, an old hunter and trapper which was camped temporary at the edge of the town.

War Paint was a new town which had sprung up out of nothing on account of a small gold rush right recent, and old Bill was very bitter.

"A hell of a come-off this is!" he snorted. "Cluttern' up the scenery and scarin' the animals off with their fool houses and claims. Last year I shot deer right whar their main saloon is now," he said, glaring at me like it was my fault.

I said nothing but chawed my venison which we was cooking over his fire, and he said: "No good'll come of it, you mark my word. These mountains won't be fit to live in. These camps draws scum like a dead horse draws buzzards. Already the outlaws is ridin' in from Arizona and Utah, besides the native ones. Grizzly Hawkins and his thieves is hidin' up in the hills, and no tellin' how many more'll come in. I'm glad they catched Badger Chisom and his gang after they robbed that bank at Gunstock. That's one gang which won't bedevil us, becaze they're in jail. If somebody'd just kill Grizzly Hawkins, now--"

About that time I seen the stagecoach fogging it down the road from the east in a cloud of dust, so I saddled Cap'n Kidd and left old Bill gorging deer meat and prophecying disaster and damnation, and I rode into War Paint just as the stage pulled up at the stand, which was also the post office and a saloon.

They was three passengers, and none of 'em was tenderfeet. Two was big hard-looking fellows, and t'other'n was a wiry oldish kind of a bird with red whiskers, so I knowed right off it was Uncle Esau Grimes. They was going into the saloon as I dismounted, the big men first, and the older fellow follering them. I touched him on the shoulder and he whirled most amazing quick with a gun in his hand, and he looked at me very suspicious, and said: "What you want?"

"I'm Breckinridge Elkins," I said. "I want you to come with me. I recognized you as soon as I seen you--"

I then got a awful surprise, but not as awful as it would have been if pap hadn't warned me that Uncle Esau was peculiar. He hollered: "Bill! Jim! Help!" and swung his six-shooter against my head with all his might.

Them two fellows whirled and their hands streaked for their guns, so I knocked Uncle Esau flat to keep him from getting hit by a stray slug, and shot one of them through the shoulder before he could unlimber his artillery. The other'n grazed my neck with a bullet, so I perforated him in the arm and again in the hind laig and he fell down across the other'n. I was careful not to shoot 'em in no vital parts, because I seen they was friends of Uncle Esau; but when guns is being drawn it ain't no time to argue or explain.

Men was hollering and running out of saloons, and I stooped and started to lift Uncle Esau, who was kind of groggy because he'd hit his head against a hitching post. He was crawling around on his all-fours cussing something terrible, and trying to find his gun which he'd dropped. When I laid hold on him he commenced biting and kicking and hollering, and I said: "Don't ack like that, Uncle Esau. Here comes a lot of fellers, and the sheriff may be here any minute and 'rest me for shootin' them idjits. We got to get goin'. Pap's waitin' for you, up on Bear Creek."

But he just fit that much harder and hollered that much louder, so I scooped him up bodily and jumped onto Cap'n Kidd and throwed Uncle Esau face-down across the saddle-bow, and headed for the hills. A lot of men yelled at me to stop, and some of 'em started shooting at me, but I give no heed.

I give Cap'n Kidd the rein and we went tearing down the road and around the first bend, and I didn't even take time to change Uncle Esau's position, because I didn't want to get arrested. I'd heard tell them folks in War Paint would even put a fellow in jail for shooting a man within the city limits.

JUST BEFORE WE REACHED the place where I aimed to turn off up into the hills I seen a man on the road ahead of me, and he must have heard the shooting and Uncle Esau yelling because he whirled his horse and blocked the road. He was a wiry old cuss with gray whiskers.

"Where you goin' with that man?" he yelled as I approached at a thundering gait.

"None of your business," I retorted. "Git outa my way."

"Help! Help!" hollered Uncle Esau. "I'm bein' kidnaped and murdered!"

"Drop that man, you derned outlaw!" roared the stranger, suiting his actions to his words.

Him and me drawed simultaneous, but my shot was a split-second quicker'n his'n. His slug fanned my ear, but his hat flew off and he pitched out of his saddle like he'd been hit with a hammer. I seen a streak of red along his temple as I thundered past him.

"Let that larn you not to interfere in family affairs!" I roared, and turned up the trail that switched off the road and up into the mountains.

"Don't never yell like that," I said irritably to Uncle Esau. "You like to got me shot. That feller thought I was a criminal."

I didn't catch what he said, but I looked back and down over the slopes and shoulders and seen men boiling out of town full tilt, and the sun glinted on six-shooters and rifles, so I urged Cap'n Kidd and we covered the next several miles at a fast clip. They ain't a horse in southern Nevada which can equal Cap'n Kidd for endurance, speed and strength.

Uncle Esau kept trying to talk, but he was bouncing up and down so all I could understand was his cuss words, which was free and fervent. At last he gasped: "For God's sake lemme git off this cussed saddle-horn; it's rubbin' a hole in my belly."

So I pulled up and seen no sign of pursuers, so I said: "All right, you can ride in the saddle and I'll set on behind. I was goin' to hire you a horse at the livery stable, but we had to leave so quick they warn't no time."

"Where you takin' me?" he demanded.

"To Bear Creek," I said. "Where you think?"

"I don't wanta go to Bear Creek," he said fiercely. "I ain't goin' to Bear Creek!"

"Yes you are, too," I said. "Pap said not to take 'no' for a answer. I'm goin' to slide over behind the saddle, and you can set in it."

So I pulled my feet outa the stirrups and moved over the cantle, and he slid into the seat--and the first thing I knowed he had a knife out of his boot and was trying to carve my gizzard.

Now I like to humor my relatives, but they is a limit to everything. I taken the knife away from him, but in the struggle, me being handicapped by not wanting to hurt him, I lost hold of the reins and Cap'n Kidd bolted and run for several miles through the pines and brush. What with me trying to grab the reins and keep Uncle Esau from killing me at the same time, and neither one of us in the stirrups, finally we both fell off, and if I hadn't managed to catch hold of the bridle as I went off, we'd had a long walk ahead of us.

I got Cap'n Kidd stopped, after being drug for several yards, and then I went back to where Uncle Esau was laying on the ground trying to get his wind back, because I had kind of fell on him.

"Is that any way to ack, tryin' to stick a knife in a man which is doin' his best to make you comfortable?" I said reproachfully. All he done was gasp, so I said: "Well, pap told me you was a cranky old duck, so I reckon the thing to do is to just not notice your--uh--eccentricities."

I looked around to get my bearings, because Cap'n Kidd had got away off the trail that runs from War Paint to Bear Creek. We was west of the trail, in very wild country, but I seen a cabin off through the trees, and I said: "We'll go over there and see can I hire or buy a horse for you to ride. That'll be more convenient for us both."

I started h'isting him back into the saddle, and he said kind of dizzily: "This here's a free country; I don't have to go to Bear Creek if'n I don't want to."

"Well," I said severely, "you oughtta want to, after all the trouble I've went to, comin' and invitin' you. Set still now; I'm settin' on behind, but I'm holdin' the reins."

"I'll have yore life for this," he promised blood-thirstily, but I ignored it, because pap had said Uncle Esau was peculiar.

PRETTY SOON WE HOVE up to the cabin I'd glimpsed through the trees. Nobody was in sight, but I seen a horse tied to a tree in front of the cabin. I rode up to the door and knocked, but nobody answered. But I seen smoke coming out of the chimney, so I decided I'd go in.

I dismounted and lifted Uncle Esau off, because I seen from the gleam in his eye that he was intending to run off on Cap'n Kidd if I give him half a chance. I got a firm grip on his collar, because I was determined that he was going to visit us up on Bear Creek if I had to tote him on my shoulder all the way, and I went into the cabin with him.

There wasn't nobody in there, though a pot of beans was simmering over some coals in the fireplace, and I seen some rifles in racks on the wall and a belt with two pistols hanging on a nail.

Then I heard somebody walking behind the cabin, and the back door opened and there stood a big black-whiskered man with a bucket of water in his hand and a astonished glare on his face. He didn't have no guns on.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, but Uncle Esau give a kind of gurgle, and said: "Grizzly Hawkins!"

The big man jumped and glared at Uncle Esau, and then his black whiskers bristled in a ferocious grin, and he said: "Oh, it's you, is it? Who'd of thunk I'd ever meet you here!"

"Grizzly Hawkins, hey?" I said, realizing that I'd stumbled onto the hideout of the worst outlaw in them mountains. "So you all know each other?"

"I'll say we do!" rumbled Hawkins, looking at Uncle Esau like a wolf looks at a fat yearling.

"I'd heard you was from Arizona," I said, being naturally tactful. "Looks to me like they's enough cow-thieves in these hills already without outsiders buttin' in. But your morals ain't none of my business. I want to buy or hire or borrow a horse for this here gent to ride."

"Oh, no, you ain't!" said Grizzly. "You think I'm goin' to let a fortune slip through my fingers like that? Tell you what I'll do, though; I'll split with you. My gang had business over toward Tomahawk this mornin', but they're due back soon. Me and you will work him over before they gits back, and we'll nab all the loot ourselves."

"What you mean?" I asked. "My uncle and me is on our way to Bear Creek--"

"Aw, don't ack innercent with me!" he snorted disgustedly. "Uncle! You think I'm a plumb fool? Cain't I see that he's yore prisoner, the way you got him by the neck? Think I don't know what yo're up to? Be reasonable. Two can work this job better'n one. I know lots of ways to make a man talk. I betcha if we kinda massage his hinder parts with a red-hot brandin' iron he'll tell us quick enough where the money is hid."

Uncle Esau turned pale under his whiskers, and I said indignantly: "Why, you low-lifed polecat! You got the crust to pertend to think I'm kidnapin' my own uncle for his dough? I got a good mind to shoot you!"

"So you're greedy, hey?" he snarled, showing his teeth. "Want all the loot yoreself, hey? I'll show you!" And quick as a cat he swung that water bucket over his head and let it go at me. I ducked and it hit Uncle Esau in the head and stretched him out all drenched with water, and Hawkins give a roar and dived for a .45-90 on the wall. He wheeled with it and I shot it out of his hands. He then come for me wild-eyed with a bowie out of his boot, and my next cartridge snapped, and he was on top of me before I could cock my gun again.

I dropped my gun and grappled with him, and we fit all over the cabin and every now and then we would tromple on Uncle Esau which was trying to crawl toward the door, and the way he would holler was pitiful to hear.

Hawkins lost his knife in the melee, but he was as big as me, and a bear-cat at rough-and-tumble. We would stand up and whale away with both fists, and then clinch and roll around the floor, biting and gouging and slugging, and once we rolled clean over Uncle Esau and kind of flattened him out like a pancake.

Finally Hawkins got hold of the table which he lifted like it was a board and splintered over my head, and this made me mad, so I grabbed the pot off the fire and hit him in the head with it, and about a gallon of red-hot beans went down his back and he fell into a corner so hard he jolted the shelves loose from the logs, and all the guns fell off the walls.

He come up with a gun in his hand, but his eyes was so full of blood and hot beans that he missed me the first shot, and before he could shoot again I hit him on the chin so hard it fractured his jaw bone and sprained both his ankles and stretched him out cold.

THEN I LOOKED AROUND for Uncle Esau, and he was gone, and the front door was open. I rushed out of the cabin and there he was just climbing aboard Cap'n Kidd. I hollered for him to wait, but he kicked Cap'n Kidd in the ribs and went tearing through the trees. Only he didn't head north back toward War Paint. He was p'inted southeast, in the general direction of Hideout Mountain. I jumped on Hawkins' horse, which was tied to a tree nearby, and lit out after him, though I didn't have much hope of catching him. Grizzly's cayuse was a good horse, but he couldn't hold a candle to Cap'n Kidd.

I wouldn't have caught him, neither, if it hadn't been for Cap'n Kidd's distaste of being rode by anybody but me. Uncle Esau was a crack horseman to stay on as long as he did.

But finally Cap'n Kidd got tired of running, and about the time he crossed the trail we'd been follering when he first bolted, he bogged his head and started busting hisself in two, with his snoot rubbing the grass and his heels scraping the clouds offa the sky.

I could see mountain peaks between Uncle Esau and the saddle, and when Cap'n Kidd started sunfishing it looked like the wrath of Judgment Day, but somehow Uncle Esau managed to stay with him till Cap'n Kidd plumb left the earth like he aimed to aviate from then on, and Uncle Esau left the saddle with a shriek of despair and sailed head-on into a blackjack thicket.

Cap'n Kidd give a snort of contempt and trotted off to a patch of grass and started grazing, and I dismounted and went and untangled Uncle Esau from amongst the branches. His clothes was tore and he was scratched so he looked like he'd been fighting with a drove of wildcats, and he left a right smart batch of his whiskers amongst the brush.

But he was full of pizen and hostility.

"I understand this here treatment," he said bitterly, like he blamed me for Cap'n Kidd pitching him into the thicket, "but you'll never git a penny. Nobody but me knows whar the dough is, and you can pull my toe nails out by the roots before I tells you."

"I know you got money hid away," I said, deeply offended, "but I don't want it."

He snorted skeptically and said sarcastic: "Then what're you draggin' me over these cussed hills for?"

"Cause pap wants to see you," I said. "But they ain't no use in askin' me a lot of fool questions. Pap said for me to keep my mouth shet."

I looked around for Grizzly's horse, and seen he had wandered off. He sure hadn't been trained proper.

"Now I got to go look for him," I said disgustedly. "Will you stay here till I git back?"

"Sure," he said. "Sure. Go on and look for the horse. I'll wait here."

But I give him a searching look, and shook my head.

"I don't want to seem like I mistrusts you," I said, "but I see a gleam in your eye which makes me believe that you intends to run off the minute my back's turned. I hate to do this, but I got to bring you safe to Bear Creek; so I'll just kinda hawg-tie you with my lariat till I git back."

Well, he put up a awful holler, but I was firm, and when I rode off on Cap'n Kidd I was satisfied that he couldn't untie them knots by himself. I left him laying in the grass beside the trail, and his language was awful to listen to.

THAT DERNED HORSE had wandered farther'n I thought. He'd moved north along the trail for a short way, and then turned off and headed in a westerly direction, and after a while I heard the sound of horses galloping somewhere behind me, and I got nervous, thinking that if Hawkins' gang had got back to their hangout and he had told 'em about us, and sent 'em after us, to capture pore Uncle Esau and torture him to make him tell where his savings was hid. I wished I'd had sense enough to shove Uncle Esau back in the thicket so he wouldn't be seen by anybody riding along the trail, and I'd just decided to let the horse go and turn back, when I seen him grazing amongst the trees ahead of me.

I headed back for the trail, leading him, aiming to hit it a short distance north of where I'd left Uncle Esau, and before I got in sight of it, I heard horses and saddles creaking ahead of me.

I pulled up on the crest of a slope, and looked down onto the trail, and there I seen a gang of men riding north, and they had Uncle Esau amongst 'em. Two of the men was ridin' double, and they had him on a horse in the middle of 'em. They'd took the ropes off him, but he didn't look happy. Instantly I realized that my premonishuns was correct. The Hawkins gang had follered us, and now pore Uncle Esau was in their clutches.

I let go of Hawkins' horse and reached for my gun, but I didn't dare fire for fear of hitting Uncle Esau, they was clustered so close about him. I reached up and tore a limb off a oak tree as big as my arm, and I charged down the slope yelling: "I'll save you, Uncle Esau!"

I come so sudden and unexpected them fellows didn't have time to do nothing but holler before I hit 'em. Cap'n Kidd ploughed through their horses like a avalanche through saplings, and he was going so hard I couldn't check him in time to keep him from knocking Uncle Esau's horse sprawling. Uncle Esau hit the turf with a shriek.

All around me men was yelling and surging and pulling guns and I riz in my stirrups and laid about me right and left, and pieces of bark and oak leaves and blood flew in showers and in a second the ground was littered with writhing figures, and the groaning and cussing was awful to hear. Knives was flashing and pistols was banging, but them outlaws' eyes was too full of bark and stars and blood for them to aim, and right in the middle of the brawl, when the guns was roaring and men was yelling and horses neighing and my oak-limb going crack! crack! on human skulls, down from the north swooped another gang, howling like hyeners!

"There he is!" one of 'em yelled. "I see him crawlin' around under them horses! After him, boys! We got as much right to his dough as anybody!"

The next minute they'd dashed in amongst us and embraced the members of the other gang and started hammering 'em over the heads with their pistols, and in a second was the damndest three-cornered war you ever seen, men fighting on the ground and on the horses, all mixed and tangled up, two gangs trying to exterminate each other, and me whaling hell out of both of 'em.

Now I have been mixed up in ruckuses like this before, despite of the fact that I am a peaceful and easy-goin' feller which never done harm to man or beast unless provoked beyond reason. I always figger the best thing to do in a brawl is to hold your temper, and I done just that. When this one feller fired a pistol plumb in my face and singed my eyebrows I didn't get mad. When this other 'un come from somewhere to start biting my leg I only picked him up by the scruff of the neck and knocked a horse over with him. But I must of lost control a little, I guess, when two fellers at once started bashing at my head with rifle-butts. I swung at them so hard I turned Cap'n Kidd plumb around, and my club broke and I had to grab a bigger and tougher one.

Then I really laid into 'em.

Meanwhile Uncle Esau was on the ground under us, yelling bloody murder and being stepped on by the horses, but finally I cleared a space with a devastating sweep of my club, and leaned down and scooped him up with one hand and hung him over my saddle horn and started battering my way clear.

But a big feller which was one of the second gang come charging through the melee yelling like a Injun, with blood running down his face from a cut in his scalp. He snapped a empty cartridge at me, and then leaned out from his saddle and grabbed Uncle Esau by the foot.

"Leggo!" he howled. "He's my meat!"

"Release Uncle Esau before I does you a injury!" I roared, trying to jerk Uncle Esau loose, but the outlaw hung on, and Uncle Esau squalled like a catamount in a wolf-trap. So I lifted what was left of my club and splintered it over the outlaw's head, and he gave up the ghost with a gurgle. I then wheeled Cap'n Kidd and rode off like the wind. Them fellows was too busy fighting each other to notice my flight. Somebody did let bam at me with a Winchester, but all it done was to nick Uncle Esau's ear.

THE SOUNDS OF CARNAGE faded out behind us as I headed south along the trail. Uncle Esau was belly-aching about something. I never seen such a cuss for finding fault, but I felt they was no time to be lost, so I didn't slow up for some miles. Then I pulled Cap'n Kidd down and said: "What did you say, Uncle Esau?"

"I'm a broken man!" he gasped. "Take my secret, and lemme go back to the posse. All I want now is a good, safe prison term."

"What posse?" I asked, thinking he must be drunk, though I couldn't figure where he'd got any booze.

"The posse you took me away from," he said. "Anything's better'n bein' dragged through these hellish mountains by a homicidal maneyack."

"Posse?" I gasped wildly. "But who was the second gang?"

"Grizzly Hawkins' outlaws," he said, and added bitterly: "Even they would be preferable to what I been goin' through. I give up. I know when I'm licked. The dough's hid in a holler oak three miles south of Gunstock."

I didn't pay no attention to his remarks, because my head was in a whirl. A posse! Of course; the sheriff and his men had follered us from War Paint, along the Bear Creek trail, and finding Uncle Esau tied up, had thought he'd been kidnaped by a outlaw instead of merely being invited to visit his relatives. Probably he was too cussed ornery to tell 'em any different. I hadn't rescued him from no bandits; I'd took him away from a posse which thought they was rescuing him.

Meanwhile Uncle Esau was clamoring: "Well, why'n't you lemme go? I've told you whar the dough is; what else you want?"

"You got to go on to Bear Creek with me--" I begun; and Uncle Esau give a shriek and went into a kind of convulsion, and the first thing I knowed he'd twisted around and jerked my gun out of its scabbard and let bam! right in my face so close it singed my hair. I grabbed his wrist and Cap'n Kidd bolted like he always does when he gets the chance.

"They's a limit to everything!" I roared. "A hell of a relative you be, you old maneyack!"

We was tearing over slopes and ridges at breakneck speed and fighting all over Cap'n Kidd's back--me to get the gun away from him, and him to commit murder. "If you warn't kin to me, Uncle Esau, I'd plumb lose my temper!"

"What you keep callin' me that fool name for?" he yelled, frothing at the mouth. "What you want to add insult to injury--" Cap'n Kidd swerved sudden and Uncle Esau tumbled over his neck. I had him by the shirt and tried to hold him on, but the shirt tore. He hit the ground on his head and Cap'n Kidd run right over him. I pulled up as quick as I could and hove a sigh of relief to see how close to home I was.

"We're nearly there, Uncle Esau," I said, but he made no comment. He was out cold.

A short time later I rode up to the cabin with my eccentric relative slung over my saddle-bow, and took him and stalked into where pap was laying on his b'ar-skin, and slung my burden down on the floor in disgust. "Well, here he is," I said.

Pap stared and said: "Who's this?"

"When you wipe the blood off," I said, "you'll find it's your Uncle Esau Grimes. And," I added bitterly, "the next time you want to invite him to visit us, you can do it yourself. A more ungrateful cuss I never seen. Peculiar ain't no name for him; he's as crazy as a locoed jackass."

"But that ain't Uncle Esau!" said pap.

"What you mean?" I said irritably. "I know most of his clothes is tore off, and his face is kinda scratched and skinned and stomped outa shape, but you can see his whiskers is red, in spite of the blood."

"Red whiskers turn gray, in time," said a voice, and I wheeled and pulled my gun as a man loomed in the door.

It was the gray-whiskered old fellow I'd traded shots with on the edge of War Paint. He didn't go for his gun, but stood twisting his mustache and glaring at me like I was a curiosity or something.

"Uncle Esau!" said pap.

"What?" I hollered. "Air you Uncle Esau?"

"Certainly I am!" he snapped.

"But you warn't on the stagecoach--" I begun.

"Stagecoach!" he snorted, taking pap's jug and beginning to pour licker down the man on the floor. "Them things is for wimmen and childern. I travel horse-back. I spent last night in War Paint, and aimed to ride on up to Bear Creek this mornin'. In fact, Bill," he addressed pap, "I was on the way here when this young maneyack creased me." He indicated a bandage on his head.

"You mean Breckinridge shot you?" ejaculated pap.

"It seems to run in the family," grunted Uncle Esau.

"But who's this?" I hollered wildly, pointing at the man I'd thought was Uncle Esau, and who was just coming to.

"I'm Badger Chisom," he said, grabbing the jug with both hands. "I demands to be pertected from this lunatick and turned over to the sheriff."

"HIM AND BILL REYNOLDS and Jim Hopkins robbed a bank over at Gunstock three weeks ago," said Uncle Esau; the real one, I mean. "A posse captured 'em, but they'd hid the loot somewhere and wouldn't say where. They escaped several days ago, and not only the sheriffs was lookin' for 'em, but all the outlaw gangs too, to find out where they'd hid their plunder. It was a awful big haul. They must of figgered that escapin' out of the country by stage coach would be the last thing folks would expect 'em to do, and they warn't known in this part of the country.

"But I recognized Bill Reynolds when I went back to War Paint to have my head dressed, after you shot me, Breckinridge. The doctor was patchin' him and Hopkins up, too. The sheriff and a posse lit out after you, and I follered 'em when I'd got my head fixed. Course, I didn't know who you was. I come up while the posse was fightin' with Hawkins' gang, and with my help we corralled the whole bunch. Then I took up yore trail again. Purty good day's work, wipin' out two of the worst gangs in the West. One of Hawkins' men said Grizzly was laid up in his cabin, and the posse was goin' to drop by for him."

"What you goin' to do about me?" clamored Chisom.

"Well," said pap, "we'll bandage yore wounds, and then I'll let Breckinridge here take you back to War Paint--hey, what's the matter with him?"

Badger Chisom had fainted.

THE END

Contents

THE SCALP HUNTER

By Robert E. Howard

The reason I am giving the full facts of this here affair is to refute a lot of rumors which is circulating about me. I am sick and tired of these lies about me terrorizing the town of Grizzly Claw and ruining their wagon-yard just for spite and trying to murder all their leading citizens. They is more'n one side to anything. These folks which is going around telling about me knocking the mayor of Grizzly Claw down a flight of steps with a kitchen stove ain't yet added that the mayor was trying to blast me with a sawed-off shotgun. As for saying that all I done was with malice afore-thought--if I was a hot-headed man like some I know, I could easy lose my temper over this here slander, but being shy and retiring by nature, I keeps my dignity and merely remarks that these gossipers is blamed liars, and I will kick the ears off of them if I catch them.

I warn't even going to Grizzly Claw in the first place. I'm kind of particular where I go to. I'd been in the settlements along Wild River for several weeks, tending to my own business, and I was headed for Pistol Mountain, when I seen "Tunk" Willoughby setting on a log at the forks where the trail to Grizzly Claw splits off of the Pistol Mountain road. Tunk ain't got no more sense than the law allows anyway, and now he looked plumb discouraged. He had a mangled ear, a couple of black eyes, and a lump on his head so big his hat wouldn't fit. From time to time he spit out a tooth.

I pulled up Cap'n Kidd and said: "What kind of a brawl have you been into?"

"I been to Grizzly Claw," he said, just like that explained it. But I didn't get the drift, because I hadn't never been to Grizzly Claw.

"That's the meanest town in these mountains," he said. "They ain't got no real law there, but they got a feller which claims to be a officer, and if you so much as spit, he says you bust a law and has got to pay a fine. If you puts up a holler, the citizens comes to his assistance. You see what happened to me. I never found out just what law I was supposed to broke," Tunk said, "but it must of been one they was particular fond of. I give 'em a good fight as long as they confined theirselves to rocks and gun butts, but when they interjuiced fence rails and wagon-tongues into the fray, I give up the ghost."

"What you go there for, anyhow?" I demanded.

"Well," he said, mopping off some dried blood, "I was lookin' for you. Three or four days ago I was in the vicinity of Bear Creek, and yore cousin Jack Gordon told me somethin' to tell you."

Him showing no sign of going on, I said: "Well, what was it?"

"I cain't remember," he said. "That lammin' they gimme in Grizzly Claw has plumb addled my brains. Jack told me to tell you to keep a sharp look-out for somebody, but I cain't remember who, or why. But somebody had did somethin' awful to somebody on Bear Creek--seems like it was yore Uncle Jeppard Grimes."

"But why did you go to Grizzly Claw?" I demanded. "I warn't there."

"I dunno," he said. "Seems like the feller which Jack wanted you to get was from Grizzly Claw, or was supposed to go there, or somethin'."

"A great help you be!" I said in disgust. "Here somebody has went and wronged one of my kinfolks, maybe, and you forgets the details. Try to remember the name of the feller, anyway. If I knew who he was, I could lay him out, and then find out what he did later on. Think, can't you?"

"Did you ever have a wagon-tongue busted over yore head?" he said. "I tell you, it's just right recent that I remembered my own name. It was all I could do to rekernize you just now. If you'll come back in a couple of days, maybe by then I'll remember what all Jack told me."

I give a snort of disgust and turned off the road and headed up the trail for Grizzly Claw. I thought maybe I could learn something there. If somebody had done dirt to Uncle Jeppard, I wanted to know it. Us Bear Creek folks may fight amongst ourselves, but we stands for no stranger to impose on any one of us. Uncle Jeppard was about as old as the Humbolt Mountains, and he'd fit Indians for a living in his younger days. He was still a tough old knot. Anybody that could do him a wrong and get away with it, sure wasn't no ordinary man, so it wasn't no wonder that word had been sent out for me to get on his trail. And now I hadn't no idea who to look for, or why, just because of Tunk Willoughby's weak skull. I despise these here egg-headed weaklings.

WELL, I ARROVE IN GRIZZLY Claw late in the afternoon and went first to the wagon-yard and seen that Cap'n Kidd was put in a good stall and fed proper, and warned the fellow there to keep away from him if he didn't want his brains kicked out. Cap'n Kidd has a disposition like a shark and he don't like strangers. It warn't much of a wagon-yard, and there was only five other horses there, besides me and Cap'n Kidd--a pinto, bay, and piebald, and a couple of pack-horses.

I then went back into the business part of the village, which was one dusty street with stores and saloons on each side, and I didn't pay much attention to the town, because I was trying to figure out how I could go about trying to find out what I wanted to know, and couldn't think of no questions to ask nobody about nothing.

Well, I was approaching a saloon called the Apache Queen, and was looking at the ground in meditation, when I seen a silver dollar laying in the dust close to a hitching rack. I immediately stooped down and picked it up, not noticing how close it was to the hind laigs of a mean-looking mule. When I stooped over he hauled off and kicked me in the head. Then he let out a awful bray and commenced jumping around holding up his hind hoof, and some men come running out of the saloon, and one of 'em hollered: "He's tryin' to kill my mule! Call the law!"

Quite a crowd gathered and the feller which owned the mule hollered like a catamount. He was a mean-looking cuss with mournful whiskers and a cock-eye. He yelled like somebody was stabbing him, and I couldn't get in a word edge-ways. Then a feller with a long skinny neck and two guns come up and said: "I'm the sheriff, what's goin' on here? Who is this big feller? What's he done?"

The whiskered cuss hollered: "He kicked hisself in the head with my mule and crippled the pore critter for life! I demands my rights! He's got to pay me three hundred and fifty dollars for my mule!"

"Aw," I said, "that mule ain't hurt none; his leg's just kinda numbed. Anyway, I ain't got but five bucks, and whoever gets them will take 'em offa my dead body." I then hitched my six-guns forwards, and the crowd kinda fell away.

"I demands that you 'rest him!" howled Drooping-whiskers. "He tried to 'sassinate my mule!"

"You ain't got no star," I told the feller which said he was the law. "You ain't goin' to arrest me."

"Does you dast resist arrest?" he said, fidgeting with his belt.

"Who said anything about resistin' arrest?" I retorted. "All I aim to do is see how far your neck will stretch before it breaks."

"Don't you dast lay hands on a officer of the law!" he squawked, backing away in a hurry.

I was tired of talking and thirsty, so I merely give a snort and turned away through the crowd towards a saloon pushing 'em right and left out of my way. I saw 'em gang up in the street, talking low and mean, but I give no heed.

They wasn't nobody in the saloon except the barman and a gangling cowpuncher which had draped hisself over the bar. I ordered whiskey and when I had drank a few fingers of the rottenest muck I believe I ever tasted, I give it up in disgust and throwed the dollar on the bar which I had found, and was starting out when the barkeeper hollered:

"Hey!"

I turned around and said courteously: "Don't you yell at me like that, you bat-eared buzzard! What you want?"

"This here dollar ain't no good!" he said, banging it on the bar.

"Well, neither is your whiskey," I snarled, because I was getting mad. "So that makes us even!"

I am a long-suffering man but it looked like everybody in Grizzly Claw was out to gyp the stranger in their midst.

"You can't run no blazer over me!" he hollered. "You gimme a real dollar, or else--"

He ducked down behind the bar and come up with a shotgun so I taken it away from him and bent the barrel double across my knee and throwed it after him as he run out the back door hollering help, murder.

The cowpuncher had picked up the dollar and bit on it, and then he looked at me very sharp, and said: "Where did you get this?"

"I found it, if it's any of your dern business," I snapped, because I was mad. Saying no more I strode out the door, and the minute I hit the street somebody let bam! at me from behind a rain-barrel across the street and shot my hat off. So I slammed a bullet back through the barrel and the feller hollered and fell out in the open yelling blue murder. It was the feller which called hisself the sheriff and he was drilled through the hind laig. I noticed a lot of heads sticking up over window sills and around doors, so I roared: "Let that be a warnin' to you Grizzly Claw coyotes! I'm Breckinridge Elkins from Bear Creek up in the Humbolts, and I shoot better in my sleep than most men does wide awake!"

I then lent emphasis to my remarks by punctuating a few signboards and knocking out a few winder panes and everybody hollered and ducked. So I shoved my guns back in their scabbards and went into a restaurant. The citizens come out from their hiding-places and carried off my victim, and he made more noise over a broke laig than I thought was possible for a grown man.

There was some folks in the restaurant but they stampeded out the back door as I come in at the front, all except the cook which tried to take refuge somewhere else.

"Come outa there and fry me some bacon!" I commanded, kicking a few slats out of the counter to add point to my request. It disgusts me to see a grown man trying to hide under a stove. I am a very patient and good-natured human, but Grizzly Claw was getting under my hide. So the cook come out and fried me a mess of bacon and ham and aigs and pertaters and sourdough bread and beans and coffee, and I et three cans of cling peaches. Nobody come into the restaurant whilst I was eating but I thought I heard somebody sneaking around outside.

When I got through I asked the feller how much and he told me, and I planked down the cash, and he commenced to bite it. This lack of faith in his feller humans enraged me, so I drawed my bowie knife and said: "They is a limit to any man's patience! I been insulted once tonight and that's enough! You just dast say that coin's phoney and I'll slice off your whiskers plumb at the roots!"

I brandished my bowie under his nose, and he hollered and stampeded back into the stove and upsot it and fell over it, and the coals went down the back of his shirt, so he riz up and run for the creek yelling bloody murder. And that's how the story started that I tried to burn a cook alive, Indian-style, because he fried my bacon too crisp. Matter of fact, I kept his shack from catching fire and burning down, because I stomped out the coals before they did more'n burn a big hole through the floor, and I throwed the stove out the back door.

It ain't my fault if the mayor of Grizzly Claw was sneaking up the back steps with a shotgun just at that moment. Anyway, I hear he was able to walk with a couple of crutches after a few months.

I emerged suddenly from the front door, hearing a suspicious noise, and I seen a feller crouching close to a side window peeking through a hole in the wall. It was the cowboy I seen in the Apache Queen saloon. He whirled when I come out, but I had him covered.

"Are you spyin' on me?" I demanded. "Cause if you are--"

"No, no!" he said in a hurry. "I was just leanin' up against that wall restin'."

"You Grizzly Claw folks is all crazy," I said disgustedly, and looked around to see if anybody else tried to shoot me, but there warn't nobody in sight, which was suspicious, but I give no heed. It was dark by that time so I went to the wagon-yard, and there wasn't nobody there. I guess the man which run it was off somewheres drunk, because that seemed to be the main occupation of most of them Grizzly Claw devils.

THE ONLY PLACE FOR folks to sleep was a kind of double log-cabin. That is, it had two rooms, but there warn't no door between 'em; and in each room there wasn't nothing but a fireplace and a bunk, and just one outer door. I seen Cap'n Kidd was fixed for the night, and then I went into the cabin and brought in my saddle and bridle and saddle blanket because I didn't trust the people thereabouts. I took off my boots and hat and hung 'em on the wall, and hung my guns and bowie on the end of the bunk, and then spread my saddle-blanket on the bunk and laid down glumly.

I dunno why they don't build them dern things for ordinary sized humans. A man six and a half foot tall like me can't never find one comfortable for him. I laid there and was disgusted at the bunk, and at myself too, because I hadn't accomplished nothing. I hadn't learnt who it was done something to Uncle Jeppard, or what he done. It looked like I'd have to go clean to Bear Creek to find out, and that was a good four days ride.

Well, as I contemplated I heard a man come into the wagon-yard, and purty soon I heard him approach the cabin, but I thought nothing of it. Then the door begun to open, and I riz up with a gun in each hand and said: "Who's there? Make yourself knowed before I blasts you down!"

Whoever it was mumbled some excuse about being on the wrong side, and the door closed. But the voice sounded kind of familiar, and the fellow didn't go into the other room. I heard his footsteps sneaking off, and I riz and went to the door, and looked over toward the row of stalls. So purty soon a man led the pinto out of his stall, and swung aboard him and rode off. It was purty dark, but if us folks on Bear Creek didn't have eyes like a hawk, we'd never live to get grown. I seen it was the cowboy I'd seen in the Apache Queen and outside the restaurant. Once he got clear of the wagon-yard, he slapped in the spurs and went racing through the village like they was a red war-party on his trail. I could hear the beat of his horse's hoofs fading south down the rocky trail after he was out of sight.

I knowed he must of follered me to the wagon-yard, but I couldn't make no sense out of it, so I went and laid down on the bunk again. I was just about to go to sleep, when I was woke by the sounds of somebody coming into the other room of the cabin, and I heard somebody strike a match. The bunk was built against the partition wall, so they was only a few feet from me, though with the log wall between us.

They was two of them, from the sounds of their talking.

"I tell you," one of them was saying, "I don't like his looks. I don't believe he's what he pertends to be. We better take no chances, and clear out. After all, we can't stay here forever. These people are beginnin' to git suspicious, and if they find out for shore, they'll be demandin' a cut in the profits, to protect us. The stuff's all packed and ready to jump at a second's notice. Let's run for it tonight. It's a wonder nobody ain't never stumbled on to that hide-out before now."

"Aw," said the other'n, "these Grizzly Claw yaps don't do nothin' but swill licker and gamble and think up swindles to work on such strangers as is unlucky enough to wander in here. They never go into the hills southwest of the village where our cave is. Most of 'em don't even know there's a path past that big rock to the west."

"Well, Bill," said t'other'n, "we've done purty well, countin' that job up in the Bear Creek country."

At that I was wide awake and listening with both ears.

Bill laughed. "That was kind of funny, warn't it, Jim?" he said.

"You ain't never told me the particulars," said Jim. "Did you have any trouble?"

"Well," said Bill. "T'warn't to say easy. That old Jeppard Grimes was a hard old nut. If all Injun fighters was like him, I feel plumb sorry for the Injuns."

"If any of them Bear Creek devils ever catch you--" begun Jim.

Bill laughed again.

"Them hill-billies never strays more'n ten miles from Bear Creek," he said. "I had the sculp and was gone before they knowed what was up. I've collected bounties for wolves and b'ars, but that's the first time I ever got money for a human sculp!"

A icy chill run down my spine. Now I knowed what had happened to poor old Uncle Jeppard! Scalped! After all the Indian scalps he'd lifted! And them cold-blooded murderers could set there and talk about it, like it was the ears of a coyote or a rabbit!

"I told him he'd had the use of that sculp long enough," Bill was saying. "A old cuss like him--"

I waited for no more. Everything was red around me. I didn't stop for my boots, gun nor nothing, I was too crazy mad even to know such things existed. I riz up from that bunk and put my head down and rammed that partition wall like a bull going through a rail fence.

THE DRIED MUD POURED out of the chinks and some of the logs give way, and a howl went up from the other side.

"What's that?" hollered one, and t'other'n yelled: "Look out! It's a b'ar!"

I drawed back and rammed the wall again. It caved inwards and I come headlong through it in a shower of dry mud and splinters, and somebody shot at me and missed. They was a lighted lantern setting on a hand-hewn table, and two men about six feet tall each that hollered and let bam at me with their six-shooters. But they was too dumfounded to shoot straight. I gathered 'em to my bosom and we went backwards over the table, taking it and the lantern with us, and you ought to of heard them critters howl when the burning ile splashed down their necks.

It was a dirt floor so nothing caught on fire, and we was fighting in the dark, and they was hollering: "Help! Murder! We are bein' 'sassinated! Release go my ear!" And then one of 'em got his boot heel wedged in my mouth, and whilst I was twisting it out with one hand, the other'n tore out of his shirt which I was gripping with t'other hand, and run out the door. I had hold of the other feller's foot and commenced trying to twist it off, when he wrenched his laig outa the boot, and took it on the run. When I started to foller him I fell over the table in the dark and got all tangled up in it.

I broke off a leg for a club and rushed to the door, and just as I got to it a whole mob of folks come surging into the wagon-yard with torches and guns and dogs and a rope, and they hollered: "There he is, the murderer, the outlaw, the counterfeiter, the house-burner, the mule-killer!"

I seen the man that owned the mule, and the restaurant feller, and the barkeeper and a lot of others. They come roaring and bellering up to the door, hollering, "Hang him! Hang him! String the murderer up!" And they begun shooting at me, so I fell amongst 'em with my table-leg and laid right and left till it busted. They was packed so close together I laid out three and four at a lick and they hollered something awful. The torches was all knocked down and trompled out except them which was held by fellers which danced around on the edge of the mill, hollering: "Lay hold on him! Don't be scared of the big hill-billy! Shoot him! Knock him in the head!" The dogs having more sense than the men, they all run off except one big mongrel that looked like a wolf, and he bit the mob often'er he did me.

They was a lot of wild shooting and men hollering: "Oh, I'm shot! I'm kilt! I'm dyin'!" and some of them bullets burnt my hide they come so close, and the flashes singed my eye-lashes, and somebody broke a knife against my belt buckle. Then I seen the torches was all gone except one, and my club was broke, so I bust right through the mob, swinging right and left with my fists and stomping on them that tried to drag me down. I got clear of everybody except the man with the torch who was so excited he was jumping up and down trying to shoot me without cocking his gun. That blame dog was snapping at my heels, so I swung him by the tail and hit the man over the head with him. They went down in a heap and the torch went out, and the dog clamped on the feller's ear and he let out a squall like a steam-whistle.

They was milling in the dark behind me, and I run straight to Cap'n Kidd's stall and jumped on him bareback with nothing but a hackamore on him. Just as the mob located where I went, we come storming out of the stall like a hurricane and knocked some of 'em galley-west and run over some more, and headed for the gate. Somebody shut the gate but Cap'n Kidd took it in his stride, and we was gone into the darkness before they knowed what hit them.

Cap'n Kidd decided then was a good time to run away, like he usually does, so he took to the hills and run through bushes and clumps of trees trying to scrape me off on the branches. When I finally pulled him up he was maybe a mile south of the village, with Cap'n Kidd no bridle nor saddle nor blanket, and me with no guns, knife, boots nor hat. And what was worse, them devils which scalped Uncle Jeppard had got away from me, and I didn't know where to look for 'em.

I SET MEDITATING WHETHER to go back and fight the whole town of Grizzly Claw for my boots and guns, or what to do, when all at once I remembered what Bill and Jim had said about a cave and a path running to it. I thought: I bet them fellers will go back and get their horses and pull out, just like they was planning, and they had stuff in the cave, so that's the place to look for 'em. I hoped they hadn't already got the stuff, whatever it was, and gone.

I knowed where that rock was, because I'd seen it when I come into town that afternoon--a big rock that jutted up above the trees about a mile to the west of Grizzly Claw. So I started out through the brush, and before long I seen it looming up against the stars, and I made straight for it. Sure enough, there was a narrow trail winding around the base and leading off to the southwest. I follered it, and when I'd went nearly a mile, I come to a steep mountain-side, all clustered with brush.

When I seen that I slipped off and led Cap'n Kidd off the trail and tied him back amongst the trees. Then I crope up to the cave which was purty well masked with bushes. I listened, but everything was dark and still, but all at once, away down the trail, I heard a burst of shots, and what sounded like a lot of horses running. Then everything was still again, and I quick ducked into the cave, and struck a match.

There was a narrer entrance that broadened out after a few feet, and the cave run straight like a tunnel for maybe thirty steps, about fifteen foot wide, and then it made a bend. After that it widened out and got to be purty big--fifty feet wide at least, and I couldn't tell how far back into the mountain it run. To the left the wall was very broken and notched with ledges, might nigh like stair-steps, and when the match went out, away up above me I seen some stars which meant that there was a cleft in the wall or roof away up on the mountain somewheres.

Before the match went out, I seen a lot of junk over in a corner covered up with a tarpaulin, and when I was fixing to strike another match I heard men coming up the trail outside. So I quick clumb up the broken wall and laid on a ledge about ten feet up and listened.

From the sounds as they arriv at the cave mouth, I knowed it was two men on foot, running hard and panting loud. They rushed into the cave and made the turn, and I heard 'em fumbling around. Then a light flared up and I seen a lantern being lit and hung up on a spur of rock.

In the light I seen them two murderers, Bill and Jim, and they looked plumb delapidated. Bill didn't have no shirt on and the other'n was wearing just one boot and limped. Bill didn't have no gun in his belt neither, and both was mauled and bruised, and scratched, too, like they'd been running through briars.

"Look here," said Jim, holding his head which had a welt on it which was likely made by my fist. "I ain't certain in my mind as to just what all has happened. Somebody must of hit me with a club some time tonight, and things is happened too fast for my addled wits. Seems like we been fightin' and runnin' all night. Listen, was we settin' in the wagon-yard shack talkin' peaceable, and did a grizzly b'ar bust through the wall and nigh slaughter us?"

"That's plumb correct," said Bill. "Only it warn't no b'ar. It was some kind of a human critter--maybe a escaped maneyack. We ought to of stopped for our horses--"

"I warn't thinkin' 'bout no horses," broke in Jim. "When I found myself outside that shack my only thought was to cover ground, and I done my best, considerin' that I'd lost a boot and that critter had nigh unhinged my hind laig. I'd lost you in the dark, so I made for the cave, knowin' you would come there eventually, and it seemed like I was forever gettin' through the woods, crippled like I was. I'd no more'n hit the path when you come up it on the run."

"Well," said Bill, "as I went over the wagon-yard wall a lot of people come whoopin' through the gate, and I thought they was after us, but they must of been after the feller we fought, because as I run I seen him layin' into 'em right and left. After I'd got over my panic, I went back after our horses, but I run right into a gang of men on horseback, and one of 'em was that durned feller which passed hisself off as a cowboy. I didn't need no more. I took out through the woods as hard as I could pelt, and they hollered. 'There he goes!' and come hot-foot after me."

"And was them the fellers I shot at back down the trail?" asked Jim.

"Yeah," said Bill. "I thought I'd shooken 'em off, but just as I seen you on the path, I heard horses comin' behind us, so I hollered to let 'em have it, and you did."

"Well, I didn't know who it was," said Jim. "I tell you, my head's buzzin' like a circle-saw."

"Well," said Bill, "we stopped 'em and scattered 'em. I dunno if you hit anybody in the dark, but they'll be mighty cautious about comin' up the trail. Let's clear out."

"On foot?" said Jim. "And me with just one boot?"

"How else?" said Bill. "We'll have to hoof it till we can steal us some broncs. We'll have to leave all this stuff here. We daren't go back to Grizzly Claw after our horses. I told you that durned cowboy would do to watch. He ain't no cowpoke at all. He's a blame detective."

"What's that?" broke in Jim.

"Horses' hoofs!" exclaimed Bill, turning pale. "Here, blow out that lantern! We'll climb the ledges and get out of the cleft, and take out over the mountain where they can't foller with horses, and then--"

IT WAS AT THAT INSTANT that I launched myself offa the ledge on top of 'em. I landed with all my two hundred and ninety pounds square on Jim's shoulders and when he hit the ground under me he kind of spread out like a toad when you step on him. Bill give a scream of astonishment and when I riz and come for him, he tore off a hunk of rock about the size of a man's head and lammed me over the ear with it. This irritated me, so I taken him by the neck, and also taken away a knife which he was trying to hamstring me with, and begun sweeping the floor with his carcass.

Presently I paused and kneeling on him, I strangled him till his tongue lolled out, betwixt times hammering his head against the rocky floor.

"You murderin' devil!" I gritted between my teeth. "Before I varnish this here rock with your brains, tell me why you taken my Uncle Jeppard's scalp!"

"Let up!" he gurgled, being purple in the face where he warn't bloody. "They was a dude travelin' through the country and collectin' souvenirs, and he heard about that sculp and wanted it. He hired me to go git it for him."

I was so shocked at that cold-bloodedness that I forgot what I was doing and choked him nigh to death before I remembered to ease up on him.

"Who was he?" I demanded. "Who is the skunk which hires old men murdered so's he can collect their scalps? My God, these Eastern dudes is worse'n Apaches! Hurry up and tell me, so I can finish killin' you."

But he was unconscious; I'd squoze him too hard. I riz up and looked around for some water or whiskey or something to bring him to so he could tell who hired him to scalp Uncle Jeppard, before I twisted his head off, which was my earnest intention of doing, when somebody said: "Han's up!"

I whirled and there at the crook of the cave stood that cowboy which had spied on me in Grizzly Claw, with ten other men. They all had their Winchesters p'inted at me, and the cowboy had a star on his buzum.

"Don't move!" he said. "I'm a Federal detective, and I arrest you for manufactorin' counterfeit money."

"What you mean?" I snarled, backing up to the wall.

"You know," he said, kicking the tarpaulin off the junk in the corner. "Look here, men! All the stamps and dyes he used to make phoney coins and bills! All packed up, ready to light out. I been hangin' around Grizzly Claw for days, knowin' that whoever was passin' this stuff made his, or their, headquarters here somewheres. Today I spotted that dollar you give the barkeep, and I went pronto for my men which was camped back in the hills a few miles. I thought you was settled in the wagon-yard for the night, but it seems you give us the slip. Put the cuffs on him, men!"

"No, you don't!" I snarled, bounding back. "Not till I've finished these devils on the floor. I dunno what you're talkin' about, but--"

"Here's a couple of corpses!" hollered one of the men. "He kilt a couple of fellers!"

One of them stooped over Bill, but he had recovered his senses, and now he riz up on his elbows and give a howl. "Save me!" he bellered. "I confesses! I'm a counterfeiter, and so is Jim there on the floor! We surrenders, and you got to pertect us!"

"YOU'RE THE COUNTERFEITERS?" said the detective, took aback as it were. "Why, I was follerin' this giant! I seen him pass fake money myself. We got to the wagon-yard awhile after he'd run off, but we seen him duck in the woods not far from there, and we been chasin' him. He opened fire on us down the trail while ago--"

"That was us," said Bill. "It was me you was chasin'. He musta found that money, if he had fake stuff. I tell you, we're the men you're after, and you got to pertect us! I demands to be put in the strongest jail in this state, which even this here devil can't bust into!"

"And he ain't no counterfeiter?" said the detective.

"He ain't nothin' but a man-eater," said Bill. "Arrest us and take us out of his reach."

"No!" I roared, clean beside myself. "They belongs to me! They scalped my uncle! Give 'em knives or gun or somethin' and let us fight it out."

"Can't do that," said the detective. "They're Federal prisoners. If you got any charge against them, they'll have to be indicted in the proper form."

His men hauled 'em up and handcuffed 'em and started to lead 'em out.

"Blast your souls!" I raved. "Does you mean to pertect a couple of dirty scalpers? I'll--"

I started for 'em and they all p'inted their Winchesters at me.

"Keep back!" said the detective. "I'm grateful for you leadin' us to this den, and layin' out these criminals for us, but I don't hanker after no battle in a cave with a human grizzly like you."

Well, what could a feller do?

If I'd had my guns, or even my knife, I'd of taken a chance with the whole eleven, officers or not, I was that crazy mad. But even I can't fight eleven .45-90's with my bare hands. I stood speechless with rage whilst they filed out, and then I went for Cap'n Kidd in a kind of a daze. I felt wuss'n a horse-thief. Them fellers would be put in the pen safe out of my reach, and Uncle Jeppard's scalp was unavenged! It was awful. I felt like bawling.

Time I got my horse back onto the trail, the posse with their prisoners was out of sight and hearing. I seen the only thing to do was to go back to Grizzly Claw and get my outfit, and then foller the posse and try to take their prisoners away from 'em someway.

Well, the wagon-yard was dark and still. The wounded had been carried away to have their injuries bandaged, and from the groaning that was still coming from the shacks and cabins along the street, the casualties had been plenteous. The citizens of Grizzly Claw must have been shook up something terrible, because they hadn't even stole my guns and saddle and things yet; everything was in the cabin just like I'd left 'em.

I put on my boots, hat and belt, saddled and bridled Cap'n Kidd and sot out on the road I knowed the posse had taken. But they had a long start on me, and when daylight come I hadn't overtook 'em. But I did meet somebody else. It was Tunk Willoughby riding up the trail, and when he seen me he grinned all over his battered features.

"Hey, Breck!" he said. "After you left I sot on that log and thunk, and thunk, and I finally remembered what Jack Gordon told me, and I started out to find you again and tell you. It was this: he said to keep a close lookout for a fellow from Grizzly Claw named Bill Jackson, which had gypped yore Uncle Jeppard in a deal."

"What?" I said.

"Yeah," said Tunk. "He bought somethin' from Jeppard and paid him in counterfeit money. Jeppard didn't know it was phoney till after the feller had plumb got away," said Tunk, "and bein' as he was too busy dryin' some b'ar meat to go after him, he sent word for you to git him."

"But the scalp--" I said wildly.

"Oh," said Tunk, "that was what Jeppard sold the feller. It was the scalp Jeppard took offa old Yeller Eagle the Comanche war-chief forty years ago, and been keepin' for a souvenear. Seems like a Eastern dude heard about it and wanted to buy it, but this Jackson must of kept the money he give him to git it with, and give Jeppard phoney cash. So you see everything's all right, even if I did forget a little, and no harm did--"

And that's why Tunk Willoughby is going around saying I am a homicidal maneyack, and run him five miles down a mountain and tried to kill him--which is a exaggeration, of course. I wouldn't of kilt him if I could of caught him. I would merely of raised a few knots on his head and tied his hind laigs in a bow-knot around his fool neck and done a few other little things that might of improved his memory.

THE END

Contents

WAR ON BEAR CREEK

By Robert E. Howard

Pap dug the nineteenth buckshot out of my shoulder and said, "Pigs is more disturbin' to the peace of a community than scandal, divorce, and corn licker put together. And," says pap, pausing to strop his bowie on my scalp where the hair was all burnt off, "when the pig is a razorback hawg, and is mixed up with a lady schoolteacher, a English tenderfoot, and a passle of bloodthirsty relatives, the result is appallin' for a peaceable man to behold. Hold still till John gits yore ear sewed back on."

Pap was right. I warn't to blame for what happened. Breaking Joel Gordon's laig was a mistake, and Erath Elkins is a liar when he says I caved in them five ribs of his'n plumb on purpose. If Uncle Jeppard Grimes had been tending to his own business he wouldn't have got the seat of his britches filled with bird-shot, and I don't figger it was my fault that cousin Bill Kirby's cabin got burned down. And I don't take no blame for Jim Gordon's ear which Jack Grimes shot off, neither. I figger everybody was more to blame than I was, and I stand ready to wipe up the earth with anybody which disagrees with me.

But it was that derned razorback hawg of Uncle Jeppard Grimes' which started the whole mess.

It begun when that there tenderfoot come riding up the trail with Tunk Willoughby, from War Paint. Tunk ain't got no more sense than the law allows, but he shore showed good jedgement that time, because having delivered his charge to his destination, he didn't tarry. He merely handed me a note, and p'inted dumbly at the tenderfoot, whilst holding his hat reverently in his hand meanwhile.

"What you mean by that there gesture?" I ast him rather irritably, and he said: "I doffs my sombrero in respect to the departed. Bringin' a specimen like that onto Bear Creek is just like heavin' a jackrabbit to a pack of starvin' loboes."

He hove a sigh and shook his head, and put his hat back on. "Rassle a cat in pieces," he says, gathering up the reins.

"What the hell are you talkin' about?" I demanded.

"That's Latin," he said. "It means rest in peace."

And with that he dusted it down the trail and left me alone with the tenderfoot which all the time was setting his cayuse and looking at me like I was a curiosity or something.

I called my sister Ouachita to come read that there note for me, which she did and it run as follows:

Dere Breckinridge:

This will interjuice Mr. J. Pembroke Pemberton a English sportsman which I met in Frisco recent. He was disapinted because he hadn't found no adventures in America and was fixin to go to Aferker to shoot liuns and elerfants but I perswaded him to come with me because I knowed he would find more hell on Bear Creek in a week than he would find in a yere in Aferker or any other place. But the very day we hit War Paint I run into a old ackwaintance from Texas I will not speak no harm of the ded but I wish the son of a buzzard had shot me somewheres besides in my left laig which already had three slugs in it which I never could get cut out. Anyway I am lade up and not able to come on to Bear Creek with J. Pembroke Pemberton. I am dependin on you to show him some good bear huntin and other excitement and pertect him from yore relatives I know what a awful responsibility I am puttin on you but I am askin' this as yore frend.

William Harrison Glanton. Esqy.

I looked J. Pembroke over. He was a medium sized young feller and looked kinda soft in spots. He had yaller hair and very pink cheeks like a gal; and he had on whip-cord britches and tan riding boots which was the first I ever seen. And he had on a funny kinda coat with pockets and a belt which he called a shooting jacket, and a big hat like a mushroom made outa cork with a red ribbon around it. And he had a pack-horse loaded with all kinds of plunder, and four or five different kinds of shotguns and rifles.

"So yo're J. Pembroke," I says, and he says, "Oh, rahther! And you, no doubt, are the person Mr. Glanton described to me, Breckinridge Elkins?"

"Yeah," I said. "Light and come in. We got b'ar meat and honey for supper."

"I say," he said, climbing down. "Pardon me for being a bit personal, old chap, but may I ask if your--ah--magnitude of bodily stature is not a bit unique?"

"I dunno," I says, not having the slightest idee what he was talking about. "I always votes a straight Democratic ticket, myself."

He started to say something else, but just then pap and my brothers John and Bill and Jim and Buckner and Garfield come to the door to see what the noise was about, and he turned pale and said faintly: "I beg your pardon; giants seem to be the rule in these parts."

"Pap says men ain't what they was when he was in his prime," I said, "but we manage to git by."

Well, J. Pembroke laid into them b'ar steaks with a hearty will, and when I told him we'd go after b'ar next day, he ast me how many days travel it'd take till we got to the b'ar country.

"Heck!" I said. "You don't have to travel to git b'ar in these parts. If you forgit to bolt yore door at night yo're liable to find a grizzly sharin' yore bunk before mornin'. This here'n we're eatin' was ketched by my sister Ellen there whilst tryin' to rob the pig-pen out behind the cabin last night."

"My word!" he says, looking at her peculiarly. "And may I ask, Miss Elkins, what caliber of firearm you used?"

"I knocked him in the head with a wagon tongue," she said, and he shook his head to hisself and muttered: "Extraordinary!"

J. PEMBROKE SLEPT IN my bunk and I took the floor that night; and we was up at daylight and ready to start after the b'ar. Whilst J. Pembroke was fussing over his guns, pap come out and pulled his whiskers and shook his head and said: "That there is a perlite young man, but I'm afeared he ain't as hale as he oughta be. I just give him a pull at my jug, and he didn't gulp but one good snort and like to choked to death."

"Well," I said, buckling the cinches on Cap'n Kidd, "I've done learnt not to jedge outsiders by the way they takes their licker on Bear Creek. It takes a Bear Creek man to swig Bear Creek corn juice."

"I hopes for the best," sighed pap. "But it's a dismal sight to see a young man which cain't stand up to his licker. Whar you takin' him?"

"Over toward Apache Mountain," I said. "Erath seen a exter big grizzly over there day before yesterday."

"Hmmmm!" says pap. "By pecooliar coincidence the schoolhouse is over on the side of Apache Mountain, ain't it, Breckinridge?"

"Maybe it is and maybe it ain't," I replied with dignerty, and rode off with J. Pembroke ignoring pap's sourcastic comment which he hollered after me: "Maybe they is a connection between book-larnin' and b'ar-huntin', but who am I to say?"

J. Pembroke was a purty good rider, but he used a funny looking saddle without no horn nor cantle, and he had the derndest gun I ever seen. It was a double-barrel rifle, and he said it was a elerfant-gun. It was big enough to knock a hill down. He was surprised I didn't tote no rifle and ast me what would I do if we met a b'ar. I told him I was depending on him to shoot it, but I said if it was necessary for me to go into action, my six-shooter was plenty.

"My word!" says he. "You mean to say you can bring down a grizzly with a shot from a pistol?"

"Not always," I said. "Sometimes I have to bust him over the head with the butt to finish him."

He didn't say nothing for a long time after that.

Well, we rode over on the lower slopes of Apache Mountain, and tied the horses in a holler and went through the bresh on foot. That was a good place for b'ars, because they come there very frequently looking for Uncle Jeppard Grimes' pigs which runs loose all over the lower slopes of the mountain.

But just like it always is when yo're looking for something, we didn't see a cussed b'ar.

The middle of the evening found us around on the south side of the mountain where they is a settlement of Kirbys and Grimeses and Gordons. Half a dozen families has their cabins within a mile of each other, and I dunno what in hell they want to crowd up together that way for, it would plumb smother me, but pap says they was always peculiar that way.

We warn't in sight of the settlement, but the schoolhouse warn't far off, and I said to J. Pembroke: "You wait here a while and maybe a b'ar will come by. Miss Margaret Ashley is teachin' me how to read and write, and it's time for my lesson."

I left J. Pembroke setting on a log hugging his elerfant-gun, and I strode through the bresh and come out at the upper end of the run which the settlement was at the other'n, and school had just turned out and the chillern was going home, and Miss Ashley was waiting for me in the log schoolhouse.

That was the first school that was ever taught on Bear Creek, and she was the first teacher. Some of the folks was awful sot agen it at first, and said no good would come of book larning, but after I licked six or seven of them they allowed it might be a good thing after all, and agreed to let her take a whack at it.

Miss Margaret was a awful purty gal and come from somewhere away back East. She was setting at her hand-made desk as I come in, ducking my head so as not to bump it agen the top of the door and perlitely taking off my coonskin cap. She looked kinda tired and discouraged, and I said: "Has the young'uns been raisin' any hell today, Miss Margaret?"

"Oh, no," she said. "They're very polite--in fact I've noticed that Bear Creek people are always polite except when they're killing each other. I've finally gotten used to the boys wearing their bowie knives and pistols to school. But somehow it seems so futile. This is all so terribly different from everything to which I've always been accustomed. I get discouraged and feel like giving up."

"You'll git used to it," I consoled her. "It'll be a lot different once yo're married to some honest reliable young man."

She give me a startled look and said: "Married to someone here on Bear Creek?"

"Shore," I said, involuntarily expanding my chest under my buckskin shirt. "Everybody is just wonderin' when you'll set the date. But le's git at the lesson. I done learnt the words you writ out for me yesterday."

But she warn't listening, and she said: "Do you have any idea of why Mr. Joel Grimes and Mr. Esau Gordon quit calling on me? Until a few days ago one or the other was at Mr. Kirby's cabin where I board almost every night."

"Now don't you worry none about them," I soothed her. "Joel'll be about on crutches before the week's out, and Esau can already walk without bein' helped. I always handles my relatives as easy as possible."

"You fought with them?" she exclaimed.

"I just convinced 'em you didn't want to be bothered with 'em," I reassured her. "I'm easy-goin', but I don't like competition."

"Competition!" Her eyes flared wide open and she looked at me like she never seen me before. "Do you mean, that you--that I--that--"

"Well," I said modestly, "everybody on Bear Creek is just wonderin' when you're goin' to set the day for us to git hitched. You see gals don't stay single very long in these parts, and--hey, what's the matter?"

Because she was getting paler and paler like she'd et something which didn't agree with her.

"Nothing," she said faintly. "You--you mean people are expecting me to marry you?"

"Shore," I said.

She muttered something that sounded like "My God!" and licked her lips with her tongue and looked at me like she was about ready to faint. Well, it ain't every gal which has a chance to get hitched to Breckinridge Elkins, so I didn't blame her for being excited.

"You've been very kind to me, Breckinridge," she said feebly. "But I--this is so sudden--so unexpected--I never thought--I never dreamed--"

"I don't want to rush you," I said. "Take yore time. Next week will be soon enough. Anyway, I got to build us a cabin, and--"

Bang! went a gun, too loud for a Winchester.

"Elkins!" It was J. Pembroke yelling for me up the slope. "Elkins! Hurry!"

"Who's that?" she exclaimed, jumping to her feet like she was working on a spring.

"Aw," I said in disgust, "it's a fool tenderfoot Bill Glanton wished on me. I reckon a b'ar is got him by the neck. I'll go see."

"I'll go with you!" she said, but from the way Pembroke was yelling I figgered I better not waste no time getting to him, so I couldn't wait for her, and she was some piece behind me when I mounted the lap of the slope and met him running out from amongst the trees. He was gibbering with excitement.

"I winged it!" he squawked. "I'm sure I winged the blighter! But it ran in among the underbrush and I dared not follow it, for the beast is most vicious when wounded. A friend of mine once wounded one in South Africa, and--"

"A b'ar?" I ast.

"No, no!" he said. "A wild boar! The most vicious brute I have ever seen! It ran into that brush there!"

"Aw, they ain't no wild boars in the Humbolts," I snorted. "You wait here. I'll go see just what you did shoot."

I seen some splashes of blood on the grass, so I knowed he'd shot something. Well, I hadn't gone more'n a few hunderd feet and was just out of sight of J. Pembroke when I run into Uncle Jeppard Grimes.

Uncle Jeppard was one of the first white men to come into the Humbolts. He's as lean and hard as a pine-knot, and wears fringed buckskins and moccasins just like he done fifty years ago. He had a bowie knife in one hand and he waved something in the other'n like a flag of revolt, and he was frothing at the mouth.

"The derned murderer!" he howled. "You see this? That's the tail of Daniel Webster, the finest derned razorback boar which ever trod the Humbolts! That danged tenderfoot of your'n tried to kill him! Shot his tail off, right spang up to the hilt! He cain't muterlate my animals like this! I'll have his heart's blood!"

And he done a war-dance waving that pig-tail and his bowie and cussing in English and Spanish and Apache Injun an at once.

"You ca'm down, Uncle Jeppard," I said sternly. "He ain't got no sense, and he thought Daniel Webster was a wild boar like they have in Aferker and England and them foreign places. He didn't mean no harm."

"No harm!" said Uncle Jeppard fiercely. "And Daniel Webster with no more tail onto him than a jackrabbit!"

"Well," I said, "here's a five dollar gold piece to pay for the dern hawg's tail, and you let J. Pembroke alone."

"Gold cain't satisfy honor," he said bitterly, but nevertheless grabbing the coin like a starving man grabbing a beefsteak. "I'll let this outrage pass for the time. But I'll be watchin' that maneyack to see that he don't muterlate no more of my prize razorbacks."

And so saying he went off muttering in his beard.

I WENT BACK TO WHERE I left J. Pembroke, and there he was talking to Miss Margaret which had just come up. She had more color in her face than I'd saw recent.

"Fancy meeting a girl like you here!" J. Pembroke was saying.

"No more surprizing than meeting a man like you!" says she with a kind of fluttery laugh.

"Oh, a sportsman wanders into all sorts of out-of-the-way places," says he, and seeing they hadn't noticed me coming up, I says: "Well, J. Pembroke, I didn't find yore wild boar, but I met the owner."

He looked at me kinda blank, and said vaguely: "Wild boar? What wild boar?"

"That-un you shot the tail off of with that there fool elerfant gun," I said. "Listen: next time you see a hawg-critter you remember there ain't no wild boars in the Humbolts. They is critters called haverleeners in South Texas, but they ain't even none of them in Nevada. So next time you see a hawg, just reflect that it's merely one of Uncle Jeppard Grimes' razorbacks and refrain from shootin' at it."

"Oh, quite!" he agreed absently, and started talking to Miss Margaret again.

So I picked up the elerfant gun which he'd absent-mindedly laid down, and said: "Well, it's gittin' late. Let's go. We won't go back to pap's cabin tonight, J. Pembroke. We'll stay at Uncle Saul Garfield's cabin on t'other side of the Apache Mountain settlement."

As I said, them cabins was awful close together. Uncle Saul's cabin was below the settlement, but it warn't much over three hundred yards from cousin Bill Kirby's cabin where Miss Margaret boarded. The other cabins was on t'other side of Bill's, mostly, strung out up the run, and up and down the slopes.

I told J. Pembroke and Miss Margaret to walk on down to the settlement whilst I went back and got the horses.

They'd got to the settlement time I catched up with 'em, and Miss Margaret had gone into the Kirby cabin, and I seen a light spring up in her room. She had one of them new-fangled ile lamps she brung with her, the only one on Bear Creek. Candles and pine chunks was good enough for us folks. And she'd hanged rag things over the winders which she called curtains. You never seen nothing like it, I tell you she was that elegant you wouldn't believe it.

We walked on toward Uncle Saul's, me leading the horses, and after a while J. Pembroke says: "A wonderful creature!"

"You mean Daniel Webster?" I ast.

"No!" he said. "No, no, I mean Miss Ashley."

"She shore is," I said. "She'll make me a fine wife."

He whirled like I'd stabbed him and his face looked pale in the dusk.

"You?" he said, "You a wife?"

"Well," I said bashfully, "she ain't sot the day yet, but I've shore sot my heart on that gal."

"Oh!" he says, "Oh!" says he, like he had the toothache. Then he said kinda hesitatingly: "Suppose--er, just suppose, you know! Suppose a rival for her affections should appear? What would you do?"

"You mean if some dirty, low-down son of a mangy skunk was to try to steal my gal?" I said, whirling so sudden he staggered backwards.

"Steal my gal?" I roared, seeing red at the mere thought. "Why, I'd--I'd--"

Words failing me I wheeled and grabbed a good-sized sapling and tore it up by the roots and broke it acrost my knee and throwed the pieces clean through a rail fence on the other side of the road.

"That there is a faint idee!" I said, panting with passion.

"That gives me a very good conception," he said faintly, and he said nothing more till we reached the cabin and seen Uncle Saul Garfield standing in the light of the door combing his black beard with his fingers.

NEXT MORNING J. PEMBROKE seemed like he'd kinda lost interest in b'ars. He said all that walking he done over the slopes of Apache Mountain had made his laig muscles sore. I never heard of such a thing, but nothing that gets the matter with these tenderfeet surprizes me much, they is such a effemernate race, so I ast him would he like to go fishing down the run and he said all right.

But we hadn't been fishing more'n a hour when he said he believed he'd go back to Uncle Saul's cabin and take him a nap, and he insisted on going alone, so I stayed where I was and ketched me a nice string of trout.

I went back to the cabin about noon, and ast Uncle Saul if J. Pembroke had got his nap out.

"Why, heck," said Uncle Saul. "I ain't seen him since you and him started down the run this mornin'. Wait a minute--yonder he comes from the other direction."

Well, J. Pembroke didn't say where he'd been all morning, and I didn't ast him, because a tenderfoot don't generally have no reason for anything he does.

We et the trout I ketched, and after dinner he perked up a right smart and got his shotgun and said he'd like to hunt some wild turkeys. I never heard of anybody hunting anything as big as a turkey with a shotgun, but I didn't say nothing, because tenderfeet is like that.

So we headed up the slopes of Apache Mountain, and I stopped by the schoolhouse to tell Miss Margaret I probably wouldn't get back in time to take my reading and writing lesson, and she said: "You know, until I met your friend, Mr. Pembroke, I didn't realize what a difference there was between men like him, and--well, like the men on Bear Creek."

"I know," I said. "But don't hold it agen him. He means well. He just ain't got no sense. Everybody cain't be smart like me. As a special favor to me, Miss Margaret, I'd like for you to be exter nice to the poor sap, because he's a friend of my friend Bill Glanton down to War Paint."

"I will, Breckinridge," she replied heartily, and I thanked her and went away with my big manly heart pounding in my gigantic bosom.

Me and J. Pembroke headed into the heavy timber, and we hadn't went far till I was convinced that somebody was follering us. I kept hearing twigs snapping, and oncet I thought I seen a shadowy figger duck behind a bush. But when I run back there, it was gone, and no track to show in the pine needles. That sort of thing would of made me nervous, anywhere else, because they is a awful lot of people which would like to get a clean shot at my back from the bresh, but I knowed none of them dast come after me in my own territory. If anybody was trailing us it was bound to be one of my relatives and to save my neck I couldn't think of no reason why anyone of 'em would be gunning for me.

But I got tired of it, and left J. Pembroke in a small glade while I snuck back to do some shaddering of my own. I aimed to cast a big circle around the opening and see could I find out who it was, but I'd hardly got out of sight of J. Pembroke when I heard a gun bang.

I turned to run back and here come J. Pembroke yelling: "I got him! I got him! I winged the bally aborigine!"

He had his head down as he busted through the bresh and he run into me in his excitement and hit me in the belly with his head so hard he bounced back like a rubber ball and landed in a bush with his riding boots brandishing wildly in the air.

"Assist me, Breckinridge!" he shrieked. "Extricate me! They will be hot on our trail!"

"Who?" I demanded, hauling him out by the hind laig and setting him on his feet.

"The Indians!" he hollered, jumping up and down and waving his smoking shotgun frantically. "The bally redskins! I shot one of them! I saw him sneaking through the bushes! I saw his legs! I know it was an Indian because he had on moccasins instead of boots! Listen! That's him now!"

"A Injun couldn't cuss like that," I said. "You've shot Uncle Jeppard Grimes!"

TELLING HIM TO STAY there, I run through the bresh, guided by the maddened howls which riz horribly on the air, and busting through some bushes I seen Uncle Jeppard rolling on the ground with both hands clasped to the rear bosom of his buckskin britches which was smoking freely. His langwidge was awful to hear.

"Air you in misery, Uncle Jeppard?" I inquired solicitously. This evoked another ear-splitting squall.

"I'm writhin' in my death-throes," he says in horrible accents, "and you stands there and mocks my mortal agony! My own blood-kin!" he says. "ae-ae-ae-ae!" says Uncle Jeppard with passion.

"Aw," I says, "that there bird-shot wouldn't hurt a flea. It cain't be very deep under yore thick old hide. Lie on yore belly, Uncle Jeppard," I said, stropping my bowie on my boot, "and I'll dig out them shot for you."

"Don't tech me!" he said fiercely, painfully climbing onto his feet. "Where's my rifle-gun? Gimme it! Now then, I demands that you bring that English murderer here where I can git a clean lam at him! The Grimes honor is besmirched and my new britches is rooint. Nothin' but blood can wipe out the stain on the family honor!"

"Well," I said, "you hadn't no business sneakin' around after us thataway--"

Here Uncle Jeppard give tongue to loud and painful shrieks.

"Why shouldn't I?" he howled. "Ain't a man got no right to pertect his own property? I was follerin' him to see that he didn't shoot no more tails offa my hawgs. And now he shoots me in the same place! He's a fiend in human form--a monster which stalks ravelin' through these hills bustin' for the blood of the innercent!"

"Aw, J. Pembroke thought you was a Injun," I said.

"He thought Daniel Webster was a wild wart-hawg," gibbered Uncle Jeppard. "He thought I was Geronimo. I reckon he'll massacre the entire population of Bear Creek under a misapprehension, and you'll uphold and defend him! When the cabins of yore kinfolks is smolderin' ashes, smothered in the blood of yore own relatives, I hope you'll be satisfied--bringin' a foreign assassin into a peaceful community!"

Here Uncle Jeppard's emotions choked him, and he chawed his whiskers and then yanked out the five-dollar gold piece I give him for Daniel Webster's tail, and throwed it at me.

"Take back yore filthy lucre," he said bitterly. "The day of retribution is close onto hand, Breckinridge Elkins, and the Lord of battles shall jedge between them which turns agen their kinfolks in their extremerties!"

"In their which?" I says, but he merely snarled and went limping off through the trees, calling back over his shoulder: "They is still men on Bear Creek which will see justice did for the aged and helpless. I'll git that English murderer if it's the last thing I do, and you'll be sorry you stood up for him, you big lunkhead!"

I went back to where J. Pembroke was waiting bewilderedly, and evidently still expecting a tribe of Injuns to bust out of the bresh and sculp him, and I said in disgust: "Let's go home. Tomorrer I'll take you so far away from Bear Creek you can shoot in any direction without hittin' a prize razorback or a antiquated gunman with a ingrown disposition. When Uncle Jeppard Grimes gits mad enough to throw away money, it's time to ile the Winchesters and strap your scabbard-ends to yore laigs."

"Legs?" he said mistily, "But what about the Indian?"

"There warn't no Injun, gol-dern it!" I howled. "They ain't been any on Bear Creek for four or five year. They--aw, hell! What's the use? Come on. It's gittin' late. Next time you see somethin' you don't understand, ast me before you shoot it. And remember, the more ferocious and woolly it looks, the more likely it is to be a leadin' citizen of Bear Creek."

It was dark when we approached Uncle Saul's cabin, and J. Pembroke glanced back up the road, toward the settlement, and said: "My word, is it a political rally? Look! A torchlight parade!"

I looked, and I said: "Quick! Git into the cabin and stay there."

He turned pale, and said: "If there is danger, I insist on--"

"Insist all you dern please," I said. "But git in that house and stay there. I'll handle this. Uncle Saul, see he gits in there."

Uncle Saul is a man of few words. He taken a firm grip on his pipe stem and grabbed J. Pembroke by the neck and seat of the britches and throwed him bodily into the cabin, and shet the door, and sot down on the stoop.

"They ain't no use in you gittin' mixed up in this, Uncle Saul," I said.

"You got yore faults, Breckinridge," he grunted. "You ain't got much sense, but yo're my favorite sister's son--and I ain't forgot that lame mule Jeppard traded me for a sound animal back in '69. Let 'em come!"

* * * *

THEY COME ALL RIGHT, and surged up in front of the cabin--Jeppard's boys Jack and Buck and Esau and Joash and Polk County. And Erath Elkins, and a mob of Gordons and Buckners and Polks, all more or less kin to me, except Joe Braxton who wasn't kin to any of us, but didn't like me because he was sweet on Miss Margaret. But Uncle Jeppard warn't with 'em. Some had torches and Polk County Grimes had a rope with a noose in it.

"Where-at air you all goin' with that there lariat?" I ast them sternly, planting my enormous bulk in their path.

"Perjuice the scoundrel!" said Polk County, waving his rope around his head. "Bring out the foreign invader which shoots hawgs and defenseless old men from the bresh!"

"What you aim to do?" I inquired.

"We aim to hang him!" they replied with hearty enthusiasm.

Uncle Saul knocked the ashes out of his pipe and stood up and stretched his arms which looked like knotted oak limbs, and he grinned in his black beard like a old timber wolf, and he says: "Whar is dear cousin Jeppard to speak for hisself?"

"Uncle Jeppard was havin' the shot picked outa his hide when we left," says Joel Gordon. "He'll be along directly. Breckinridge, we don't want no trouble with you, but we aims to have that Englishman."

"Well," I snorted, "you all cain't. Bill Glanton is trustin' me to return him whole of body and limb, and--"

"What you want to waste time in argyment for, Breckinridge?" Uncle Saul reproved mildly. "Don't you know it's a plumb waste of time to try to reason with the off-spring of a lame-mule trader?"

"What would you suggest, old man?" sneeringly remarked Polk County.

Uncle Saul beamed on him benevolently, and said gently: "I'd try moral suasion--like this!" And he hit Polk County under the jaw and knocked him clean acrost the yard into a rain barrel amongst the ruins of which he reposed until he was rescued and revived some hours later.

But they was no stopping Uncle Saul oncet he took the war-path. No sooner had he disposed of Polk County than he jumped seven foot into the air, cracked his heels together three times, give the rebel yell and come down with his arms around the necks of Esau Grimes and Joe Braxton, which he went to the earth with and starting mopping up the cabin yard with 'em.

That started the fight, and they is no scrap in the world where mayhem is committed as free and fervent as in one of these here family rukuses.

Polk County had hardly crashed into the rain barrel when Jack Grimes stuck a pistol in my face. I slapped it aside just as he fired and the bullet missed me and taken a ear offa Jim Gordon. I was scared Jack would hurt somebody if he kept on shooting reckless that way, so I kinda rapped him with my left fist and how was I to know it would dislocate his jaw. But Jim Gordon seemed to think I was to blame about his ear because he give a maddened howl and jerked up his shotgun and let bam with both barrels. I ducked just in time to keep from getting my head blowed off, and catched most of the double-charge in my shoulder, whilst the rest hived in the seat of Steve Kirby's britches. Being shot that way by a relative was irritating, but I controlled my temper and merely taken the gun away from Jim and splintered the stock over his head.

In the meantime Joel Gordon and Buck Grimes had grabbed one of my laigs apiece and was trying to rassle me to the earth, and Joash Grimes was trying to hold down my right arm, and cousin Pecos Buckner was beating me over the head from behind with a ax-handle, and Erath Elkins was coming at me from the front with a bowie knife. I reached down and got Buck Grimes by the neck with my left hand, and I swung my right and hit Erath with it, but I had to lift Joash clean off his feet and swing him around with the lick, because he wouldn't let go, so I only knocked Erath through the rail fence which was around Uncle Saul's garden.

About this time I found my left laig was free and discovered that Buck Grimes was unconscious, so I let go of his neck and begun to kick around with my left laig and it ain't my fault if the spur got tangled up in Uncle Jonathan Polk's whiskers and jerked most of 'em out by the roots. I shaken Joash off and taken the ax-handle away from Pecos because I seen he was going to hurt somebody if he kept on swinging it around so reckless, and I dunno why he blames me because his skull got fractured when he hit that tree. He oughta look where he falls when he gets throwed across a cabin yard. And if Joel Gordon hadn't been so stubborn trying to gouge me he wouldn't of got his laig broke neither.

I was handicapped by not wanting to kill any of my kinfolks, but they was so mad they all wanted to kill me, so in spite of my carefulness the casualties was increasing at a rate which would of discouraged anybody but Bear Creek folks. But they are the stubbornnest people in the world. Three or four had got me around the laigs again, refusing to be convinced that I couldn't be throwed that way, and Erath Elkins, having pulled hisself out of the ruins of the fence, come charging back with his bowie.

By this time I seen I'd have to use violence in spite of myself, so I grabbed Erath and squoze him with a grizzly-hug and that was when he got them five ribs caved in, and he ain't spoke to me since. I never seen such a cuss for taking offense over trifles.

For a matter of fact, if he hadn't been so bodaciously riled up--if he had of kept his head like I did--he would have seen how kindly I felt toward him even in the fever of that there battle. If I had dropped him underfoot he might have been tromped on fatally for I was kicking folks right and left without caring where they fell. So I carefully flung Erath out of the range of that ruckus--and if he thinks I aimed him at Ozark Grimes and his pitchfork--well, I just never done it. It was Ozark's fault more than mine for toting that pitchfork, and it ought to be Ozark that Erath cusses when he starts to sit down these days.

It was at this moment that somebody swung at me with a ax and ripped my ear nigh offa my head, and I begun to lose my temper. Four or five other relatives was kicking and hitting and biting at me all at oncet, and they is a limit even to my timid manners and mild nature. I voiced my displeasure with a beller of wrath, and lashed out with both fists, and my misguided relatives fell all over the yard like persimmons after a frost. I grabbed Joash Grimes by the ankles and begun to knock them ill-advised idjits in the head with him, and the way he hollered you'd of thought somebody was manhandling him. The yard was beginning to look like a battle-field when the cabin door opened and a deluge of b'iling water descended on us.

I got about a gallon down my neck, but paid very little attention to it, however the others ceased hostilities and started rolling on the ground and hollering and cussing, and Uncle Saul riz up from amongst the ruins of Esau Grimes and Joe Braxton, and bellered: "Woman! What air you at?"

Aunt Zavalla Garfield was standing in the doorway with a kettle in her hand, and she said: "Will you idjits stop fightin'? The Englishman's gone. He run out the back door when the fightin' started, saddled his nag and pulled out. Now will you born fools stop, or will I give you another deluge? Land save us! What's that light?"

Somebody was yelling toward the settlement, and I was aware of a peculiar glow which didn't come from such torches as was still burning. And here come Medina Kirby, one of Bill's gals, yelping like a Comanche.

"Our cabin's burnin'!" she squalled. "A stray bullet went through the winder and busted Miss Margaret's ile lamp!"

WITH A YELL OF DISMAY I abandoned the fray and headed for Bill's cabin, follered by everybody which was able to foller me. They had been several wild shots fired during the melee and one of 'em must have hived in Miss Margaret's winder. The Kirbys had dragged most of their belongings into the yard and some was bringing water from the creek, but the whole cabin was in a blaze by now.

"Whar's Miss Margaret?" I roared.

"She must be still in there!" shrilled Miss Kirby. "A beam fell and wedged her door so we couldn't open it, and--"

I grabbed a blanket one of the gals had rescued and plunged it into the rain barrel and run for Miss Margaret's room. They wasn't but one door in it, which led into the main part of the cabin, and was jammed like they said, and I knowed I couldn't never get my shoulders through either winder, so I just put down my head and rammed the wall full force and knocked four or five logs outa place and made a hole big enough to go through.

The room was so full of smoke I was nigh blinded but I made out a figger fumbling at the winder on the other side. A flaming beam fell outa the roof and broke acrost my head with a loud report and about a bucketful of coals rolled down the back of my neck, but I paid no heed.

I charged through the smoke, nearly fracturing my shin on a bedstead or something, and enveloped the figger in the wet blanket and swept it up in my arms. It kicked wildly and fought and though its voice was muffled in the blanket I ketched some words I never would of thought Miss Margaret would use, but I figgered she was hysterical. She seemed to be wearing spurs, too, because I felt 'em every time she kicked.

By this time the room was a perfect blaze and the roof was falling in and we'd both been roasted if I'd tried to get back to the hole I knocked in the oppersite wall. So I lowered my head and butted my way through the near wall, getting all my eyebrows and hair burnt off in the process, and come staggering through the ruins with my precious burden and fell into the arms of my relatives which was thronged outside.

"I've saved her!" I panted. "Pull off the blanket! Yo're safe, Miss Margaret!"

"ae-ae-ae-ae-ae!" said Miss Margaret, and Uncle Saul groped under the blanket and said: "By golly, if this is the schoolteacher she's growed a remarkable set of whiskers since I seen her last!"

He yanked off the blanket--to reveal the bewhiskered countenance of Uncle Jeppard Grimes!

"Hell's fire!" I bellered. "What you doin' here?"

"I was comin' to jine the lynchin', you blame fool!" he snarled. "I seen Bill's cabin was afire so I clumb in through the back winder to save Miss Margaret. She was gone, but they was a note she'd left. I was fixin' to climb out the winder when this maneyack grabbed me."

"Gimme that note!" I bellered, grabbing it. "Medina! Come here and read it for me."

That note run:

Dear Breckinridge:

I am sorry, but I can't stay on Bear Creek any longer. It was tough enough anyway, but being expected to marry you was the last straw. You've been very kind to me, but it would be too much like marrying a grizzly bear. Please forgive me. I am eloping with J. Pembroke Pemberton. We're going out the back window to avoid any trouble, and ride away on his horse. Give my love to the children. We are going to Europe on our honeymoon.

With love.

Margaret Ashley.

"Now what you got to say?" sneered Uncle Jeppard.

"I'm a victim of foreign entanglements," I said dazedly. "I'm goin' to chaw Bill Glanton's ears off for saddlin' that critter on me. And then I'm goin' to lick me a Englishman if I have to go all the way to Californy to find one."

Which same is now my aim, object and ambition. This Englishman took my girl and ruined my education, and filled my neck and spine with burns and bruises. A Elkins never forgets?and the next one that pokes his nose into the Bear Creek country had better be a fighting fool or a powerful fast runner.

THE END

Contents

THE VULTURES OF WHAPETON

By Robert E. Howard

Chapter 1 Guns in the Dark

The bare plank walls of the Golden Eagle Saloon seemed still to vibrate with the crashing echoes of the guns which had split the sudden darkness with spurts of red. But only a nervous shuffling of booted feet sounded in the tense silence that followed the shots. Then somewhere a match rasped on leather and a yellow flicker sprang up, etching a shaky hand and

a pallid face. An instant later an oil lamp with a broken chimney illuminated the saloon, throwing tense bearded faces into bold relief. The big lamp that hung from the ceiling was a smashed ruin; kerosene dripped from it to the floor, making an oily puddle beside a grimmer, darker pool.

Two figures held the center of the room, under the broken lamp. One lay facedown, motionless arms outstretching empty hands. The other was crawling to his feet, blinking and gaping stupidly, like a man whose wits are still muddled by drink. His right arm hung limply by his side, a long-barreled pistol sagging from his fingers.

The rigid line of figures along the bar melted into movement. Men came forward, stooping to stare down at the limp shape. A confused babble of conversation rose. Hurried steps sounded outside, and the crowd divided as a man pushed his way abruptly through. Instantly he dominated the scene. His broad-shouldered, trim-hipped figure was above medium height, and his broad-brimmed white hat, neat boots and cravat contrasted with the rough garb of the others, just as his keen, dark face with its narrow black mustache contrasted with the bearded countenances about him. He held an ivory-butted gun in his right hand, muzzle tilted upward.

"What devil's work is this?" he harshly demanded; and then his gaze fell on the man on the floor. His eyes widened.

"Grimes!" he ejaculated. "Jim Grimes, my deputy! Who did this?" There was something tigerish about him as he wheeled toward the uneasy crowd. "Who did this?" he demanded, half-crouching, his gun still lifted, but seeming to hover like a live thing ready to swoop.

Feet shuffled as men backed away, but one man spoke up: "We don't know, Middleton. Jackson there was havin' a little fun, shootin' at the ceilin', and the rest of us was at the bar, watchin' him, when Grimes come in and started to arrest him--"

"So Jackson shot him!" snarled Middleton, his gun covering the befuddled one in a baffling blur of motion. Jackson yelped in fear and threw up his hands, and the man who had first spoken interposed.

"No, Sheriff, it couldn't have been Jackson. His gun was empty when the lights went out. I know he slung six bullets into the ceilin' while he was playin' the fool, and I heard him snap the gun three times afterwards, so I know it was empty. But when Grimes went up to him, somebody shot the light out, and a gun banged in the dark, and when we got a light on again, there Grimes was on the floor, and Jackson was just gettin' up."

"I didn't shoot him," muttered Jackson. "I was just havin' a little fun. I was drunk, but I ain't now. I wouldn't have resisted arrest. When the light went out I didn't know what had happened. I heard the gun bang, and Grimes dragged me down with him as he fell. I didn't shoot him. I dunno who did."

"None of us knows," added a bearded miner. "Somebody shot in the dark--"

"More'n one," muttered another. "I heard at least three or four guns speakin'."

Silence followed, in which each man looked sidewise at his neighbor. The men had drawn back to the bar, leaving the middle of the big room clear, where the sheriff stood. Suspicion and fear galvanized the crowd, leaping like an electric spark from man to man. Each man knew that a murderer stood near him, possibly at his elbow. Men refused to look directly into the eyes of their neighbors, fearing to surprise guilty knowledge there--and die for the discovery. They stared at the sheriff who stood facing them, as if expecting to see him fall suddenly before a blast from the same unknown guns that had mowed down his deputy.

Middleton's steely eyes ranged along the silent line of men. Their eyes avoided or gave back his stare. In some he read fear; some were inscrutable; in others flickered a sinister mockery.

"The men who killed Jim Grimes are in this saloon," he said finally. "Some of you are the murderers." He was careful not to let his eyes single out anyone when he spoke; they swept the whole assemblage.

"I've been expecting this. Things have been getting a little too hot for the robbers and murderers who have been terrorizing this camp, so they've started shooting my deputies in the back. I suppose you'll try to kill me, next. Well, I want to tell you sneaking rats, whoever you are, that I'm ready for you, any time."

He fell silent, his rangy frame tense, his eyes burning with watchful alertness. None moved. The men along the bar might have been figures cut from stone.

He relaxed and shoved his gun into its scabbard; a sneer twisted his lips.

"I know your breed. You won't shoot a man unless his back is toward you. Forty men have been murdered in the vicinity of this camp within the last year, and not one had a chance to defend himself.

"Maybe this killing is an ultimatum to me. All right; I've got an answer ready: I've got a new deputy, and you won't find him so easy as Grimes. I'm fighting fire with fire from here on. I'm riding out of the Gulch early in the morning, and when I come back, I'll have a man with me. A gunfighter from Texas!"

He paused to let this information sink in, and laughed grimly at the furtive glances that darted from man to man.

"You'll find him no lamb," he predicted vindictively. "He was too wild for the country where gun-throwing was invented. What he did down there is none of my business. What he'll do here is what counts. And all I ask is that the men who murdered Grimes here, try that same trick on this Texan.

"Another thing, on my own account. I'm meeting this man at Ogalala Spring tomorrow morning. I'll be riding out alone, at dawn. If anybody wants to try to waylay me, let him make his plans now! I'll follow the open trail, and anyone who has any business with me will find me ready."

And turning his trimly-tailored back scornfully on the throng at the bar, the sheriff of Whapeton strode from the saloon.

* * *

Ten miles east of Whapeton a man squatted on his heels, frying strips of deer meat over a tiny fire. The sun was just coming up. A short distance away a rangy mustang nibbled at the wiry grass that grew sparsely between broken rocks. The man had camped there that night, but his saddle and blanket were hidden back in the bushes. That fact showed him to be a man of wary nature. No one following the trail that led past Ogalala Spring could have seen him as he slept among the bushes. Now, in full daylight, he was making no attempt to conceal his presence.

The man was tall, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, lean-hipped, like one who had spent his life in the saddle. His unruly black hair matched a face burned dark by the sun, but his eyes were a burning blue. Low on either hip the black butt of a heavy Colt jutted from a worn black leather scabbard. These guns seemed as much part of the man as his eyes or his hands. He had worn them so constantly and so long that their association was as natural as the use of his limbs.

As he fried his meat and watched his coffee boiling in a battered old pot, his gaze darted continually eastward where the trail crossed a wide open space before it vanished among the thickets of a broken hill country. Westward the trail mounted a gentle slope and quickly disappeared among trees and bushes that crowded up within a few yards of the spring. But it was always eastward that the man looked.

When a rider emerged from the thickets to the east, the man at the spring set aside the skillet with its sizzling meat strips, and picked up his rifle--a long range Sharps .50. His eyes narrowed with satisfaction. He did not rise, but remained on one knee, the rifle resting negligently in his hands, the muzzle tilted upward, not aimed.

The rider came straight on, and the man at the spring watched him from under the brim of his hat. Only when the stranger pulled up a few yards away did the first man lift his head and give the other a full view of his face.

The horseman was a supple youth of medium height, and his hat did not conceal the fact that his hair was yellow and curly. His wide eyes were ingenuous, and an infectious smile curved his lips. There was no rifle under his knee, but an ivory-butted .45 hung low at his right hip.

His expression as he saw the other man's face gave no hint to his reaction, except for a slight, momentary contraction of the muscles that control the eyes--a movement involuntary and all but uncontrollable. Then he grinned broadly, and hailed:

"That meat smells prime, stranger!"

"Light and help me with it," invited the other instantly. "Coffee, too, if you don't mind drinkin' out of the pot."

He laid aside the rifle as the other swung from his saddle. The blond youngster threw his reins over the horse's head, fumbled in his blanket roll and drew out a battered tin cup. Holding this in his right hand he approached the fire with the rolling gait of a man born to a horse.

"I ain't et my breakfast," he admitted. "Camped down the trail a piece last night, and come on up here early to meet a man. Thought you was the hombre till you looked up. Kinda startled me," he added frankly. He sat down opposite the taller man, who shoved the skillet and coffee pot toward him. The tall man moved both these utensils with his left hand. His right rested lightly and apparently casually on his right thigh.

The youth filled his tin cup, drank the black, unsweetened coffee with evident enjoyment, and filled the cup again. He picked out pieces of the cooling meat with his fingers--and he was careful to use only his left hand for that part of the breakfast that would leave grease on his fingers. But he used his right hand for pouring coffee and holding the cup to his lips. He did not seem to notice the position of the other's right hand.

"Name's Glanton," he confided. "Billy Glanton. Texas. Guadalupe country. Went up the trail with a herd of mossy horns, went broke buckin' faro in Hayes City, and headed west lookin' for gold. Hell of a prospector I turned out to be! Now I'm lookin' for a job, and the man I was goin' to meet here said he had one for me. If I read your marks right you're a Texan, too?"

The last sentence was more a statement than a question.

"That's my brand," grunted the other. "Name's O'Donnell. Pecos River country, originally."

His statement, like that of Glanton's, was indefinite. Both the Pecos and the Guadalupe cover considerable areas of territory. But Glanton grinned boyishly and stuck out his hand.

"Shake!" he cried. "I'm glad to meet an hombre from my home state, even if our stampin' grounds down there are a right smart piece apart!"

Their hands met and locked briefly--brown, sinewy hands that had never worn gloves, and that gripped with the abrupt tension of steel springs.

The handshake seemed to relax O'Donnell. When he poured out another cup of coffee he held the cup in one hand and the pot in the other, instead of setting the cup on the ground beside him and pouring with his left hand.

"I've been in California," he volunteered. "Drifted back on this side of the mountains a month ago. Been in Whapeton for the last few weeks, but gold huntin' ain't my style. I'm a vaquero. Never should have tried to be anything else. I'm headin' back for Texas."

"Why don't you try Kansas?" asked Glanton. "It's fillin' up with Texas men, bringin' cattle up the trail to stock the ranges. Within a year they'll be drivin' 'em into Wyoming and Montana."

"Maybe I might." O'Donnell lifted the coffee cup absently. He held it in his left hand, and his right lay in his lap, almost touching the big black pistol butt. But the tension was gone out of his frame. He seemed relaxed, absorbed in what Glanton was saying. The use of his left hand and the position of his right seemed mechanical, merely an unconscious habit.

"It's a great country," declared Glanton, lowering his head to conceal the momentary and uncontrollable flicker of triumph in his eyes. "Fine ranges. Towns springin' up wherever the railroad touches.

"Everybody gettin' rich on Texas beef. Talkin' about 'cattle kings'! Wish I could have knowed this beef boom was comin' when I was a kid! I'd have rounded up about fifty thousand of them maverick steers that was roamin' loose all over lower Texas, and put me a brand on 'em, and saved 'em for the market!" He laughed at his own conceit.

"They wasn't worth six bits a head then," he added, as men in making small talk will state a fact well known to everyone. "Now twenty dollars a head ain't the top price."

He emptied his cup and set it on the ground near his right hip. His easy flow of speech flowed on--but the natural movement of his hand away from the cup turned into a blur of speed that flicked the heavy gun from its scabbard.

Two shots roared like one long stuttering detonation.

The blond newcomer slumped sidewise, his smoking gun falling from his fingers, a widening spot of crimson suddenly dyeing his shirt, his wide eyes fixed in sardonic self-mockery on the gun in O'Donnell's right hand.

"Corcoran!" he muttered. "I thought I had you fooled--you--"

Self-mocking laughter bubbled to his lips, cynical to the last; he was laughing as he died.

The man whose real name was Corcoran rose and looked down at his victim unemotionally. There was a hole in the side of his shirt, and a seared spot on the skin of his ribs burned like fire. Even with his aim spoiled by ripping lead, Glanton's bullet had passed close.

Reloading the empty chamber of his Colt, Corcoran started toward the horse the dead man had ridden up to the spring. He had taken but one step when a sound brought him around, the heavy Colt jumping back into his hand.

He scowled at the man who stood before him: a tall man, trimly built, and clad in frontier elegance.

"Don't shoot," this man said imperturbably. "I'm John Middleton, sheriff of Whapeton Gulch."

The warning attitude of the other did not relax.

"This was a private matter," he said.

"I guessed as much. Anyway, it's none of my business. I saw two men at the spring as I rode over a rise in the trail some distance back. I was only expecting one. I can't afford to take any chance. I left my horse a short distance back and came on afoot. I was watching from the bushes and saw the whole thing. He reached for his gun first, but you already had your hand almost on your gun. Your shot was first by a flicker. He fooled me. His move came as an absolute surprise to me."

"He thought it would to me," said Corcoran. "Billy Glanton always wanted the drop on his man. He always tried to get some advantage before he pulled his gun.

"He knew me as soon as he saw me; knew that I knew him. But he thought he was making me think that he didn't know me. I made him think that. He could take chances because he knew I wouldn't shoot him down without warnin'--which is just what he figured on doin' to me. Finally he thought he had me off my guard, and went for his gun. I was foolin' him all along."

Middleton looked at Corcoran with much interest. He was familiar with the two opposite breeds of gunmen. One kind was like Glanton; utterly cynical, courageous enough when courage was necessary, but always preferring to gain an advantage by treachery whenever possible. Corcoran typified the opposite breed; men too direct by nature, or too proud of their skill to resort to trickery when it was possible to meet their enemies in the open and rely on sheer speed and nerve and accuracy. But that Corcoran was a strategist was proved by his tricking Glanton into drawing.

Middleton looked down at Glanton; in death the yellow curls and boyish features gave the youthful gunman an appearance of innocence. But Middleton knew that that mask had covered the heart of a merciless grey wolf.

"A bad man!" he muttered, staring at the rows of niches on the ivory stock of Glanton's Colt.

"Plenty bad," agreed Corcoran. "My folks and his had a feud between 'em down in Texas. He came back from Kansas and killed an uncle of mine--shot him down in cold blood. I was in California when it happened. Got a letter a year after the feud was over. I was headin' for Kansas, where I figured he'd gone back to, when I met a man who told me he was in this part of the country, and was ridin' towards Whapeton. I cut his trail and camped here last night waitin' for him.

"It'd been years since we'd seen each other, but he knew me--didn't know I knew he knew me, though. That gave me the edge. You're the man he was goin' to meet here?"

"Yes. I need a gunfighting deputy bad. I'd heard of him. Sent him word."

Middleton's gaze wandered over Corcoran's hard frame, lingering on the guns at his hips.

"You pack two irons," remarked the sheriff. "I know what you can do with your right. But what about the left? I've seen plenty of men who wore two guns, but those who could use both I can count on my fingers."

"Well?"

"Well," smiled the sheriff, "I thought maybe you'd like to show what you can do with your left."

"Why do you think it makes any difference to me whether you believe I can handle both guns or not?" retorted Corcoran without heat.

Middleton seemed to like the reply.

"A tinhorn would be anxious to make me believe he could. You don't have to prove anything to me. I've seen enough to show me that you're the man I need. Corcoran, I came out here to hire Glanton as my deputy. I'll make the same proposition to you. What you were down in Texas, or out in California, makes no difference to me. I know your breed, and I know that you'll shoot square with a man who trusts you, regardless of what you may have been in other parts, or will be again, somewhere else.

"I'm up against a situation in Whapeton that I can't cope with alone, or with the forces I have.

"For a year the town and the camps up and down the gulch have been terrorized by a gang of outlaws who call themselves the Vultures.

"That describes them perfectly. No man's life or property is safe. Forty or fifty men have been murdered, hundreds robbed. It's next to impossible for a man to pack out any dust, or for a big shipment of gold to get through on the stage. So many men have been shot trying to protect shipments that the stage company has trouble hiring guards any more.

"Nobody knows who are the leaders of the gang. There are a number of ruffians who are suspected of being members of the Vultures, but we have no proof that would stand up, even in a miners' court. Nobody dares give evidence against any of them. When a man recognizes the men who rob him he doesn't dare reveal his knowledge. I can't get anyone to identify a criminal, though I know that robbers and murderers are walking the streets, and rubbing elbows with me along the bars. It's maddening! And yet I can't blame the poor devils. Any man who dared testify against one of them would be murdered.

"People blame me some, but I can't give adequate protection to the camp with the resources allowed me. You know how a gold camp is; everybody so greedy-blind they don't want to do anything but grab for the yellow dust. My deputies are brave men, but they can't be everywhere, and they're not gunfighters. If I arrest a man there are a dozen to stand up in a miners' court and swear enough lies to acquit him. Only last night they murdered one of my deputies, Jim Grimes, in cold blood.

"I sent for Billy Glanton when I heard he was in this country, because I need a man of more than usual skill. I need a man who can handle a gun like a streak of forked lightning, and knows all the tricks of trapping and killing a man. I'm tired of arresting criminals to be turned loose! Wild Bill Hickok has the right idea--kill the badmen and save the jails for the petty offenders!"

The Texan scowled slightly at the mention of Hickok, who was not loved by the riders who came up the cattle trails, but he nodded agreement with the sentiment expressed. The fact that he, himself, would fall into Hickok's category of those to be exterminated did not prejudice his viewpoint.

"You're a better man than Glanton," said Middleton abruptly. "The proof is that Glanton lies there dead, and here you stand very much alive. I'll offer you the same terms I meant to offer him."

He named a monthly salary considerably larger than that drawn by the average Eastern city marshal. Gold was the most plentiful commodity in Whapeton.

"And a monthly bonus," added Middleton. "When I hire talent I expect to pay for it; so do the merchants and miners who look to me for protection."

Corcoran meditated a moment.

"No use in me goin' on to Kansas now," he said finally. "None of my folks in Texas are havin' any feud that I know of. I'd like to see this Whapeton. I'll take you up."

"Good!" Middleton extended his hand and as Corcoran took it he noticed that it was much browner than the left. No glove had covered that hand for many years.

"Let's get it started right away! But first we'll have to dispose of Glanton's body."

"I'll take along his gun and horse and send 'em to Texas to his folks," said Corcoran.

"But the body?"

"Hell, the buzzards'll 'tend to it."

"No, no!" protested Middleton. "Let's cover it with bushes and rocks, at least."

Corcoran shrugged his shoulders. It was not vindictiveness which prompted his seeming callousness. His hatred of the blond youth did not extend to the lifeless body of the man. It was simply that he saw no use in going to what seemed to him an unnecessary task. He had hated Glanton with the merciless hate of his race, which is more enduring and more relentless than the hate of an Indian or a Spaniard. But toward the body that was no longer animated by the personality he had hated, he was simply indifferent. He expected some day to leave his own corpse stretched on the ground, and the thought of buzzards tearing at his dead flesh moved him no more than the sight of his dead enemy. His creed was pagan and nakedly elemental.

A man's body, once life had left it, was no more than any other carcass, moldering back into the soil which once produced it.

But he helped Middleton drag the body into an opening among the bushes, and build a rude cairn above it. And he waited patiently while Middleton carved the dead youth's name on a rude cross fashioned from broken branches, and thrust upright among the stones.

Then they rode for Whapeton, Corcoran leading the riderless roan; over the horn of the empty saddle hung the belt supporting the dead man's gun, the ivory stock of which bore eleven notches, each of which represented a man's life.

Chapter 2 Golden Madness

The mining town of Whapeton sprawled in a wide gulch that wandered between sheer rock walls and steep hillsides. Cabins, saloons and dance-halls backed against the cliffs on the south side of the gulch. The houses facing them were almost on the bank of Whapeton Creek, which wandered down the gulch, keeping mostly to the center. On both sides of the creek cabins and tents straggled for a mile and a half each way from the main body of the town. Men were washing gold dust out of the creek, and out of its smaller tributaries which meandered into the canyon along tortuous ravines. Some of these ravines opened into the gulch between the houses built against the wall, and the cabins and tents which straggled up them gave the impression that the town had overflowed the main gulch and spilled into its tributaries.

Buildings were of logs, or of bare planks laboriously freighted over the mountains. Squalor and draggled or gaudy elegance rubbed elbows. An intense virility surged through the scene. What other qualities it might have lacked, it overflowed with a superabundance of vitality. Color, action, movement--growth and power! The atmosphere was alive with these elements, stinging and tingling. Here there were no delicate shadings or subtle contrasts. Life painted here in broad, raw colors, in bold, vivid strokes. Men who came here left behind them the delicate nuances, the cultured tranquilities of life. An empire was being built on muscle and guts and audacity, and men dreamed gigantically and wrought terrifically. No dream was too mad, no enterprise too tremendous to be accomplished.

Passions ran raw and turbulent. Boot heels stamped on bare plank floors, in the eddying dust of the street. Voices boomed, tempers exploded in sudden outbursts of primitive violence. Shrill voices of painted harpies mingled with the clank of gold on gambling tables, gusty mirth and vociferous altercation along the bars where raw liquor hissed in a steady stream down hairy, dust-caked throats. It was one of a thousand similar panoramas of the day, when a giant empire was bellowing in lusty infancy.

But a sinister undercurrent was apparent. Corcoran, riding by the sheriff, was aware of this, his senses and intuitions whetted to razor keenness by the life he led. The instincts of a gunfighter were developed to an abnormal alertness, else he had never lived out his first year of gunmanship. But it took no abnormally developed instinct to tell Corcoran that hidden

currents ran here, darkly and strongly.

As they threaded their way among trains of pack-mules, rumbling wagons and swarms of men on foot which thronged the straggling street, Corcoran was aware of many eyes following them. Talk ceased suddenly among gesticulating groups as they recognized the sheriff, then the eyes swung to Corcoran, searching and appraising. He did not seem to be aware of their scrutiny.

Middleton murmured: "They know I'm bringing back a gunfighting deputy. Some of those fellows are Vultures, though I can't prove it. Look out for yourself."

Corcoran considered this advice too unnecessary to merit a reply. They were riding past the King of Diamonds gambling hall at the moment, and a group of men clustered in the doorway turned to stare at them. One lifted a hand in greeting to the sheriff.

"Ace Brent, the biggest gambler in the gulch," murmured Middleton as he returned the salute. Corcoran got a glimpse of a slim figure in elegant broadcloth, a keen, inscrutable countenance, and a pair of piercing black eyes.

Middleton did not enlarge upon his description of the man, but rode on in silence.

They traversed the body of the town--the clusters of stores and saloons--and passed on, halting at a cabin apart from the rest. Between it and the town the creek swung out in a wide loop that carried it some distance from the south wall of the gulch, and the cabins and tents straggled after the creek. That left this particular cabin isolated, for it was built with its back wall squarely against the sheer cliff. There was a corral on one side, a clump of trees on the other. Beyond the trees a narrow ravine opened into the gulch, dry and unoccupied.

"This is my cabin," said Middleton. "That cabin back there"--he pointed to one which they had passed, a few hundred yards back up the road--"I use for a sheriff's office. I need only one room. You can bunk in the back room. You can keep your horse in my corral, if you want to. I always keep several there for my deputies. It pays to have a fresh supply of horseflesh always on hand."

As Corcoran dismounted he glanced back at the cabin he was to occupy. It stood close to a clump of trees, perhaps a hundred yards from the steep wall of the gulch.

There were four men at the sheriff's cabin, one of which Middleton introduced to Corcoran as Colonel Hopkins, formerly of Tennessee. He was a tall, portly man with an iron grey mustache and goatee, as well dressed as Middleton himself.

"Colonel Hopkins owns the rich Elinor A. claim, in partnership with Dick Bisley," said Middleton; "in addition to being one of the most prominent merchants in the Gulch."

"A great deal of good either occupation does me, when I can't get my money out of town," retorted the colonel. "Three times my partner and I have lost big shipments of gold on the stage. Once we sent out a load concealed in wagons loaded with supplies supposed to be intended for the miners at Teton Gulch. Once clear of Whapeton the drivers were to swing back east through the mountains. But somehow the Vultures learned of our plan; they caught the wagons fifteen miles south of Whapeton, looted them and murdered the guards and drivers."

"The town's honeycombed with their spies," muttered Middleton.

"Of course. One doesn't know who to trust. It was being whispered in the streets that my men had been killed and robbed, before their bodies had been found. We know that the Vultures knew all about our plan, that they rode straight out from Whapeton, committed that crime and rode straight back with the gold dust. But we could do nothing. We can't prove anything, or convict anybody."

Middleton introduced Corcoran to the three deputies, Bill McNab, Richardson, and Stark. McNab was as tall as Corcoran and more heavily built, hairy and muscular, with restless eyes that reflected a violent temper. Richardson was more slender, with cold, unblinking eyes, and Corcoran instantly classified him as the most dangerous of the three. Stark was a burly, bearded fellow, not differing in type from hundreds of miners. Corcoran found the appearances of these men incongruous with their protestations of helplessness in the face of the odds against them. They looked like hard men, well able to take care of themselves in any situation.

Middleton, as if sensing his thoughts, said: "These men are not afraid of the devil, and they can throw a gun as quick as the average man, or quicker. But it's hard for a stranger to appreciate just what we're up against here in Whapeton. If it was a matter of an open fight, it would be different. I wouldn't need any more help. But it's blind going, working in the dark, not knowing who to trust. I don't dare to deputize a man unless I'm sure of his honesty. And who can be sure of who? We know the town is full of spies. We don't know who they are; we don't know who the leader of the Vultures is."

Hopkins' bearded chin jutted stubbornly as he said: "I still believe that gambler, Ace Brent, is mixed up with the gang. Gamblers have been murdered and robbed, but Brent's never been molested. What becomes of all the dust he wins? Many of the miners, despairing of ever getting out of the gulch with their gold, blow it all in the saloons and gambling halls. Brent's won thousands of dollars in dust and nuggets. So have several others. What becomes of it? It doesn't all go back into circulation. I believe they get it out, over the mountains. And if they do, when no one else can, that proves to my mind that they're members of the Vultures."

"Maybe they cache it, like you and the other merchants are doing," suggested Middleton. "I don't know. Brent's intelligent enough to be the chief of the Vultures. But I've never been able to get anything on him."

"You've never been able to get anything definite on anybody, except petty offenders," said Colonel Hopkins bluntly, as he took up his hat. "No offense intended, John. We know what you're up against, and we can't blame you. But it looks like, for the good of the camp, we're going to have to take direct action."

Middleton stared after the broadcloth-clad back as it receded from the cabin.

"'We,'" he murmured. "That means the vigilantes--or rather the men who have been agitating a vigilante movement. I can understand their feelings, but I consider it an unwise move. In the first place, such an organization is itself outside the law, and would be playing into the hands of the lawless element. Then, what's to prevent outlaws from joining the vigilantes, and diverting it to suit their own ends?"

"Not a damned thing!" broke in McNab heatedly. "Colonel Hopkins and his friends are hot-headed. They expect too much from us. Hell, we're just ordinary workin' men. We do the best we can, but we ain't gunslingers like this man Corcoran here."

Corcoran found himself mentally questioning the whole truth of this statement; Richardson had all the earmarks of a gunman, if he had ever seen one, and the Texan's experience in such matters ranged from the Pacific to the Gulf.

Middleton picked up his hat. "You boys scatter out through the camp. I'm going to take Corcoran around, when I've sworn him in and given him his badge, and introduce him to the leading men of the camp.

"I don't want any mistake, or any chance of mistake, about his standing. I've put you in a tight spot, Corcoran, I'll admit--boasting about the gunfighting deputy I was going to get. But I'm confident that you can take care of yourself."

The eyes that had followed their ride down the street focused on the sheriff and his companion as they made their way on foot along the straggling street with its teeming saloons and gambling halls. Gamblers and bartenders were swamped with business, and merchants were getting rich with all commodities selling at unheard-of prices. Wages for day-labor matched prices for groceries, for few men could be found to toil for a prosaic, set salary when their eyes were dazzled by visions of creeks fat with yellow dust and gorges crammed with nuggets. Some of those dreams were not disappointed; millions of dollars in virgin gold was being taken out of the claims up and down the gulch. But the finders frequently found it a golden weight hung to their necks to drag them down to a bloody death. Unseen, unknown, on furtive feet the human wolves stole among them, unerringly marking their prey and striking in the dark.

From saloon to saloon, dance hall to dance hall, where weary girls in tawdry finery allowed themselves to be tussled and hauled about by bear-like males who emptied sacks of gold dust down the low necks of their dresses, Middleton piloted Corcoran, talking rapidly and incessantly. He pointed out men in the crowd and gave their names and status in the community, and introduced the Texan to the more important citizens of the camp.

All eyes followed Corcoran curiously. The day was still in the future when the northern ranges would be flooded by Texas cattle, driven by wiry Texas riders; but Texans were not unknown, even then, in the mining camps of the Northwest. In the first days of the gold rushes they had drifted in from the camps of California, to which, at a still earlier date, the Southwest had sent some of her staunchest and some of her most turbulent sons. And of late others had drifted in from the Kansas cattle towns along whose streets the lean riders were swaggering and fighting out feuds brought up from the far south country. Many in Whapeton were familiar with the characteristics of the Texas breed, and all had heard tales of the fighting men bred among the live oaks and mesquites of that hot, turbulent country where racial traits met and clashed, and the traditions of the Old South mingled with those of the untamed West.

Here, then, was a lean grey wolf from that southern pack; some of the men looked their scowling animosity; but most merely looked, in the role of spectators, eager to witness the drama all felt imminent.

"You're, primarily, to fight the Vultures, of course," Middleton told Corcoran as they walked together down the street. "But that doesn't mean you're to overlook petty offenders. A lot of small-time crooks and bullies are so emboldened by the success of the big robbers that they think they can get away with things, too. If you see a man shooting up a saloon, take his gun away and throw him into jail to sober up. That's the jail, up yonder at the other end of town. Don't let men fight on the street or in saloons. Innocent bystanders get hurt."

"All right." Corcoran saw no harm in shooting up saloons or fighting in public places. In Texas few innocent bystanders were ever hurt, for there men sent their bullets straight to the mark intended. But he was ready to follow instructions.

"So much for the smaller fry. You know what to do with the really bad men. We're not bringing any more murderers into court to be acquitted through their friends' lies!"

Chapter 3 Gunman's Trap

Night had fallen over the roaring madness that was Whapeton Gulch. Light streamed from the open doors of saloons and honky-tonks, and the gusts of noise that rushed out into the street smote the passers-by like the impact of a physical blow.

Corcoran traversed the street with the smooth, easy stride of perfectly poised muscles. He seemed to be looking straight ahead, but his eyes missed nothing on either side of him. As he passed each building in turn he analyzed the sounds that issued from the open door, and knew just how much was rough merriment and horseplay, recognized the elements of anger and menace when they edged some of the voices, and accurately appraised the extent and intensity of those emotions. A real gunfighter was not merely a man whose eye was truer, whose muscles were quicker than other men; he was a practical psychologist, a student of human nature, whose life depended on the correctness of his conclusions.

It was the Golden Garter dance hall that gave him his first job as a defender of law and order.

As he passed a startling clamor burst forth inside--strident feminine shrieks piercing a din of coarse masculine hilarity. Instantly he was through the door and elbowing a way through the crowd which was clustered about the center of the room. Men cursed and turned belligerently as they felt his elbows in their ribs, twisted their heads to threaten him, and then gave back as they recognized the new deputy.

Corcoran broke through into the open space the crowd ringed, and saw two women fighting like furies. One, a tall, fine blond girl, had bent a shrieking, biting, clawing Mexican girl back over a billiard table, and the crowd was yelling joyful encouragement to one or the other: "Give it to her, Glory!" "Slug her, gal!" "Hell, Conchita, bite her!"

The brown girl heeded this last bit of advice and followed it so energetically that Glory cried out sharply and jerked away her wrist, which dripped blood. In the grip of the hysterical frenzy which seizes women in such moments, she caught up a billiard ball and lifted it to crash it down on the head of her screaming captive.

Corcoran caught that uplifted wrist, and deftly flicked the ivory sphere from her fingers. Instantly she whirled on him like a tigress, her yellow hair falling in disorder over her shoulders, bared by the violence of the struggle, her eyes blazing. She lifted her hands toward his face, her fingers working spasmodically, at which some drunk bawled, with a shout of laughter: "Scratch his eyes out, Glory!"

Corcoran made no move to defend his features; he did not seem to see the white fingers twitching so near his face. He was staring into her furious face, and the candid admiration of his gaze seemed to confuse her, even in her anger. She dropped her hands but fell back on woman's traditional weapon--her tongue.

"You're Middleton's new deputy! I might have expected you to butt in! Where are McNab and the rest? Drunk in some gutter? Is this the way you catch murderers? You lawmen are all alike--better at bullying girls than at catching outlaws!"

Corcoran stepped past her and picked up the hysterical Mexican girl. Conchita seeing that she was more frightened than hurt, scurried toward the back rooms, sobbing in rage and humiliation, and clutching about her the shreds of garments her enemy's tigerish attack had left her.

Corcoran looked again at Glory, who stood clenching and unclenching her white fists. She was still fermenting with anger, and furious at his intervention. No one in the crowd about them spoke; no one laughed, but all seemed to hold their breaths as she launched into another tirade. They knew Corcoran was a dangerous man, but they did not know the code by which he had been reared; did not know that Glory, or any other woman, was safe from violence at his hands, whatever her offense.

"Why don't you call McNab?" she sneered. "Judging from the way Middleton's deputies have been working, it will probably take three or four of you to drag one helpless girl to jail!"

"Who said anything about takin' you to jail?" Corcoran's gaze dwelt in fascination on her ruddy cheeks, the crimson of her full lips in startling contrast against the whiteness of her teeth. She shook her yellow hair back impatiently, as a spirited young animal might shake back its flowing mane.

"You're not arresting me?" She seemed startled, thrown into confusion by this unexpected statement.

"No. I just kept you from killin' that girl. If you'd brained her with that billiard ball I'd have had to arrest you."

"She lied about me!" Her wide eyes flashed, and her breast heaved again.

"That wasn't no excuse for makin' a public show of yourself," he answered without heat. "If ladies have got to fight, they ought to do it in private."

And so saying he turned away. A gusty exhalation of breath seemed to escape the crowd, and the tension vanished, as they turned to the bar. The incident was forgotten, merely a trifling episode in an existence crowded with violent incidents. Jovial masculine voices mingled with the shriller laughter of women, as glasses began to clink along the bar.

Glory hesitated, drawing her torn dress together over her bosom, then darted after Corcoran, who was moving toward the door. When she touched his arm he whipped about as quick as a cat, a hand flashing to a gun. She glimpsed a momentary gleam in his eyes as menacing and predatory as the threat that leaps in a panther's eyes. Then it was gone as he saw whose hand had touched him.

"She lied about me," Glory said, as if defending herself from a charge of misconduct. "She's a dirty little cat."

Corcoran looked her over from head to foot, as if he had not heard her; his blue eyes burned her like a physical fire.

She stammered in confusion. Direct and unveiled admiration was commonplace, but there was an elemental candor about the Texan such as she had never before encountered.

He broke in on her stammerings in a way that showed he had paid no attention to what she was saying.

"Let me buy you a drink. There's a table over there where we can sit down."

"No. I must go and put on another dress. I just wanted to say that I'm glad you kept me from killing Conchita. She's a slut, but I don't want her blood on my hands."

"All right."

She found it hard to make conversation with him, and could not have said why she wished to make conversation.

"McNab arrested me once," she said, irrelevantly, her eyes dilating as if at the memory of an injustice. "I slapped him for something he said. He was going to put me in jail for resisting an officer of the law! Middleton made him turn me loose."

"McNab must be a fool," said Corcoran slowly.

"He's mean; he's got a nasty temper, and he--what's that?"

Down the street sounded a fusillade of shots, a blurry voice yelling gleefully.

"Some fool shooting up a saloon," she murmured, and darted a strange glance at her companion, as if a drunk shooting into the air was an unusual occurrence in that wild mining camp.

"Middleton said that's against the law," he grunted, turning away.

"Wait!" she cried sharply, catching at him. But he was already moving through the door, and Glory stopped short as a hand fell lightly on her shoulder from behind. Turning her head she paled to see the keenly-chiseled face of Ace Brent. His hand lay gently on her shoulder, but there was a command and a blood-chilling threat in its touch. She shivered and stood still as a statue, as Corcoran, unaware of the drama being played behind him, disappeared into the street.

The racket was coming from the Blackfoot Chief Saloon, a few doors down, and on the same side of the street as the Golden Garter. With a few long strides Corcoran reached the door. But he did not rush in. He halted and swept his cool gaze deliberately over the interior. In the center of the saloon a roughly dressed man was reeling about, whooping and discharging a pistol into the ceiling, perilously close to the big oil lamp which hung there. The bar was lined with men, all bearded and uncouthly garbed, so it was impossible to tell which were ruffians and which were honest miners. All the men in the room were at the bar, with the exception of the drunken man.

Corcoran paid little heed to him as he came through the door, though he moved straight toward him, and to the tense watchers it seemed the Texan was looking at no one else. In reality, from the corner of his eye he was watching the men at the bar; and as he moved deliberately from the door, across the room, he distinguished the pose of honest curiosity from the tension of intended murder. He saw the three hands that gripped gun butts.

And as he, apparently ignorant of what was going on at the bar, stepped toward the man reeling in the center of the room, a gun jumped from its scabbard and pointed toward the lamp. And even as it moved, Corcoran moved quicker. His turn was a blur of motion too quick for the eye to follow and even as he turned his gun was burning red.

The man who had drawn died on his feet with his gun still pointed toward the ceiling, unfired. Another stood gaping, stunned, a pistol dangling in his fingers, for that fleeting tick of time; then as he woke and whipped the gun up, hot lead ripped through his brain. A third gun spoke once as the owner fired wildly, and then he went to his knees under the blast of ripping lead, slumped over on the floor and lay twitching.

It was over in a flash, action so blurred with speed that not one of the watchers could ever tell just exactly what had happened. One instant Corcoran had been moving toward the man in the center of the room, the next both guns were blazing and three men were falling from the bar, crashing dead on the floor.

For an instant the scene held, Corcoran half-crouching, guns held at his hips, facing the men who stood stunned along the bar. Wisps of blue smoke drifted from the muzzles of his guns, forming a misty veil through which his grim face looked, implacable and passionless as that of an image carved from granite. But his eyes blazed.

Shakily, moving like puppets on a string, the men at the bar lifted their hands clear of their waistline. Death hung on the crook of a finger for a shuddering tick of time. Then with a choking gasp the man who had played drunk made a stumbling rush toward the door. With a catlike wheel and stroke Corcoran crashed a gun barrel over his head and stretched him stunned and bleeding on the floor.

The Texan was facing the men at the bar again before any of them could have moved. He had not looked at the men on the floor since they had fallen.

"Well, amigos!" His voice was soft, but it was thick with killer's lust. "Why don't you-all keep the baile goin'? Ain't these hombres got no friends?"

Apparently they had not. No one made a move.

Realizing that the crisis had passed, that there was no more killing to be done just then, Corcoran straightened, shoving his guns back in his scabbards.

"Purty crude," he criticized. "I don't see how anybody could fall for a trick that stale. Man plays drunk and starts shootin' at the roof. Officer comes in to arrest him. When the officer's back's turned, somebody shoots out the light, and the drunk falls on the floor to get out of the line of fire. Three or four men planted along the bar start blazin' away in the dark at the place where they know the law's standin', and out of eighteen or twenty-four shots, some's bound to connect."

With a harsh laugh he stooped, grabbed the "drunk" by the collar and hauled him upright. The man staggered and stared wildly about him, blood dripping from the gash in his scalp.

"You got to come along to jail," said Corcoran unemotionally. "Sheriff says it's against the law to shoot up saloons. I ought to shoot you, but I ain't in the habit of pluggin' men with empty guns. Reckon you'll be more value to the sheriff alive than dead, anyway."

And propelling his dizzy charge, he strode out into the street. A crowd had gathered about the door, and they gave back suddenly. He saw a supple, feminine figure dart into the circle of light, which illumined the white face and golden hair of the girl Glory.

"Oh!" she exclaimed sharply. "Oh!" Her exclamation was almost drowned in a sudden clamor of voices as the men in the street realized what had happened in the Blackfoot Chief.

Corcoran felt her pluck at his sleeve as he passed her, heard her tense whisper.

"I was afraid--I tried to warn you--I'm glad they didn't--"

A shadow of a smile touched his hard lips as he glanced down at her. Then he was gone, striding down the street toward the jail, half-pushing, half-dragging his bewildered prisoner.

Chapter 4 The Madness That Blinds Men

Corcoran locked the door on the man who seemed utterly unable to realize just what had happened, and turned away, heading for the sheriff's office at the other end of town. He kicked on the door of the jailer's shack, a few yards from the jail, and roused that individual out of a slumber he believed was alcoholic, and informed him he had a prisoner in his care. The jailer seemed as surprised as the victim was.

No one had followed Corcoran to the jail, and the street was almost deserted, as the people jammed morbidly into the Blackfoot Chief to stare at the bodies and listen to conflicting stories as to just what had happened.

Colonel Hopkins came running up, breathlessly, to grab Corcoran's hand and pump it vigorously.

"By gad, sir, you have the real spirit! Guts! Speed! They tell me the loafers at the bar didn't even have time to dive for cover before it was over! I'll admit I'd ceased to expect much of John's deputies, but you've shown your metal! These fellows were undoubtedly Vultures. That Tom Deal, you've got in jail, I've suspected him for some time. We'll question him--make him tell us who the rest are, and who their leader is. Come in and have a drink, sir!"

"Thanks, but not just now. I'm goin' to find Middleton and report this business. His office ought to be closer to the jail. I don't think much of his jailer. When I get through reportin' I'm goin' back and guard that fellow myself."

Hopkins emitted more laudations, and then clapped the Texan on the back and darted away to take part in whatever informal inquest was being made, and Corcoran strode on through the emptying street. The fact that so much uproar was being made over the killing of three would-be murderers showed him how rare was a successful resistance to the Vultures. He shrugged his shoulders as he remembered feuds and range wars in his native Southwest: men falling like flies under the unerring drive of bullets on the open range and in the streets of Texas towns. But there all men were frontiersmen, sons and grandsons of frontiersmen; here, in the mining camps, the frontier element was only one of several elements, many drawn from sections where men had forgotten how to defend themselves through generations of law and order.

He saw a light spring up in the sheriff's cabin just before he reached it, and, with his mind on possible gunmen lurking in ambush--for they must have known he would go directly to the cabin from the jail--he swung about and approached the building by a route that would not take him across the bar of light pouring from the window. So it was that the man who came

running noisily down the road passed him without seeing the Texan as he kept in the shadows of the cliff. The man was McNab; Corcoran knew him by his powerful build, his slouching carriage. And as he burst through the door, his face was illuminated and Corcoran was amazed to see it contorted in a grimace of passion.

Voices rose inside the cabin, McNab's bull-like roar, thick with fury, and the calmer tones of Middleton. Corcoran hurried forward, and as he approached he heard McNab roar: "Damn you, Middleton, you've got a lot of explainin' to do! Why didn't you warn the boys he was a killer?"

At that moment Corcoran stepped into the cabin and demanded: "What's the trouble, McNab?"

The big deputy whirled with a feline snarl of rage, his eyes glaring with murderous madness as they recognized Corcoran.

"You damned--" A string of filthy expletives gushed from his thick lips as he ripped out his gun. Its muzzle had scarcely cleared leather when a Colt banged in Corcoran's right hand. McNab's gun clattered to the floor and he staggered back, grasping his right arm with his left hand, and cursing like a madman.

"What's the matter with you, you fool?" demanded Corcoran harshly. "Shut up! I did you a favor by not killin' you. If you wasn't a deputy I'd have drilled you through the head. But I will anyway, if you don't shut your dirty trap."

"You killed Breckman, Red Bill and Curly!" raved McNab; he looked like a wounded grizzly as he swayed there, blood trickling down his wrist and dripping off his fingers.

"Was that their names? Well, what about it?"

"Bill's drunk, Corcoran," interposed Middleton. "He goes crazy when he's full of liquor."

McNab's roar of fury shook the cabin. His eyes turned red and he swayed on his feet as if about to plunge at Middleton's throat.

"Drunk?" he bellowed. "You lie, Middleton! Damn you, what's your game? You sent your own men to death! Without warnin'!"

"His own men?" Corcoran's eyes were suddenly glittering slits. He stepped back and made a half-turn so that he was facing both men; his hands became claws hovering over his gun-butts.

"Yes, his men!" snarled McNab. "You fool, he's the chief of the Vultures!"

An electric silence gripped the cabin. Middleton stood rigid, his empty hands hanging limp, knowing that his life hung on a thread no more substantial than a filament of morning dew. If he moved, if, when he spoke, his tone jarred on Corcoran's suspicious ears, guns would be roaring before a man could snap his fingers.

"Is that so?" Corcoran shot at him.

"Yes," Middleton said calmly, with no inflection in his voice that could be taken as a threat. "I'm chief of the Vultures."

Corcoran glared at him puzzled. "What's your game?" he demanded, his tone thick with the deadly instinct of his breed.

"That's what I want to know!" bawled McNab. "We killed Grimes for you, because he was catchin' on to things. And we set the same trap for this devil. He knew! He must have known! You warned him--told him all about it!"

"He told me nothin'," grated Corcoran. "He didn't have to. Nobody but a fool would have been caught in a trap like that. Middleton, before I blow you to Hell, I want to know one thing: what good was it goin' to do you to bring me into Whapeton, and have me killed the first night I was here?"

"I didn't bring you here for that," answered Middleton.

"Then what'd you bring him here for?" yelled McNab. "You told us--"

"I told you I was bringing a new deputy here, that was a gunslinging fool," broke in Middleton. "That was the truth. That should have been warning enough."

"But we thought that was just talk, to fool the people," protested McNab bewilderedly. He sensed that he was beginning to be wound in a web he could not break.

"Did I tell you it was just talk?"

"No, but we thought--"

"I gave you no reason to think anything. The night when Grimes was killed I told everyone in the Golden Eagle that I was bringing in a Texas gunfighter as my deputy. I spoke the truth."

"But you wanted him killed, and--"

"I didn't. I didn't say a word about having him killed."

"But--"

"Did I?" Middleton pursued relentlessly. "Did I give you a definite order to kill Corcoran, to molest him in any way?"

Corcoran's eyes were molten steel, burning into McNab's soul. The befuddled giant scowled and floundered, vaguely realizing that he was being put in the wrong, but not understanding how, or why.

"No, you didn't tell us to kill him in so many words; but you didn't tell us to let him alone."

"Do I have to tell you to let people alone to keep you from killing them? There are about three thousand people in this camp I've never given any definite orders about. Are you going out and kill them, and say you thought I meant you to do it, because I didn't tell you not to?"

"Well, I--" McNab began apologetically, then burst out in righteous though bewildered wrath: "Damn it, it was the understandin' that we'd get rid of deputies like that, who wasn't on the inside. We thought you were bringin' in an honest deputy to fool the folks, just like you hired Jim Grimes to fool 'em. We thought you was just makin' a talk to the fools in the Golden Eagle. We thought you'd want him out of the way as quick as possible--"

"You drew your own conclusions and acted without my orders," snapped Middleton. "That's all that it amounts to. Naturally Corcoran defended himself. If I'd had any idea that you fools would try to murder him, I'd have passed the word to let him alone. I thought you understood my motives. I brought Corcoran in here to fool the people; yes. But he's not a man like Jim Grimes. Corcoran is with us. He'll clean out the thieves that are working outside our gang, and we'll accomplish two things with one stroke: get rid of competition and make the miners think we're on the level."

McNab stood glaring at Middleton; three times he opened his mouth, and each time he shut it without speaking. He knew that an injustice had been done him; that a responsibility that was not rightfully his had been dumped on his brawny shoulders. But the subtle play of Middleton's wits was beyond him; he did not know how to defend himself or make a countercharge.

"All right," he snarled. "We'll forget it. But the boys ain't goin' to forget how Corcoran shot down their pards. I'll talk to 'em, though. Tom Deal's got to be out of that jail before daylight. Hopkins is aimin' to question him about the gang. I'll stage a fake jailbreak for him. But first I've got to get this arm dressed." And he slouched out of the cabin and away through the darkness, a baffled giant, burning with murderous rage, but too tangled in a net of subtlety to know where or how or who to smite.

Back in the cabin Middleton faced Corcoran who still stood with his thumbs hooked in his belt, his fingers near his gun butts. A whimsical smile played on Middleton's thin lips, and Corcoran smiled back; but it was the mirthless grin of a crouching panther.

"You can't tangle me up with words like you did that big ox," Corcoran said. "You let me walk into that trap. You knew your men were ribbin' it up. You let 'em go ahead, when a word from you would have stopped it. You knew they'd think you wanted me killed, like Grimes, if you didn't say nothin'. You let 'em think that, but you played safe by not givin' any definite orders, so if anything went wrong, you could step out from under and shift the blame onto McNab."

Middleton smiled appreciatively, and nodded coolly.

"That's right. All of it. You're no fool, Corcoran."

Corcoran ripped out an oath, and this glimpse of the passionate nature that lurked under his inscrutable exterior was like a momentary glimpse of an enraged cougar, eyes blazing, spitting and snarling.

"Why?" he exclaimed. "Why did you plot all this for me? If you had a grudge against Glanton, I can understand why you'd rib up a trap for him, though you wouldn't have had no more luck with him than you have with me. But you ain't got no feud against me. I never saw you before this mornin'!"

"I have no feud with you; I had none with Glanton. But if Fate hadn't thrown you into my path, it would have been Glanton who would have been ambushed in the Blackfoot Chief. Don't you see, Corcoran? It was a test. I had to be sure you were the man I wanted."

Corcoran scowled, puzzled himself now.

"What do you mean?"

"Sit down!" Middleton himself sat down on a nearby chair, unbuckled his gun-belt and threw it, with the heavy, holstered gun, onto a table, out of easy reach. Corcoran seated himself, but his vigilance did not relax, and his gaze rested on Middleton's left arm pit, where a second gun might be hidden.

"In the first place," said Middleton, his voice flowing tranquilly, but pitched too low to be heard outside the cabin, "I'm chief of the Vultures, as that fool said. I organized them, even before I was made sheriff. Killing a robber and murderer, who was working outside my gang, made the people of Whapeton think I'd make a good sheriff. When they gave me the office, I saw what an advantage it would be to me and my gang.

"Our organization is airtight. There are about fifty men in the gang. They are scattered throughout these mountains. Some pose as miners; some are gamblers--Ace Brent, for instance. He's my right-hand man. Some work in saloons, some clerk in stores. One of the regular drivers of the stage-line company is a Vulture, and so is a clerk of the company, and one of the men who works in the company's stables, tending the horses.

"With spies scattered all over the camp, I know who's trying to take out gold, and when. It's a cinch. We can't lose."

"I don't see how the camp stands for it," grunted Corcoran.

"Men are too crazy after gold to think about anything else. As long as a man isn't molested himself, he doesn't care much what happens to his neighbors. We are organized; they are not. We know who to trust; they don't. It can't last forever. Sooner or later the more intelligent citizens will organize themselves into a vigilante committee and sweep the gulch clean. But when that happens, I intend to be far away--with one man I can trust."

Corcoran nodded, comprehension beginning to gleam in his eyes.

"Already some men are talking vigilante. Colonel Hopkins, for instance. I encourage him as subtly as I can."

"Why, in the name of Satan?"

"To avert suspicion; and for another reason. The vigilantes will serve my purpose at the end."

"And your purpose is to skip out and leave the gang holdin' the sack!"

"Exactly! Look here!"

Taking the candle from the table, he led the way through a back room, where heavy shutters covered the one window. Shutting the door, he turned to the back wall and drew aside some skins which were hung over it. Setting the candle on a roughly hewed table, he fumbled at the logs, and a section swung outward, revealing a heavy plank door set in the solid rock against which the back wall of the cabin was built. It was braced with iron and showed a ponderous lock. Middleton produced a key, and turned it in the lock, and pushed the door inward. He lifted the candle and revealed a small cave, lined and heaped with canvas and buckskin sacks. One of these sacks had burst open, and a golden stream caught the glints of the candle.

"Gold! Sacks and sacks of it!"

Corcoran caught his breath, and his eyes glittered like a wolf's in the candlelight. No man could visualize the contents of those bags unmoved. And the gold-madness had long ago entered Corcoran's veins, more powerfully than he had dreamed, even though he had followed the lure to California and back over the mountains again. The sight of that glittering heap, of those bulging sacks, sent his pulses pounding in his temples, and his hand unconsciously locked on the butt of a gun.

"There must be a million there!"

"Enough to require a good-sized mule-train to pack it out," answered Middleton. "You see why I have to have a man to help me the night I pull out. And I need a man like you. You're an outdoor man, hardened by wilderness travel. You're a frontiersman, a vaquero, a trail-driver. These men I lead are mostly rats that grew up in border towns--gamblers, thieves, barroom gladiators, saloon-bred gunmen; a few miners gone wrong. You can stand things that would kill any of them.

"The flight we'll have to make will be hard traveling. We'll have to leave the beaten trails and strike out through the mountains. They'll be sure to follow us, and we'll probably have to fight them off. Then there are Indians--Blackfeet and Crows; we may run into a war party of them. I knew I had to have a fighting man of the keenest type; not only a fighting man, but a man bred on the frontier. That's why I sent for Glanton. But you're a better man than he was."

Corcoran frowned his suspicion.

"Why didn't you tell me all this at first?"

"Because I wanted to try you out. I wanted to be sure you were the right man. I had to be sure. If you were stupid enough, and slow enough to be caught in such a trap as McNab and the rest would set for you, you weren't the man I wanted."

"You're takin' a lot for granted," snapped Corcoran. "How do you know I'll fall in with you and help you loot the camp and then double-cross your gang? What's to prevent me from blowin' your head off for the trick you played on me? Or spillin' the beans to Hopkins, or to McNab?"

"Half a million in gold!" answered Middleton. "If you do any of those things, you'll miss your chance to share that cache with me."

He shut the door, locked it, pushed the other door to and hung the skins over it. Taking the candle he led the way back into the outer room.

He seated himself at the table and poured whisky from a jug into two glasses.

"Well, what about it?"

Corcoran did not at once reply. His brain was still filled with blinding golden visions. His countenance darkened, became sinister as he meditated, staring into his whisky glass.

The men of the West lived by their own code. The line between the outlaw and the honest cattleman or vaquero was sometimes a hair line, too vague to always be traced with accuracy. Men's personal codes were frequently inconsistent, but rigid as iron. Corcoran would not have stolen one cow, or three cows from a squatter, but he had swept across the border to loot Mexican rancherios of hundreds of head. He would not hold up a man and take his money, nor would he murder a man in cold blood; but he felt no compunctions about killing a thief and taking the money the thief had stolen. The gold in that cache was bloodstained, the fruit of crimes to which he would have scorned to stoop. But his code of honesty did not prevent him from looting it from the thieves who had looted it in turn from honest men.

"What's my part in the game?" Corcoran asked abruptly.

Middleton grinned zestfully.

"Good! I thought you'd see it my way. No man could look at that gold and refuse a share of it! They trust me more than they do any other member of the gang. That's why I keep it here. They know--or think they know--that I couldn't slip out with it. But that's where we'll fool them.

"Your job will be just what I told McNab: you'll uphold law and order. I'll tell the boys not to pull any more holdups inside the town itself, and that'll give you a reputation. People will think you've got the gang too scared to work in close. You'll enforce laws like those against shooting up saloons, fighting on the street, and the like. And you'll catch the thieves that are still working alone. When you kill one we'll make it appear that he was a Vulture. You've put yourself solid with the people tonight, by killing those fools in the Blackfoot Chief. We'll keep up the deception.

"I don't trust Ace Brent. I believe he's secretly trying to usurp my place as chief of the gang. He's too damned smart. But I don't want you to kill him. He has too many friends in the gang. Even if they didn't suspect I put you up to it, even if it looked like a private quarrel, they'd want your scalp. I'll frame him--get somebody outside the gang to kill him, when the time comes.

"When we get ready to skip, I'll set the vigilantes and the Vultures to battling each other--how, I don't know, but I'll find a way--and we'll sneak while they're at it. Then for California--South America and the sharing of the gold!"

"The sharin' of the gold!" echoed Corcoran, his eyes lit with grim laughter.

Their hard hands met across the rough table, and the same enigmatic smile played on the lips of both men.

Chapter 5 The Wheel Begins to Turn

Corcoran stalked through the milling crowd that swarmed in the street, and headed toward the Golden Garter Dance Hall and Saloon. A man lurching through the door with the wide swing of hilarious intoxication stumbled into him and clutched at him to keep from falling to the floor.

Corcoran righted him, smiling faintly into the bearded, rubicund countenance that peered into his.

"Steve Corcoran, by thunder!" whooped the inebriated one gleefully. "Besh damn' deputy in the Territory! 'S' a honor to get picked up by Steve Corcoran! Come in and have a drink."

"You've had too many now," returned Corcoran.

"Right!" agreed the other. "I'm goin' home now, 'f I can get there. Lasht time I was a little full, I didn't make it, by a quarter of a mile! I went to sleep in a ditch across from your shack. I'd 'a' come in and slept on the floor, only I was 'fraid you'd shoot me for one of them derned Vultures!"

Men about them laughed. The intoxicated man was Joe Willoughby, a prominent merchant in Whapeton, and extremely popular for his free-hearted and open-handed ways.

"Just knock on the door next time and tell me who it is," grinned Corcoran. "You're welcome to a blanket in the sheriff's office, or a bunk in my room, any time you need it."

"Soul of gener--generoshity!" proclaimed Willoughby boisterously. "Goin' home now before the licker gets down in my legs. S'long, old pard!"

He weaved away down the street, amidst the jovial joshings of the miners, to which he retorted with bibulous good nature.

Corcoran turned again into the dance hall and brushed against another man, at whom he glanced sharply, noting the set jaw, the haggard countenance and the bloodshot eyes. This man, a young miner well known to Corcoran, pushed his way through the crowd and hurried up the street with the manner of a man who goes with a definite purpose. Corcoran hesitated, as though to follow him, then decided against it and entered the dance hall. Half the reason for a gunfighter's continued existence lay in his ability to read and analyze the expressions men wore, to correctly interpret the jut of jaw, the glitter of eye. He knew this young miner was determined on some course of action that might result in violence. But the man was not a criminal, and Corcoran never interfered in private quarrels so long as they did not threaten the public safety.

A girl was singing, in a clear, melodious voice, to the accompaniment of a jangling, banging piano. As Corcoran seated himself at a table, with his back to the wall and a clear view of the whole hall before him, she concluded her number amid a boisterous clamor of applause. Her face lit as she saw him. Coming lightly across the hall, she sat down at his table. She rested her elbows on the table, cupped her chin in her hands, and fixed her wide clear gaze on his brown face.

"Shot any Vultures today, Steve?"

He made no answer as he lifted the glass of beer brought him by a waiter.

"They must be scared of you," she continued, and something of youthful hero-worship glowed in her eyes. "There hasn't been a murder or holdup in town for the past month, since you've been here. Of course you can't be everywhere. They still kill men and rob them in the camps up the ravines, but they keep out of town.

"And that time you took the stage through to Yankton! It wasn't your fault that they held it up and got the gold on the other side of Yankton. You weren't in it, then. I wish I'd been there and seen the fight, when you fought off the men who tried to hold you up, halfway between here and Yankton."

"There wasn't any fight to it," he said impatiently, restless under praise he knew he did not deserve.

"I know; they were afraid of you. You shot at them and they ran."

Very true; it had been Middleton's idea for Corcoran to take the stage through to the next town east, and beat off a fake attempt at holdup. Corcoran had never relished the memory; whatever his faults, he had the pride of his profession; a fake gunfight was as repugnant to him as a business hoax to an honest business man.

"Everybody knows that the stage company tried to hire you away from Middleton, as a regular shotgun-guard. But you told them that your business was to protect life and property here in Whapeton."

She meditated a moment and then laughed reminiscently.

"You know, when you pulled me off of Conchita that night, I thought you were just another blustering bully like McNab. I was beginning to believe that Middleton was taking pay from the Vultures, and that his deputies were crooked. I know things that some people don't." Her eyes became shadowed as if by an unpleasant memory in which, though her companion could not know it, was limned the handsome, sinister face of Ace Brent. "Or maybe people do. Maybe they guess things, but are afraid to say anything.

"But I was mistaken about you, and since you're square, then Middleton must be, too. I guess it was just too big a job for him and his other deputies. None of them could have wiped out that gang in the Blackfoot Chief that night like you did. It wasn't your fault that Tom Deal got away that night, before he could be questioned. If he hadn't though, maybe you could have made him tell who the other Vultures were."

"I met Jack McBride comin' out of here," said Corcoran abruptly. "He looked like he was about ready to start gunnin' for somebody. Did he drink much in here?"

"Not much. I know what's the matter with him. He's been gambling too much down at the King of Diamonds. Ace Brent has been winning his money for a week. McBride's nearly broke, and I believe he thinks Brent is crooked. He came in here, drank some whisky, and let fall a remark about having a showdown with Brent."

Corcoran rose abruptly. "Reckon I better drift down towards the King of Diamonds. Somethin' may bust loose there. McBride's quick with a gun, and high tempered. Brent's deadly. Their private business is none of my affair. But if they want to fight it out, they'll have to get out where innocent people won't get hit by stray slugs."

Glory Bland watched him as his tall, erect figure swung out of the door, and there was a glow in her eyes that had never been awakened there by any other man.

Corcoran had almost reached the King of Diamonds gambling hall, when the ordinary noises of the street were split by the crash of a heavy gun. Simultaneously men came headlong out of the doors, shouting, shoving, plunging in their haste.

"McBride's killed!" bawled a hairy miner.

"No, it's Brent!" yelped another. The crowd surged and milled, craning their necks to see through the windows, yet crowding back from the door in fear of stray bullets. As Corcoran made for the door he heard a man bawl in answer to an eager question: "McBride accused Brent of usin' marked cards, and offered to prove it to the crowd. Brent said he'd kill him and pulled his gun to do it. But it snapped. I heard the hammer click. Then McBride drilled him before he could try again."

Men gave way as Corcoran pushed through the crowd. Somebody yelped: "Look out, Steve! McBride's on the warpath!"

Corcoran stepped into the gambling hall, which was deserted except for the gambler who lay dead on the floor, with a bullet-hole over his heart, and the killer who half-crouched with his back to the bar, and a smoking gun lifted in his hand.

McBride's lips were twisted hard in a snarl, and he looked like a wolf at bay.

"Get back, Corcoran," he warned. "I ain't got nothin' against you, but I ain't goin' to be murdered like a sheep."

"Who said anything about murderin' you?" demanded Corcoran impatiently.

"Oh, I know you wouldn't. But Brent's got friends. They'll never let me get away with killin' him. I believe he was a Vulture. I believe the Vultures will be after me for this. But if they get me, they've got to get me fightin'."

"Nobody's goin' to hurt you," said Corcoran tranquilly. "You better give me your gun and come along. I'll have to arrest you, but it won't amount to nothin', and you ought to know it. As soon as a miners' court can be got together, you'll be tried and acquitted. It was a plain case of self-defense. I reckon no honest folks will do any grievin' for Ace Brent."

"But if I give up my gun and go to jail," objected McBride, wavering, "I'm afraid the toughs will take me out and lynch me."

"I'm givin' you my word you won't be harmed while you're under arrest," answered Corcoran.

"That's enough for me," said McBride promptly, extending his pistol.

Corcoran took it and thrust it into his waistband. "It's damned foolishness, takin' an honest man's gun," he grunted. "But accordin' to Middleton that's the law. Give me your word that you won't skip, till you've been properly acquitted, and I won't lock you up."

"I'd rather go to jail," said McBride. "I wouldn't skip. But I'll be safer in jail, with you guardin' me, than I would be walkin' around loose for some of Brent's friends to shoot me in the back. After I've been cleared by due process of law, they won't dare to lynch me, and I ain't afraid of 'em when it comes to gunfightin', in the open."

"All right." Corcoran stooped and picked up the dead gambler's gun, and thrust it into his belt. The crowd surging about the door gave way as he led his prisoner out.

"There the skunk is!" bawled a rough voice. "He murdered Ace Brent!"

McBride turned pale with anger and glared into the crowd, but Corcoran urged him along, and the miner grinned as other voices rose: "A damned good thing, too!" "Brent was crooked!" "He was a Vulture!" bawled somebody, and for a space a tense silence held. That charge was too sinister to bring openly against even a dead man. Frightened by his own indiscretion the man who had shouted slunk away, hoping none had identified his voice.

"I've been gamblin' too much," growled McBride, as he strode along beside Corcoran. "Afraid to try to take my gold out, though, and didn't know what else to do with it. Brent won thousands of dollars worth of dust from me; poker, mostly.

"This mornin' I was talkin' to Middleton, and he showed a card he said a gambler dropped in his cabin last night. He showed me it was marked, in a way I'd never have suspected. I recognized it as one of the same brand Brent always uses, though Middleton wouldn't tell me who the gambler was. But later I learned that Brent slept off a drunk in Middleton's cabin. Damned poor business for a gambler to get drunk.

"I went to the King of Diamonds awhile ago, and started playin' poker with Brent and a couple of miners. As soon as he raked in the first pot, I called him--flashed the card I got from Middleton and started to show the boys where it was marked. Then Brent pulled his gun; it snapped, and I killed him before he could cock it again. He knew I had the goods on him. He didn't even give me time to tell where I'd gotten the card."

Corcoran made no reply. He locked McBride in the jail, called the jailer from his nearby shack and told him to furnish the prisoner with food, liquor and anything else he needed, and then hurried to his own cabin. Sitting on his bunk in the room behind the sheriff's office, he ejected the cartridge on which Brent's pistol had snapped. The cap was dented, but had not detonated the powder. Looking closely he saw faint abrasions on both the bullet and brass case. They were such as might have been made by the jaws of iron pinchers and a vise.

Securing a wire-cutter with pincher jaws, he began to work at the bullet. It slipped out with unusual ease, and the contents of the case spilled into his hand. He did not need to use a match to prove that it was not powder. He knew what the stuff was at first glance--iron filings, to give the proper weight to the cartridge from which the powder had been removed.

At that moment he heard someone enter the outer room, and recognized the firm, easy tread of Sheriff Middleton. Corcoran went into the office and Middleton turned, hung his white hat on a nail.

"McNab tells me McBride killed Ace Brent!"

"You ought to know!" Corcoran grinned. He tossed the bullet and empty case on the table, dumped the tiny pile of iron dust beside them.

"Brent spent the night with you. You got him drunk, and stole one of his cards to show to McBride. You knew how his cards were marked. You took a cartridge out of Brent's gun and put that one in place. One would be enough. You knew there'd be gunplay between him and McBride, when you showed McBride that marked card, and you wanted to be sure it was Brent who stopped lead."

"That's right," agreed Middleton. "I haven't seen you since early yesterday morning. I was going to tell you about the frame I'd ribbed, as soon as I saw you. I didn't know McBride would go after Brent as quickly as he did.

"Brent got too ambitious. He acted as if he were suspicious of us both, lately. Maybe, though, it was just jealousy as far as you were concerned. He liked Glory Bland, and she could never see him. It gouged him to see her falling for you.

"And he wanted my place as leader of the Vultures. If there was one man in the gang that could have kept us from skipping with the loot, it was Ace Brent.

"But I think I've worked it neatly. No one can accuse me of having him murdered, because McBride isn't in the gang. I have no control over him. But Brent's friends will want revenge."

"A miners' court will acquit McBride on the first ballot."

"That's true. Maybe we'd better let him get shot, trying to escape!"

"We will like hell!" rapped Corcoran. "I swore he wouldn't be harmed while he was under arrest. His part of the deal was on the level. He didn't know Brent had a blank in his gun, any more than Brent did. If Brent's friends want his scalp, let 'em go after McBride, like white men ought to, when he's in a position to defend himself."

"But after he's acquitted," argued Middleton, "they won't dare gang up on him in the street, and he'll be too sharp to give them a chance at him in the hills."

"What the hell do I care?" snarled Corcoran. "What difference does it make to me whether Brent's friends get even or not? Far as I'm concerned, he got what was comin' to him. If they ain't got the guts to give McBride an even break, I sure ain't goin' to fix it so they can murder him without riskin' their own hides. If I catch 'em sneakin' around the jail for a shot at him, I'll fill 'em full of hot lead.

"If I'd thought the miners would be crazy enough to do anything to him for killin' Brent, I'd never arrested him. They won't. They'll acquit him. Until they do, I'm responsible for him, and I've give my word. And anybody that tries to lynch him while he's in my charge better be damned sure they're quicker with a gun than I am."

"There's nobody of that nature in Whapeton," admitted Middleton with a wry smile. "All right, if you feel your personal honor is involved. But I'll have to find a way to placate Brent's friends, or they'll be accusing me of being indifferent about what happened to him."

Chapter 6 Vultures' Court

Next morning Corcoran was awakened by a wild shouting in the street. He had slept in the jail that night, not trusting Brent's friends, but there had been no attempt at violence. He jerked on his boots, and went out into the street, followed by McBride, to learn what the shouting was about.

Men milled about in the street, even at that early hour--for the sun was not yet up--surging about a man in the garb of a miner. This man was astride a horse whose coat was dark with sweat; the man was wild eyed, bareheaded, and he held his hat in his hands, holding it down for the shouting, cursing throng to see.

"Look at 'em!" he yelled. "Nuggets as big as hen eggs! I took 'em out in an hour, with a pick, diggin' in the wet sand by the creek! And there's plenty more! It's the richest strike these hills ever seen!"

"Where?" roared a hundred voices.

"Well, I got my claim staked out, all I need," said the man, "so I don't mind tellin' you. It ain't twenty miles from here, in a little canyon everybody's overlooked and passed over--Jackrabbit Gorge! The creek's buttered with dust, and the banks are crammed with pockets of nuggets!"

An exuberant whoop greeted this information, and the crowd broke up suddenly as men raced for their shacks.

"New strike," sighed McBride enviously. "The whole town will be surgin' down Jackrabbit Gorge. Wish I could go."

"Gimme your word you'll come back and stand trial, and you can go," promptly offered Corcoran. McBride stubbornly shook his head.

"No, not till I've been cleared legally. Anyway, only a handful of men will get anything. The rest will be pullin' back into their claims in Whapeton Gulch tomorrow. Hell, I've been in plenty of them rushes. Only a few ever get anything."

Colonel Hopkins and his partner Dick Bisley hurried past. Hopkins shouted: "We'll have to postpone your trial until this rush is over, Jack! We were going to hold it today, but in an hour there won't be enough men in Whapeton to impanel a jury! Sorry you can't make the rush. If we can, Dick and I will stake out a claim for you!"

"Thanks, Colonel!"

"No thanks! The camp owes you something for ridding it of that scoundrel Brent. Corcoran, we'll do the same for you, if you like."

"No, thanks," drawled Corcoran. "Minin's too hard work. I've got a gold mine right here in Whapeton that don't take so much labor!"

The men burst into laughter at this conceit, and Bisley shouted back as they hurried on: "That's right! Your salary looks like an assay from the Comstock lode! But you earn it, all right!"

Joe Willoughby came rolling by, leading a seedy-looking burro on which illy-hung pick and shovel banged against skillet and kettle. Willoughby grasped a jug in one hand, and that he had already been sampling it was proved by his wide-legged gait.

"H'ray for the new diggin's!" he whooped, brandishing the jug at Corcoran and McBride. "Git along, jackass! I'll be scoopin' out nuggets bigger'n this jug before night--if the licker don't git in my legs before I git there!"

"And if it does, he'll fall into a ravine and wake up in the mornin' with a fifty pound nugget in each hand," said McBride. "He's the luckiest son of a gun in the camp; and the best natured."

"I'm goin' and get some ham-and-eggs," said Corcoran. "You want to come and eat with me, or let Pete Daley fix your breakfast here?"

"I'll eat in the jail," decided McBride. "I want to stay in jail till I'm acquitted. Then nobody can accuse me of tryin' to beat the law in any way."

"All right." With a shout to the jailer, Corcoran swung across the road and headed for the camp's most pretentious restaurant, whose proprietor was growing rich, in spite of the terrific prices he had to pay for vegetables and food of all kinds--prices he passed on to his customers.

While Corcoran was eating, Middleton entered hurriedly, and bending over him, with a hand on his shoulder, spoke softly in his ear.

"I've just got wind that that old miner, Joe Brockman, is trying to sneak his gold out on a pack mule, under the pretense of making this rush. I don't know whether it's so or not, but some of the boys up in the hills think it is, and are planning to waylay him and kill him. If he intends getting away, he'll leave the trail to Jackrabbit Gorge a few miles out of town, and swing back toward Yankton, taking the trail over Grizzly Ridge--you know where the thickets are so close. The boys will be laying for him either on the ridge or just beyond.

"He hasn't enough dust to make it worth our while to take it. If they hold him up they'll have to kill him, and we want as few murders as possible. Vigilante sentiment is growing, in spite of the people's trust in you and me. Get on your horse and ride to Grizzly Ridge and see that the old man gets away safe. Tell the boys Middleton said to lay off. If they won't listen--

but they will. They wouldn't buck you, even without my word to back you. I'll follow the old man, and try to catch up with him before he leaves the Jackrabbit Gorge road.

"I've sent McNab up to watch the jail, just as a formality. I know McBride won't try to escape, but we mustn't be accused of carelessness."

"Let McNab be mighty careful with his shootin' irons," warned Corcoran. "No 'shot while attemptin' to escape', Middleton. I don't trust McNab. If he lays a hand on McBride, I'll kill him as sure as I'm sittin' here."

"Don't worry. McNab hated Brent. Better get going. Take the short cut through the hills to Grizzly Ridge."

"Sure." Corcoran rose and hurried out in the street which was all but deserted. Far down toward the other end of the gulch rose the dust of the rearguard of the army which was surging toward the new strike. Whapeton looked almost like a deserted town in the early morning light, foreshadowing its ultimate destiny.

Corcoran went to the corral beside the sheriff's cabin and saddled a fast horse, glancing cryptically at the powerful pack mules whose numbers were steadily increasing. He smiled grimly as he remembered Middleton telling Colonel Hopkins that pack mules were a good investment. As he led his horse out of the corral his gaze fell on a man sprawling under the trees across the road, lazily whittling. Day and night, in one way or another, the gang kept an eye on the cabin which hid the cache of their gold. Corcoran doubted if they actually suspected Middleton's intentions. But they wanted to be sure that no stranger did any snooping about.

Corcoran rode into a ravine that straggled away from the gulch, and a few minutes later he followed a narrow path to its rim, and headed through the mountains toward the spot, miles away, where a trail crossed Grizzly Ridge, a long, steep backbone, thickly timbered.

He had not left the ravine far behind him when a quick rattle of hoofs brought him around, in time to see a horse slide recklessly down a low bluff amid a shower of shale. He swore at the sight of its rider.

"Glory! What the hell?"

"Steve!" She reined up breathlessly beside him. "Go back! It's a trick! I heard Buck Gorman talking to Conchita; he's sweet on her. He's a friend of Brent's--a Vulture! She twists all his secrets out of him. Her room is next to mine, she thought I was out. I overheard them talking. Gorman said a trick had been played on you to get you out of town. He didn't say how. Said you'd go to Grizzly Ridge on a wild-goose chase. While you're gone they're going to assemble a 'miners' court,' out of the riff-raff left in town. They're going to appoint a 'judge' and 'jury,' take McBride out of jail, try him for killing Ace Brent--and hang him!"

A lurid oath ripped through Steve Corcoran's lips, and for an instant the tiger flashed into view, eyes blazing, fangs bared. Then his dark face was an inscrutable mask again. He wrenched his horse around.

"Much obliged, Glory. I'll be dustin' back into town. You circle around and come in another way. I don't want folks to know you told me."

"Neither do I!" she shuddered. "I knew Ace Brent was a Vulture. He boasted of it to me, once when he was drunk. But I never dared tell anyone. He told me what he'd do to me if I did. I'm glad he's dead. I didn't know Gorman was a Vulture, but I might have guessed it. He was Brent's closest friend. If they ever find out I told you--"

"They won't," Corcoran assured her. It was natural for a girl to fear such black-hearted rogues as the Vultures, but the thought of them actually harming her never entered his mind. He came from a country where not even the worst of scoundrels would ever dream of hurting a woman.

He drove his horse at a reckless gallop back the way he had come, but not all the way. Before he reached the Gulch he swung wide of the ravine he had followed out, and plunged into another, that would bring him into the Gulch at the end of town where the jail stood. As he rode down it he heard a deep, awesome roar he recognized--the roar of the man-pack, hunting its own kind.

A band of men surged up the dusty street, roaring, cursing. One man waved a rope. Pale faces of bartenders, store clerks and dance hall girls peered timidly out of doorways as the unsavory mob roared past. Corcoran knew them, by sight or reputation: plug-uglies, barroom loafers, skulkers--many were Vultures, as he knew; others were riff-raff, ready for any sort of deviltry that required neither courage nor intelligence--the scum that gathers in any mining camp.

Dismounting, Corcoran glided through the straggling trees that grew behind the jail, and heard McNab challenge the mob.

"What do you want?"

"We aim to try your prisoner!" shouted the leader. "We come in the due process of law. We've app'inted a jedge and paneled a jury, and we demands that you hand over the prisoner to be tried in miners' court, accordin' to legal precedent!"

"How do I know you're representative of the camp?" parried McNab.

"'Cause we're the only body of men in camp right now!" yelled someone, and this was greeted by a roar of laughter.

"We come empowered with the proper authority--" began the leader, and broke off suddenly: "Grab him, boys!"

There was the sound of a brief scuffle, McNab swore vigorously, and the leader's voice rose triumphantly: "Let go of him, boys, but don't give him his gun. McNab, you ought to know better'n to try to oppose legal procedure, and you a upholder of law and order!"

Again a roar of sardonic laughter, and McNab growled: "All right; go ahead with the trial. But you do it over my protests. I don't believe this is a representative assembly."

"Yes, it is," averred the leader, and then his voice thickened with blood-lust. "Now, Daley, gimme that key and bring out the prisoner."

The mob surged toward the door of the jail, and at that instant Corcoran stepped around the corner of the cabin and leaped up on the low porch it boasted. There was a hissing intake of breath. Men halted suddenly, digging their heels against the pressure behind them. The surging line wavered backward, leaving two figures isolated--McNab, scowling, disarmed, and a hairy giant whose huge belly was girt with a broad belt bristling with gun butts and knife hilts. He held a noose in one hand, and his bearded lips gaped as he glared at the unexpected apparition.

For a breathless instant Corcoran did not speak. He did not look at McBride's pallid countenance peering through the barred door behind him. He stood facing the mob, his head slightly bent, a somber, immobile figure, sinister with menace.

"Well," he said finally, softly, "what's holdin' up the baile?"

The leader blustered feebly.

"We come here to try a murderer!"

Corcoran lifted his head and the man involuntarily recoiled at the lethal glitter of his eyes.

"Who's your judge?" the Texan inquired softly.

"We appointed Jake Bissett, there," spoke up a man, pointing at the uncomfortable giant on the porch.

"So you're goin' to hold a miners' court," murmured Corcoran. "With a judge and jury picked out of the dives and honky-tonks--scum and dirt of the gutter!" And suddenly uncontrollable fury flamed in his eyes. Bissett, sensing his intention, bellowed in ox-like alarm and grabbed frantically at a gun. His fingers had scarcely touched the checkered butt when smoke and flame roared from Corcoran's right hip. Bissett pitched backward off the porch as if he had been struck by a hammer; the rope tangled about his limbs as he fell, and he lay in the dust that slowly turned crimson, his hairy fingers twitching spasmodically.

Corcoran faced the mob, livid under his sun-burnt bronze. His eyes were coals of blue hell's-fire. There was a gun in each hand, and from the right-hand muzzle a wisp of blue smoke drifted lazily upward.

"I declare this court adjourned!" he roared. "The judge is done impeached, and the jury's discharged! I'll give you thirty seconds to clear the courtroom!"

He was one man against nearly a hundred, but he was a grey wolf facing a pack of yapping jackals. Each man knew that if the mob surged on him, they would drag him down at last; but each man knew what an awful toll would first be paid, and each man feared that he himself would be one of those to pay that toll.

They hesitated, stumbled back--gave way suddenly and scattered in all directions. Some backed away, some shamelessly turned their backs and fled. With a snarl Corcoran thrust his guns back in their scabbards and turned toward the door where McBride stood, grasping the bars.

"I thought I was a goner that time, Corcoran," he gasped. The Texan pulled the door open, and pushed McBride's pistol into his hand.

"There's a horse tied behind the jail," said Corcoran. "Get on it and dust out of here. I'll take the full responsibility. If you stay here they'll burn down the jail, or shoot you through the window. You can make it out of town while they're scattered. I'll explain to Middleton and Hopkins. In a month or so, if you want to, come back and stand trial, as a matter of formality. Things will be cleaned up around here by then."

McBride needed no urging. The grisly fate he had just escaped had shaken his nerve. Shaking Corcoran's hand passionately, he ran stumblingly through the trees to the horse Corcoran had left there. A few moments later he was fogging it out of the Gulch.

McNab came up, scowling and grumbling.

"You had no authority to let him go. I tried to stop the mob--"

Corcoran wheeled and faced him, making no attempt to conceal his hatred.

"You did like hell! Don't pull that stuff with me, McNab. You was in on this, and so was Middleton. You put up a bluff of talk, so afterwards you could tell Colonel Hopkins and the others that you tried to stop the lynchin' and was overpowered. I saw the scrap you put up when they grabbed you! Hell! You're a rotten actor."

"You can't talk to me like that!" roared McNab.

The old tigerish light flickered in the blue eyes. Corcoran did not exactly move, yet he seemed to sink into a half-crouch, as a cougar does for the killing spring.

"If you don't like my style, McNab," he said softly, thickly, "you're more'n welcome to open the baile whenever you get ready!"

For an instant they faced each other, McNab black browed and scowling, Corcoran's thin lips almost smiling, but blue fire lighting his eyes. Then with a grunt McNab turned and slouched away, his shaggy head swaying from side to side like that of a surly bull.

Chapter 7 A Vulture's Wings Are Clipped

Middleton pulled up his horse suddenly as Corcoran reined out of the bushes. One glance showed the sheriff that Corcoran's mood was far from placid. They were amidst a grove of alders, perhaps a mile from the Gulch.

"Why, hello, Corcoran," began Middleton, concealing his surprise. "I caught up with Brockman. It was just a wild rumor. He didn't have any gold. That--"

"Drop it!" snapped Corcoran. "I know why you sent me off on that wild-goose chase--same reason you pulled out of town. To give Brent's friends a chance to get even with McBride. If I hadn't turned around and dusted back into Whapeton, McBride would be kickin' his life out at the end of a rope, right now."

"You came back--?"

"Yeah! And now Jake Bissett's in Hell instead of Jack McBride, and McBride's dusted out--on a horse I gave him. I told you I gave him my word he wouldn't be lynched."

"You killed Bissett?"

"Deader'n hell!"

"He was a Vulture," muttered Middleton, but he did not seem displeased. "Brent, Bissett--the more Vultures die, the easier it will be for us to get away when we go. That's one reason I had Brent killed. But you should have let them hang McBride. Of course I framed this affair; I had to do something to satisfy Brent's friends. Otherwise they might have gotten suspicious.

"If they suspicioned I had anything to do with having him killed, or thought I wasn't anxious to punish the man who killed him, they'd make trouble for me. I can't have a split in the gang now. And even I can't protect you from Brent's friends, after this."

"Have I ever asked you, or any man, for protection?" The quick jealous pride of the gunfighter vibrated in his voice.

"Breckman, Red Bill, Curly, and now Bissett. You've killed too many Vultures. I made them think the killing of the first three was a mistake, all around. Bissett wasn't very popular. But they won't forgive you for stopping them from hanging the man who killed Ace Brent. They won't attack you openly, of course. But you'll have to watch every step you make. They'll kill you if they can, and I won't be able to prevent them."

"If I'd tell 'em just how Ace Brent died, you'd be in the same boat," said Corcoran bitingly. "Of course, I won't. Our final getaway depends on you keepin' their confidence--as well as the confidence of the honest folks. This last killin' ought to put me, and therefore you, ace-high with Hopkins and his crowd."

"They're still talking vigilante. I encourage it. It's coming anyway. Murders in the outlying camps are driving men to a frenzy of fear and rage, even though such crimes have ceased in Whapeton. Better to fall in line with the inevitable and twist it to a man's own ends, than to try to oppose it. If you can keep Brent's friends from killing you for a few more weeks, we'll be ready to jump. Look out for Buck Gorman. He's the most dangerous man in the gang. He was Brent's friend, and he has his own friends--all dangerous men. Don't kill him unless you have to."

"I'll take care of myself," answered Corcoran somberly. "I looked for Gorman in the mob, but he wasn't there. Too smart. But he's the man behind the mob. Bissett was just a stupid ox; Gorman planned it--or rather, I reckon he helped you plan it."

"I'm wondering how you found out about it," said Middleton. "You wouldn't have come back unless somebody told you. Who was it?"

"None of your business," growled Corcoran. It did not occur to him that Glory Bland would be in any danger from Middleton, even if the sheriff knew about her part in the affair, but he did not relish being questioned, and did not feel obliged to answer anybody's queries.

"That new gold strike sure came in mighty handy for you and Gorman," he said. "Did you frame that, too?"

Middleton nodded.

"Of course. That was one of my men who poses as a miner. He had a hatful of nuggets from the cache. He served his purpose and joined the men who hide up there in the hills. The mob of miners will be back tomorrow, tired and mad and disgusted, and when they hear about what happened, they'll recognize the handiwork of the Vultures; at least some of them will. But they won't connect me with it in any way. Now we'll ride back to town. Things are breaking our way, in spite of your foolish interference with the mob. But let Gorman alone. You can't afford to make any more enemies in the gang."

Buck Gorman leaned on the bar in the Golden Eagle and expressed his opinion of Steve Corcoran in no uncertain terms. The crowd listened sympathetically, for, almost to a man, they were the ruffians and riff-raff of the camp.

"The dog pretends to be a deputy!" roared Gorman, whose bloodshot eyes and damp tangled hair attested to the amount of liquor he had drunk. "But he kills an appointed judge, breaks up a court and drives away the jury--yes, and releases the prisoner, a man charged with murder!"

It was the day after the fake gold strike, and the disillusioned miners were drowning their chagrin in the saloons. But few honest miners were in the Golden Eagle.

"Colonel Hopkins and other prominent citizens held an investigation," said someone. "They declared that evidence showed Corcoran to have been justified--denounced the court as a mob, acquitted Corcoran of killing Bissett, and then went ahead and acquitted McBride for killing Brent, even though he wasn't there."

Gorman snarled like a cat, and reached for his whisky glass. His hand did not twitch or quiver, his movements were more catlike than ever. The whisky had inflamed his mind, illumined his brain with a white-hot certainty that was akin to insanity, but it had not affected his nerves or any part of his muscular system. He was more deadly drunk than sober.

"I was Brent's best friend!" he roared. "I was Bissett's friend."

"They say Bissett was a Vulture," whispered a voice. Gorman lifted his tawny head and glared about the room as a lion might glare.

"Who says he was a Vulture? Why don't these slanderers accuse a living man? It's always a dead man they accuse! Well, what if he was? He was my friend! Maybe that makes me a Vulture!"

No one laughed or spoke as his flaming gaze swept the room, but each man, as those blazing eyes rested on him in turn, felt the chill breath of Death blowing upon him.

"Bissett a Vulture!" he said, wild enough with drink and fury to commit any folly, as well as any atrocity. He did not heed the eyes fixed on him, some in fear, a few in intense interest. "Who knows who the Vultures are? Who knows who, or what anybody really is? Who really knows anything about this man Corcoran, for instance? I could tell--"

A light step on the threshold brought him about as Corcoran loomed in the door. Gorman froze, snarling, lips writhed back, a tawny-maned incarnation of hate and menace.

"I heard you was makin' a talk about me down here, Gorman," said Corcoran. His face was bleak and emotionless as that of a stone image, but his eyes burned with murderous purpose.

Gorman snarled wordlessly.

"I looked for you in the mob," said Corcoran, tonelessly, his voice as soft and without emphasis as the even strokes of a feather. It seemed almost as if his voice were a thing apart from him; his lips murmuring while all the rest of his being was tense with concentration on the man before him.

"You wasn't there. You sent your coyotes, but you didn't have the guts to come yourself, and--"

The dart of Gorman's hand to his gun was like the blurring stroke of a snake's head, but no eye could follow Corcoran's hand. His gun smashed before anyone knew he had reached for it. Like an echo came the roar of Gorman's shot. But the bullet ploughed splinteringly into the floor, from a hand that was already death-stricken and falling. Gorman pitched over and lay still, the swinging lamp glinting on his upturned spurs and the blue steel of the smoking gun which lay by his hand.

Chapter 8 The Coming of the Vigilantes

Colonel Hopkins looked absently at the liquor in his glass, stirred restlessly, and said abruptly: "Middleton, I might as well come to the point. My friends and I have organized a vigilante committee, just as we should have done months ago. Now, wait a minute. Don't take this as a criticism of your methods. You've done wonders in the last month, ever since you brought Steve Corcoran in here. Not a holdup in the town, not a killing--that is, not a murder, and only a few shootings among the honest citizens.

"Added to that the ridding of the camp of such scoundrels as Jake Bissett and Buck Gorman. They were both undoubtedly members of the Vultures. I wish Corcoran hadn't killed Gorman just when he did, though. The man was drunk, and about to make some reckless disclosures about the gang. At least that's what a friend of mine thinks, who was in the Golden Eagle that night. But anyway it couldn't be helped.

"No, we're not criticizing you at all. But obviously you can't stop the murders and robberies that are going on up and down the Gulch, all the time. And you can't stop the outlaws from holding up the stage regularly.

"So that's where we come in. We have sifted the camp, carefully, over a period of months, until we have fifty men we can trust absolutely. It's taken a long time, because we've had to be sure of our men. We didn't want to take in a man who might be a spy for the Vultures. But at last we know where we stand. We're not sure just who is a Vulture, but we know who isn't, in as far as our organization is concerned.

"We can work together, John. We have no intention of interfering within your jurisdiction, or trying to take the law out of your hands. We demand a free hand outside the camp; inside the limits of Whapeton we are willing to act under your orders, or at least according to your advice. Of course we will work in absolute secrecy until we have proof enough to strike."

"You must remember, Colonel," reminded Middleton, "that all along I've admitted the impossibility of my breaking up the Vultures with the limited means at my disposal. I've never opposed a vigilante committee. All I've demanded was that when it was formed, it should be composed of honest men, and be free of any element which might seek to twist its purpose into the wrong channels."

"That's true. I didn't expect any opposition from you, and I can assure you that we'll always work hand-in-hand with you and your deputies." He hesitated, as if over something unpleasant, and then said: "John, are you sure of all your deputies?"

Middleton's head jerked up and he shot a startled glance at the Colonel, as if the latter had surprised him by putting into words a thought that had already occurred to him.

"Why do you ask?" he parried.

"Well," Hopkins was embarrassed, "I don't know--maybe I'm prejudiced--but--well, damn it, to put it bluntly, I've sometimes wondered about Bill McNab!"

Middleton filled the glasses again before he answered.

"Colonel, I never accuse a man without iron-clad evidence. I'm not always satisfied with McNab's actions, but it may merely be the man's nature. He's a surly brute. But he has his virtues. I'll tell you frankly, the reason I haven't discharged him is that I'm not sure of him. That probably sounds ambiguous."

"Not at all. I appreciate your position. You have as much as said you suspect him of double-dealing, and are keeping him on your force so you can watch him. Your wits are not dull, John. Frankly--and this will probably surprise you--until a month ago some of the men were beginning to whisper some queer things about you--queer suspicions, that is. But your bringing Corcoran in showed us that you were on the level. You'd have never brought him in if you'd been taking pay from the Vultures!"

Middleton halted with his glass at his lips.

"Great heavens!" he ejaculated. "Did they suspect me of that?"

"Just a fool idea some of the men had," Hopkins assured him. "Of course I never gave it a thought. The men who thought it are ashamed now. The killing of Bissett, of Gorman, of the men in the Blackfoot Chief, show that Corcoran's on the level. And of course, he's merely taking his orders from you. All those men were Vultures, of course. It's a pity Tom Deal got away before we could question him." He rose to go.

"McNab was guarding Deal," said Middleton, and his tone implied more than his words said.

Hopkins shot him a startled glance.

"By heaven, so he was! But he was really wounded--I saw the bullet hole in his arm, where Deal shot him in making his getaway."

"That's true." Middleton rose and reached for his hat. "I'll walk along with you. I want to find Corcoran and tell him what you've just told me."

"It's been a week since he killed Gorman," mused Hopkins. "I've been expecting Gorman's Vulture friends to try to get him, any time."

"So have I!" answered Middleton, with a grimness which his companion missed.

Chapter 9 The Vultures Swoop

Down the gulch lights blazed; the windows of cabins were yellow squares in the night, and beyond them the velvet sky reflected the lurid heart of the camp. The intermittent breeze brought faint strains of music and the other noises of hilarity. But up the gulch, where a clump of trees straggled near an unlighted cabin, the darkness of the moonless night was a mask that the faint stars did not illuminate.

Figures moved in the deep shadows of the trees, voices whispered, their furtive tones mingling with the rustling of the wind through the leaves.

"We ain't close enough. We ought to lay alongside his cabin and blast him as he goes in."

A second voice joined the first, muttering like a bodyless voice in a conclave of ghosts.

"We've gone all over that. I tell you this is the best way. Get him off guard. You're sure Middleton was playin' cards at the King of Diamonds?"

Another voice answered: "He'll be there till daylight, likely."

"He'll be awful mad," whispered the first speaker.

"Let him. He can't afford to do anything about it. Listen! Somebody's comin' up the road!"

They crouched down in the bushes, merging with the blacker shadows. They were so far from the cabin, and it was so dark, that the approaching figure was only a dim blur in the gloom.

"It's him!" a voice hissed fiercely, as the blur merged with the bulkier shadow that was the cabin.

In the stillness a door rasped across a sill. A yellow light sprang up, streaming through the door, blocking out a small window high up in the wall. The man inside did not cross the lighted doorway, and the window was too high to see through into the cabin.

The light went out after a few minutes.

"Come on!" The three men rose and went stealthily toward the cabin. Their bare feet made no sound, for they had discarded their boots. Coats too had been discarded, any garment that might swing loosely and rustle, or catch on projections. Cocked guns were in their hands, they could have been no more wary had they been approaching the lair of a lion. And each man's heart pounded suffocatingly, for the prey they stalked was far more dangerous than any lion.

When one spoke it was so low that his companions hardly heard him with their ears a matter of inches from his bearded lips.

"We'll take our places like we planned, Joel. You'll go to the door and call him, like we told you. He knows Middleton trusts you. He don't know you'd be helpin' Gorman's friends. He'll recognize your voice, and he won't suspect nothin'. When he comes to the door and opens it, step back into the shadows and fall flat. We'll do the rest from where we'll be layin'."

His voice shook slightly as he spoke, and the other man shuddered; his face was a pallid oval in the darkness.

"I'll do it, but I bet he kills some of us. I bet he kills me, anyway. I must have been crazy when I said I'd help you fellows."

"You can't back out now!" hissed the other. They stole forward, their guns advanced, their hearts in their mouths. Then the foremost man caught at the arms of his companions.

"Wait! Look there! He's left the door open!"

The open doorway was a blacker shadow in the shadow of the wall.

"He knows we're after him!" There was a catch of hysteria in the babbling whisper. "It's a trap!"

"Don't be a fool! How could he know? He's asleep. I hear him snorin'. We won't wake him. We'll step into the cabin and let him have it! We'll have enough light from the window to locate the bunk, and we'll rake it with lead before he can move. He'll wake up in Hell. Come on, and for God's sake, don't make no noise!"

The last advice was unnecessary. Each man, as he set his bare foot down, felt as if he were setting it into the lair of a diamond-backed rattler.

As they glided, one after another, across the threshold, they made less noise than the wind blowing through the black branches. They crouched by the door, straining their eyes across the room, whence came the rhythmic snoring. Enough light sifted through the small window to show them a vague outline that was a bunk, with a shapeless mass upon it.

A man caught his breath in a short, uncontrollable gasp. Then the cabin was shaken by a thunderous volley, three guns roaring together. Lead swept the bunk in a devastating storm, thudding into flesh and bone, smacking into wood. A wild cry broke in a gagging gasp. Limbs thrashed wildly and a heavy body tumbled to the floor. From the darkness on the floor beside the bunk welled up hideous sounds, choking gurgles and a convulsive flopping and thumping. The men crouching near the door poured lead blindly at the sounds. There was fear and panic in the haste and number of their shots. They did not cease jerking their triggers until their guns were empty, and the noises on the floor had ceased.

"Out of here, quick!" gasped one.

"No! Here's the table, and a candle on it. I felt it in the dark. I've got to know that he's dead before I leave this cabin. I've got to see him lyin' dead if I'm goin' to sleep easy. We've got plenty of time to get away. Folks down the gulch must have heard the shots, but it'll take time for them to get here. No danger. I'm goin' to light the candle--"

There was a rasping sound, and a yellow light sprang up, etching three staring, bearded faces. Wisps of blue smoke blurred the light as the candle wick ignited from the fumbling match, but the men saw a huddled shape crumpled near the bunk, from which streams of dark crimson radiated in every direction.

"Ahhh!"

They whirled at the sound of running footsteps.

"Oh, God!" shrieked one of the men, falling to his knees, his hands lifted to shut out a terrible sight. The other ruffians staggered with the shock of what they saw. They stood gaping, livid, helpless, empty guns sagging in their hands.

For in the doorway, glaring in dangerous amazement, with a gun in each hand, stood the man whose lifeless body they thought lay over there by the splintered bunk!

"Drop them guns!" Corcoran rasped. They clattered on the floor as the hands of their owner mechanically reached skyward. The man on the floor staggered up, his hands empty; he retched, shaken by the nausea of fear.

"Joel Miller!" said Corcoran evenly; his surprise was passed, as he realized what had happened. "Didn't know you run with Gorman's crowd. Reckon Middleton'll be some surprised, too."

"You're a devil!" gasped Miller. "You can't be killed! We killed you--heard you roll off your bunk and die on the floor, in the dark. We kept shooting after we knew you were dead. But you're alive!"

"You didn't shoot me," grunted Corcoran. "You shot a man you thought was me. I was comin' up the road when I heard the shots. You killed Joe Willoughby! He was drunk and I reckon he staggered in here and fell in my bunk, like he's done before."

The men went whiter yet under their bushy beards, with rage and chagrin and fear.

"Willoughby!" babbled Miller. "The camp will never stand for this! Let us go, Corcoran! Hopkins and his crowd will hang us! It'll mean the end of the Vultures! Your end, too, Corcoran! If they hang us, we'll talk first! They'll find out that you're one of us!"

"In that case," muttered Corcoran, his eyes narrowing, "I'd better kill the three of you. That's the sensible solution. You killed Willoughby, tryin' to get me; I kill you, in self-defense."

"Don't do it, Corcoran!" screamed Miller, frantic with terror.

"Shut up, you dog," growled one of the other men, glaring balefully at their captor. "Corcoran wouldn't shoot down unarmed men."

"No, I wouldn't," said Corcoran. "Not unless you made some kind of a break. I'm peculiar that way, which I see is a handicap in this country. But it's the way I was raised, and I can't get over it. No, I ain't goin' to beef you cold, though you've just tried to get me that way.

"But I'll be damned if I'm goin' to let you sneak off, to come back here and try it again the minute you get your nerve bucked up. I'd about as soon be hanged by the vigilantes as shot in the back by a passle of rats like you-all. Vultures, hell! You ain't even got the guts to be good buzzards.

"I'm goin' to take you down the gulch and throw you in jail. It'll be up to Middleton to decide what to do with you. He'll probably work out some scheme that'll swindle everybody except himself; but I warn you--one yap about the Vultures to anybody, and I'll forget my raisin' and send you to Hell with your belts empty and your boots on."

The noise in the King of Diamonds was hushed suddenly as a man rushed in and bawled: "The Vultures have murdered Joe Willoughby! Steve Corcoran caught three of 'em, and has just locked 'em up! This time we've got some live Vultures to work on!"

A roar answered him and the gambling hall emptied itself as men rushed yelling into the street. John Middleton laid down his hand of cards, donned his white hat with a hand that was steady as a rock, and strode after them.

Already a crowd was surging and roaring around the jail. The miners were lashed into a murderous frenzy and were restrained from shattering the door and dragging forth the cowering prisoners only by the presence of Corcoran, who faced them on the jail-porch. McNab, Richardson and Stark were there, also. McNab was pale under his whiskers, and Stark seemed nervous and ill at ease, but Richardson, as always, was cold as ice.

"Hang 'em!" roared the mob. "Let us have 'em, Steve! You've done your part! This camp's put up with enough! Let us have 'em!"

Middleton climbed up on the porch, and was greeted by loud cheers, but his efforts to quiet the throng proved futile. Somebody brandished a rope with a noose in it. Resentment, long smoldering, was bursting into flame, fanned by hysterical fear and hate. The mob had no wish to harm either Corcoran or Middleton--did not intend to harm them. But they were determined to drag out the prisoners and string them up.

Colonel Hopkins forced his way through the crowd, mounted the step, and waved his hands until he obtained a certain amount of silence.

"Listen, men!" he roared, "this is the beginning of a new era for Whapeton! This camp has been terrorized long enough. We're beginning a rule of law and order, right now! But don't spoil it at the very beginning! These men shall hang--I swear it! But let's do it legally, and with the sanction of law. Another thing: if you hang them out of hand, we'll never learn who their companions and leaders are.

"Tomorrow, I promise you, a court of inquiry will sit on their case. They'll be questioned and forced to reveal the men above and behind them. This camp is going to be cleaned up! Let's clean it up lawfully and in order!"

"Colonel's right!" bawled a bearded giant. "Ain't no use to hang the little rats till we find out who's the big 'uns!"

A roar of approbation rose as the temper of the mob changed. It began to break up, as the men scattered to hasten back to the bars and indulge in their passion to discuss the new development.

Hopkins shook Corcoran's hand heartily.

"Congratulations, sir! I've seen poor Joe's body. A terrible sight. The fiends fairly shot the poor fellow to ribbons. Middleton, I told you the vigilantes wouldn't usurp your authority in Whapeton. I keep my word. We'll leave these murderers in your jail, guarded by your deputies. Tomorrow the vigilante court will sit in session, and I hope we'll come to the bottom of this filthy mess."

And so saying he strode off, followed by a dozen or so steely-eyed men whom Middleton knew formed the nucleus of the Colonel's organization.

When they were out of hearing, Middleton stepped to the door and spoke quickly to the prisoners: "Keep your mouths shut. You fools have gotten us all in a jam, but I'll snake you out of it, somehow." To McNab he spoke: "Watch the jail. Don't let anybody come near it. Corcoran and I have got to talk this over." Lowering his voice so the prisoners could not hear, he added: "If anybody does come, that you can't order off, and these fools start shooting off their heads, close their mouths with lead."

Corcoran followed Middleton into the shadow of the gulch wall. Out of earshot of the nearest cabin, Middleton turned. "Just what happened?"

"Gorman's friends tried to get me. They killed Joe Willoughby by mistake. I hauled them in. That's all."

"That's not all," muttered Middleton. "There'll be hell to pay if they come to trial. Miller's yellow. He'll talk, sure. I've been afraid Gorman's friends would try to kill you--wondering how it would work out. It's worked out just about the worst way it possibly could. You should either have killed them or let them go. Yet I appreciate your attitude. You have scruples against cold-blooded murder; and if you'd turned them loose, they'd have been back potting at you the next night."

"I couldn't have turned them loose if I'd wanted to. Men had heard the shots; they came runnin'; found me there holdin' a gun on those devils, and Joe Willoughby's body layin' on the floor, shot to pieces."

"I know. But we can't keep members of our own gang in jail, and we can't hand them over to the vigilantes. I've got to delay that trial, somehow. If I were ready, we'd jump tonight, and to hell with it. But I'm not ready. After all, perhaps it's as well this happened. It may give us our chance to skip. We're one jump ahead of the vigilantes and the gang, too. We know the vigilantes have formed and are ready to strike, and the rest of the gang don't. I've told no one but you what Hopkins told me early in the evening.

"Listen, Corcoran, we've got to move tomorrow night! I wanted to pull one last job, the biggest of all--the looting of Hopkins and Bisley's private cache. I believe I could have done it, in spite of all their guards and precautions. But we'll have to let that slide. I'll persuade Hopkins to put off the trial another day. I think I know how. Tomorrow night I'll have the vigilantes and the Vultures at each others' throats! We'll load the mules and pull out while they're fighting. Once let us get a good start, and they're welcome to chase us if they want to.

"I'm going to find Hopkins now. You get back to the jail. If McNab talks to Miller or the others, be sure you listen to what's said."

Middleton found Hopkins in the Golden Eagle Saloon.

"I've come to ask a favor of you, Colonel," he began directly. "I want you, if it's possible, to put off the investigating trial until day after tomorrow. I've been talking to Joel Miller. He's cracking. If I can get him away from Barlow and Letcher, and talk to him, I believe he'll tell me everything I want to know. It'll be better to get his confession, signed and sworn to, before we bring the matter into court. Before a judge, with all eyes on him, and his friends in the crowd, he might stiffen and refuse to incriminate anyone. I don't believe the others will talk. But talking to me, alone, I believe Miller will spill the whole works. But it's going to take time to wear him down. I believe that by tomorrow night I'll have a full confession from him."

"That would make our work a great deal easier," admitted Hopkins.

"And another thing: these men ought to be represented by proper counsel. You'll prosecute them, of course; and the only other lawyer within reach is Judge Bixby, at Yankton. We're doing this thing in as close accordance to regular legal procedure as possible. Therefore we can't refuse the prisoner the right to be defended by an attorney. I've sent a man after Bixby. It will be late tomorrow evening before he can get back with the Judge, even if he has no trouble in locating him.

"Considering all these things, I feel it would be better to postpone the trial until we can get Bixby here, and until I can get Miller's confession."

"What will the camp think?"

"Most of them are men of reason. The few hotheads who might want to take matters into their own hands can't do any harm."

"All right," agreed Hopkins. "After all, they're your prisoners, since your deputy captured them, and the attempted murder of an officer of the law is one of the charges for which they'll have to stand trial. We'll set the trial for day after tomorrow. Meanwhile, work on Joel Miller. If we have his signed confession, naming the leaders of the gang, it will expedite matters a great deal at the trial."

Chapter 10 The Blood on the Gold

Whapeton learned of the postponement of the trial and reacted in various ways. The air was surcharged with tension. Little work was done that day. Men gathering in heated, gesticulating groups, crowded in at the bars. Voices rose in hot altercation, fists pounded on the bars. Unfamiliar faces were observed, men who were seldom seen in the gulch--miners from claims in distant canyons, or more sinister figures from the hills, whose business was less obvious.

Lines of cleavage were noticed. Here and there clumps of men gathered, keeping to themselves and talking in low tones. In certain dives the ruffian element of the camp gathered, and these saloons were shunned by honest men. But still the great mass of the people milled about, suspicious and uncertain. The status of too many men was still in doubt. Certain men were known to be above suspicion, certain others were known to be ruffians and criminals; but between these two extremes there were possibilities for all shades of distrust and suspicion.

So most men wandered aimlessly to and fro, with their weapons ready to their hands, glancing at their fellows out of the corners of their eyes.

To the surprise of all, Steve Corcoran was noticed at several bars, drinking heavily, though the liquor did not seem to affect him in any way.

The men in the jail were suffering from nerves. Somehow the word had gotten out that the vigilante organization was a reality, and that they were to be tried before a vigilante court. Joel Miller, hysterical, accused Middleton of double-crossing his men.

"Shut up, you fool!" snarled the sheriff, showing the strain under which he was laboring merely by the irascible edge on his voice. "Haven't you seen your friends drifting by the jail? I've gathered the men in from the hills. They're all here. Forty-odd men, every Vulture in the gang, is here in Whapeton.

"Now, get this: and McNab, listen closely: we'll stage the break just before daylight, when everybody is asleep. Just before dawn is the best time, because that's about the only time in the whole twenty-four hours that the camp isn't going full blast.

"Some of the boys, with masks on, will swoop down and overpower you deputies. There'll be no shots fired until they've gotten the prisoners and started off. Then start yelling and shooting after them--in the air, of course. That'll bring everybody on the run to hear how you were overpowered by a gang of masked riders.

"Miller, you and Letcher and Barlow will put up a fight--"

"Why?"

"Why, you fool, to make it look like it's a mob that's capturing you, instead of friends rescuing you. That'll explain why none of the deputies are hurt. Men wanting to lynch you wouldn't want to hurt the officers. You'll yell and scream blue murder, and the men in the masks will drag you out, tie you and throw you across horses and ride off. Somebody is bound to see them riding away. It'll look like a capture, not a rescue."

Bearded lips gaped in admiring grins at the strategy.

"All right. Don't make a botch of it. There'll be hell to pay, but I'll convince Hopkins that it was the work of a mob, and we'll search the hills to find your bodies hanging from trees. We won't find any bodies, naturally, but maybe we'll contrive to find a mass of ashes where a log hut had been burned to the ground, and a few hats and belt buckles easy to identify."

Miller shivered at the implication and stared at Middleton with painful intensity.

"Middleton, you ain't planning to have us put out of the way? These men in masks are our friends, not vigilantes you've put up to this?"

"Don't be a fool!" flared Middleton disgustedly. "Do you think the gang would stand for anything like that, even if I was imbecile enough to try it? You'll recognize your friends when they come.

"Miller, I want your name at the foot of a confession I've drawn up, implicating somebody as the leader of the Vultures. There's no use trying to deny you and the others are members of the gang. Hopkins knows you are; instead of trying to play innocent, you'll divert suspicion to someone outside the gang. I haven't filled in the name of the leader, but Dick Lennox is as good as anybody. He's a gambler, has few friends, and never would work with us. I'll write his name in your 'confession' as chief of the Vultures, and Corcoran will kill him 'for resisting arrest,' before he has time to prove that it's a lie. Then, before anybody has time to get suspicious, we'll make our last big haul--the raid on the Hopkins and Bisley cache!--and blow! Be ready to jump, when the gang swoops in.

"Miller, put your signature to this paper. Read it first if you want to. I'll fill in the blanks I left for the 'chief's' name later. Where's Corcoran?"

"I saw him in the Golden Eagle an hour ago," growled McNab. "He's drinkin' like a fish."

"Damnation!" Middleton's mask slipped a bit despite himself, then he regained his easy control. "Well, it doesn't matter. We won't need him tonight. Better for him not to be here when the jail break's made. Folks would think it was funny if he didn't kill somebody. I'll drop back later in the night."

Even a man of steel nerves feels the strain of waiting for a crisis. Corcoran was in this case no exception. Middleton's mind was so occupied in planning, scheming and conniving that he had little time for the strain to corrode his willpower. But Corcoran had nothing to occupy his attention until the moment came for the jump.

He began to drink, almost without realizing it. His veins seemed on fire, his external senses abnormally alert. Like most men of his breed he was high-strung, his nervous system poised on a hair-trigger balance, in spite of his mask of unemotional coolness. He lived on, and for, violent action. Action kept his mind from turning inward; it kept his brain clear and his hand steady; failing action, he fell back on whisky. Liquor artificially stimulated him to that pitch which his temperament required. It was not fear that made his nerves thrum so intolerably. It was the strain of waiting inertly, the realization of the stakes for which they played. Inaction maddened him. Thought of the gold cached in the cave behind John Middleton's cabin made Corcoran's lips dry, set a nerve to pounding maddeningly in his temples.

So he drank, and drank, and drank again, as the long day wore on.

The noise from the bar was a blurred medley in the back room of the Golden Garter. Glory Bland stared uneasily across the table at her companion. Corcoran's blue eyes seemed lit by dancing fires. Tiny beads of perspiration shone on his dark face. His tongue was not thick; he spoke lucidly and without exaggeration; he had not stumbled when he entered. Nevertheless he was drunk, though to what extent the girl did not guess.

"I never saw you this way before, Steve," she said reproachfully.

"I've never had a hand in a game like this before," he answered, the wild flame flickering bluely in his eyes. He reached across the table and caught her white wrist with an unconscious strength that made her wince. "Glory, I'm pullin' out of here tonight. I want you to go with me!"

"You're leaving Whapeton? Tonight?"

"Yes. For good. Go with me! This joint ain't fit for you. I don't know how you got into this game, and I don't give a damn. But you're different from these other dance hall girls. I'm takin' you with me. I'll make a queen out of you! I'll cover you with diamonds!"

She laughed nervously.

"You're drunker than I thought. I know you've been getting a big salary, but--"

"Salary?" His laugh of contempt startled her. "I'll throw my salary into the street for the beggars to fight over. Once I told that fool Hopkins that I had a gold mine right here in Whapeton. I told him no lie. I'm rich!"

"What do you mean?" She was slightly pale, frightened by his vehemence.

His fingers unconsciously tightened on her wrist and his eyes gleamed with the hard arrogance of possession and desire.

"You're mine, anyway," he muttered. "I'll kill any man that looks at you. But you're in love with me. I know it. Any fool could see it. I can trust you. You wouldn't dare betray me. I'll tell you. I wouldn't take you along without tellin' you the truth. Tonight Middleton and I are goin' over the mountains with a million dollars' worth of gold tied on pack mules!"

He did not see the growing light of incredulous horror in her eyes.

"A million in gold! It'd make a devil out of a saint! Middleton thinks he'll kill me when we get away safe, and grab the whole load. He's a fool. It'll be him that dies, when the time comes. I've planned while he planned. I didn't ever intend to split the loot with him. I wouldn't be a thief for less than a million."

"Middleton--" she choked.

"Yeah! He's chief of the Vultures, and I'm his right-hand man. If it hadn't been for me, the camp would have caught on long ago."

"But you upheld the law," she panted, as if clutching at straws. "You killed murderers--saved McBride from the mob."

"I killed men who tried to kill me. I shot as square with the camp as I could, without goin' against my own interests. That business of McBride has nothin' to do with it. I'd given him my word. That's all behind us now. Tonight, while the vigilantes and the Vultures kill each other, we'll vamose! And you'll go with me!"

With a cry of loathing she wrenched her hand away, and sprang up, her eyes blazing.

"Oh!" It was a cry of bitter disillusionment. "I thought you were straight--honest! I worshiped you because I thought you were honorable. So many men were dishonest and bestial--I idolized you! And you've just been pretending--playing a part! Betraying the people who trusted you!" The poignant anguish of her enlightenment choked her, then galvanized her with another possibility.

"I suppose you've been pretending with me, too!" she cried wildly. "If you haven't been straight with the camp, you couldn't have been straight with me, either! You've made a fool of me! Laughed at me and shamed me! And now you boast of it in my teeth!"

"Glory!" He was on his feet, groping for her, stunned and bewildered by her grief and rage. She sprang back from him.

"Don't touch me! Don't look at me! Oh, I hate the very sight of you!"

And turning, with an hysterical sob, she ran from the room. He stood swaying slightly, staring stupidly after her. Then fumbling with his hat, he stalked out, moving like an automaton. His thoughts were a confused maelstrom, whirling until he was giddy. All at once the liquor seethed madly in his brain, dulling his perceptions, even his recollections of what had just passed. He had drunk more than he realized.

Not long after dark had settled over Whapeton, a low call from the darkness brought Colonel Hopkins to the door of his cabin, gun in hand.

"Who is it?" he demanded suspiciously.

"It's Middleton. Let me in, quick!"

The sheriff entered, and Hopkins, shutting the door, stared at him in surprise. Middleton showed more agitation than the Colonel had ever seen him display. His face was pale and drawn. A great actor was lost to the world when John Middleton took the dark road of outlawry.

"Colonel, I don't know what to say. I've been a blind fool. I feel that the lives of murdered men are hung about my neck for all Eternity! All through my blindness and stupidity!"

"What do you mean, John?" ejaculated Colonel Hopkins.

"Colonel, Miller talked at last. He just finished telling me the whole dirty business. I have his confession, written as he dictated."

"He named the chief of the Vultures?" exclaimed Hopkins eagerly.

"He did!" answered Middleton grimly, producing a paper and unfolding it. Joel Miller's unmistakable signature sprawled at the bottom. "Here is the name of the leader, dictated by Miller to me!"

"Good God!" whispered Hopkins. "Bill McNab!"

"Yes! My deputy! The man I trusted next to Corcoran. What a fool--what a blind fool I've been. Even when his actions seemed peculiar, even when you voiced your suspicions of him, I could not bring myself to believe it. But it's all clear now. No wonder the gang always knew my plans as soon as I knew them myself! No wonder my deputies--before Corcoran came--were never able to kill or capture any Vultures. No wonder, for instance, that Tom Deal 'escaped,' before we could question him. That bullet hole in McNab's arm, supposedly made by Deal--Miller told me McNab got that in a quarrel with one of his own gang. It came in handy to help pull the wool over my eyes.

"Colonel Hopkins, I'll turn in my resignation tomorrow. I recommend Corcoran as my successor. I shall be glad to serve as deputy under him."

"Nonsense, John!" Hopkins laid his hand sympathetically on Middleton's shoulder. "It's not your fault. You've played a man's part all the way through. Forget that talk about resigning. Whapeton doesn't need a new sheriff; you just need some new deputies. Just now we've got some planning to do. Where is McNab?"

"At the jail, guarding the prisoners. I couldn't remove him without exciting his suspicion. Of course he doesn't dream that Miller has talked. And I learned something else. They plan a jailbreak shortly after midnight."

"We might have expected that!"

"Yes. A band of masked men will approach the jail, pretend to overpower the guards--yes, Stark and Richardson are Vultures, too--and release the prisoners. Now this is my plan. Take fifty men and conceal them in the trees near the jail. You can plant some on one side, some on the other. Corcoran and I will be with you, of course. When the bandits come, we can kill or capture them all at one swoop. We have the advantage of knowing their plans, without their knowing we know them."

"That's a good plan, John!" warmly endorsed Hopkins. "You should have been a general. I'll gather the men at once. Of course, we must use the utmost secrecy."

"Of course. If we work it right, we'll bag prisoners, deputies and rescuers with one stroke. We'll break the back of the Vultures!"

"John, don't ever talk resignation to me again!" exclaimed Hopkins, grabbing his hat and buckling on his gun-belt. "A man like you ought to be in the Senate. Go get Corcoran. I'll gather my men and we'll be in our places before midnight. McNab and the others in the jail won't hear a sound."

"Good! Corcoran and I will join you before the Vultures reach the jail."

Leaving Hopkins' cabin, Middleton hurried to the bar of the King of Diamonds. As he drank, a rough-looking individual moved casually up beside him. Middleton bent his head over his whisky glass and spoke, hardly moving his lips. None could have heard him a yard away.

"I've just talked to Hopkins. The vigilantes are afraid of a jail break. They're going to take the prisoners out just before daylight and hang them out of hand. That talk about legal proceedings was just a bluff. Get all the boys, go to the jail and get the prisoners out within a half-hour after midnight. Wear your masks, but let there be no shooting or yelling. I'll tell McNab our plan's been changed. Go silently. Leave your horses at least a quarter of a mile down the gulch and sneak up to the jail on foot, so you won't make so much noise. Corcoran and I will be hiding in the brush to give you a hand in case anything goes wrong."

The other man had not looked toward Middleton; he did not look now. Emptying his glass, he strolled deliberately toward the door. No casual onlooker could have known that any words had passed between them.

When Glory Bland ran from the backroom of the Golden Garter, her soul was in an emotional turmoil that almost amounted to insanity. The shock of her brutal disillusionment vied with passionate shame of her own gullibility and an unreasoning anger. Out of this seething cauldron grew a blind desire to hurt the man who had unwittingly hurt her. Smarting vanity had its part, too, for with characteristic and illogical feminine conceit, she believed that he had practiced an elaborate deception in order to fool her into falling in love with him--or rather with the man she thought he was. If he was false with men, he must be false with women, too. That thought sent her into hysterical fury, blind to all except a desire for revenge. She was a primitive, elemental young animal, like most of her profession of that age and place; her emotions were powerful and easily stirred, her passions stormy. Love could change quickly to hate.

She reached an instant decision. She would find Hopkins and tell him everything Corcoran had told her! In that instant she desired nothing so much as the ruin of the man she had loved.

She ran down the crowded street, ignoring men who pawed at her and called after her. She hardly saw the people who stared after her. She supposed that Hopkins would be at the jail, helping guard the prisoners, and she directed her steps thither. As she ran up on the porch Bill McNab confronted her with a leer, and laid a hand on her arm, laughing when she jerked away.

"Come to see me, Glory? Or are you lookin' for Corcoran?"

She struck his hand away. His words, and the insinuating guffaws of his companions were sparks enough to touch off the explosives seething in her.

"You fool! You're being sold out, and don't know it!"

The leer vanished.

"What do you mean?" he snarled.

"I mean that your boss is fixing to skip out with all the gold you thieves have grabbed!" she blurted, heedless of consequences, in her emotional storm, indeed scarcely aware of what she was saying. "He and Corcoran are going to leave you holding the sack, tonight!"

And not seeing the man she was looking for, she eluded McNab's grasp, jumped down from the porch and darted away in the darkness.

The deputies stared at each other, and the prisoners, having heard everything, began to clamor to be turned out.

"Shut up!" snarled McNab. "She may be lyin'. Might have had a quarrel with Corcoran and took this fool way to get even with him. We can't afford to take no chances. We've got to be sure we know what we're doin' before we move either way. We can't afford to let you out now, on the chance that she might be lyin'. But we'll give you weapons to defend yourselves.

"Here, take these rifles and hide 'em under the bunks. Pete Daley, you stay here and keep folks shooed away from the jail till we get back. Richardson, you and Stark come with me! We'll have a showdown with Middleton right now!"

When Glory left the jail she headed for Hopkins' cabin. But she had not gone far when a reaction shook her. She was like one waking from a nightmare, or a dope-jag. She was still sickened by the discovery of Corcoran's duplicity in regard to the people of the camp, but she began to apply reason to her suspicions of his motives in regard to herself. She began to realize that she had acted illogically. If Corcoran's attitude toward her was not sincere, he certainly would not have asked her to leave the camp with him. At the expense of her vanity she was forced to admit that his attentions to her had not been necessary in his game of duping the camp. That was something apart; his own private business; it must be so. She had suspected him of trifling with her affections, but she had to admit that she had no proof that he had ever paid the slightest attention to any other woman in Whapeton. No; whatever his motives or actions in general, his feeling toward her must be sincere and real.

With a shock she remembered her present errand, her reckless words to McNab. Despair seized her, in which she realized that she loved Steve Corcoran in spite of all he might be. Chill fear seized her that McNab and his friends would kill her lover. Her unreasoning fury died out, gave way to frantic terror.

Turning she ran swiftly down the gulch toward Corcoran's cabin. She was hardly aware of it when she passed through the blazing heart of the camp. Lights and bearded faces were like a nightmarish blur, in which nothing was real but the icy terror in her heart.

She did not realize it when the clusters of cabins fell behind her. The patter of her slippered feet in the road terrified her, and the black shadows under the trees seemed pregnant with menace. Ahead of her she saw Corcoran's cabin at last, a light streaming through the open door. She burst into the office-room, panting--and was confronted by Middleton who wheeled with a gun in his hand.

"What the devil are you doing here?" He spoke without friendliness, though he returned the gun to its scabbard.

"Where's Corcoran?" she panted. Fear took hold of her as she faced the man she now knew was the monster behind the grisly crimes that had made a reign of terror over Whapeton Gulch. But fear for Corcoran overshadowed her own terror.

"I don't know. I looked for him through the bars a short time ago, and didn't find him. I'm expecting him here any minute. What do you want with him?"

"That's none of your business," she flared.

"It might be." He came toward her, and the mask had fallen from his dark, handsome face. It looked wolfish.

"You were a fool to come here. You pry into things that don't concern you. You know too much. You talk too much. Don't think I'm not wise to you! I know more about you than you suspect."

A chill fear froze her. Her heart seemed to be turning to ice. Middleton was like a stranger to her, a terrible stranger. The mask was off, and the evil spirit of the man was reflected in his dark, sinister face. His eyes burned her like actual coals.

"I didn't pry into secrets," she whispered with dry lips. "I didn't ask any questions. I never before suspected you were the chief of the Vultures--"

The expression of his face told her she had made an awful mistake.

"So you know that!" His voice was soft, almost a whisper, but murder stood stark and naked in his flaming eyes. "I didn't know that. I was talking about something else. Conchita told me it was you who told Corcoran about the plan to lynch McBride. I wouldn't have killed you for that, though it interfered with my plans. But you know too much. After tonight it wouldn't matter. But tonight's not over yet--"

"Oh!" she moaned, staring with dilated eyes as the big pistol slid from its scabbard in a dull gleam of blue steel. She could not move, she could not cry out. She could only cower dumbly until the crash of the shot knocked her to the floor.

As Middleton stood above her, the smoking gun in his hand, he heard a stirring in the room behind him. He quickly upset the long table, so it could hide the body of the girl, and turned, just as the door opened. Corcoran came from the back room, blinking, a gun in his hand. It was evident that he had just awakened from a drunken sleep, but his hands did not shake, his pantherish tread was sure as ever, and his eyes were neither dull nor bloodshot.

Nevertheless Middleton swore.

"Corcoran, are you crazy?"

"You shot?"

"I shot at a snake that crawled across the floor. You must have been mad, to soak up liquor today, of all days!"

"I'm all right," muttered Corcoran, shoving his gun back in its scabbard.

"Well, come on. I've got the mules in the clump of trees next to my cabin. Nobody will see us load them. Nobody will see us go. We'll go up the ravine beyond my cabin, as we planned. There's nobody watching my cabin tonight. All the Vultures are down in the camp, waiting for the signal to move. I'm hoping none will escape the vigilantes, and that most of the vigilantes themselves are killed in the fight that's sure to come. Come on! We've got thirty mules to load, and that job will take us from now until midnight, at least. We won't pull out until we hear the guns on the other side of the camp."

"Listen!"

It was footsteps, approaching the cabin almost at a run. Both men wheeled and stood motionless as McNab loomed in the door. He lurched into the room, followed by Richardson and Stark. Instantly the air was supercharged with suspicion, hate, tension. Silence held for a tick of time.

"You fools!" snarled Middleton. "What are you doing away from the jail?"

"We came to talk to you," said McNab. "We've heard that you and Corcoran planned to skip with the gold."

Never was Middleton's superb self-control more evident. Though the shock of that blunt thunderbolt must have been terrific, he showed no emotion that might not have been showed by any honest man, falsely accused.

"Are you utterly mad?" he ejaculated, not in a rage, but as if amazement had submerged whatever anger he might have felt at the charge.

McNab shifted his great bulk uneasily, not sure of his ground. Corcoran was not looking at him, but at Richardson, in whose cold eyes a lethal glitter was growing. More quickly than Middleton, Corcoran sensed the inevitable struggle in which this situation must culminate.

"I'm just sayin' what we heard. Maybe it's so, maybe it ain't. If it ain't, there's no harm done," said McNab slowly. "On the chance that it was so, I sent word for the boys not to wait till midnight. They're goin' to the jail within the next half-hour and take Miller and the rest out."

Another breathless silence followed that statement. Middleton did not bother to reply. His eyes began to smolder. Without moving, he yet seemed to crouch, to gather himself for a spring. He had realized what Corcoran had already sensed; that this situation was not to be passed over by words, that a climax of violence was inevitable.

Richardson knew this; Stark seemed merely puzzled. McNab, if he had any thoughts, concealed the fact.

"Say you was intendin' to skip," he said, "this might be a good chance, while the boys was takin' Miller and them off up into the hills. I don't know. I ain't accusin' you. I'm just askin' you to clear yourself. You can do it easy. Just come back to the jail with us and help get the boys out."

Middleton's answer was what Richardson, instinctive man-killer, had sensed it would be. He whipped out a gun in a blur of speed. And even as it cleared leather, Richardson's gun was out. But Corcoran had not taken his eyes off the cold-eyed gunman, and his draw was the quicker by a lightning-flicker. Quick as was Middleton, both the other guns spoke before his, like a double detonation. Corcoran's slug blasted Richardson's brains just in time to spoil his shot at Middleton. But the bullet grazed Middleton so close that it caused him to miss McNab with his first shot.

McNab's gun was out and Stark was a split second behind him. Middleton's second shot and McNab's first crashed almost together, but already Corcoran's guns had sent lead ripping through the giant's flesh. His ball merely flicked Middleton's hair in passing, and the chief's slug smashed full into his brawny breast. Middleton fired again and yet again as the giant was falling. Stark was down, dying on the floor, having pulled trigger blindly as he fell, until the gun was empty.

Middleton stared wildly about him, through the floating blue fog of smoke that veiled the room. In that fleeting instant, as he glimpsed Corcoran's image-like face, he felt that only in such a setting as this did the Texan appear fitted. Like a somber figure of Fate he moved implacably against a background of blood and slaughter.

"God!" gasped Middleton. "That was the quickest, bloodiest fight I was ever in!" Even as he talked he was jamming cartridges into his empty gun chambers.

"We've got no time to lose now! I don't know how much McNab told the gang of his suspicions. He must not have told them much, or some of them would have come with him. Anyway, their first move will be to liberate the prisoners. I have an idea they'll go through with that just as we planned, even when McNab doesn't return to lead them. They won't come looking for him, or come after us, until they turn Miller and the others loose.

"It just means the fight will come within the half-hour instead of at midnight. The vigilantes will be there by that time. They're probably lying in ambush already. Come on! We've got to sling gold on those mules like devils. We may have to leave some of it; we'll know when the fight's started, by the sound of the guns! One thing, nobody will come up here to investigate the shooting. All attention is focused on the jail!"

Corcoran followed him out of the cabin, then turned back with a muttered: "Left a bottle of whisky in that back room."

"Well, hurry and get it and come on!" Middleton broke into a run toward his cabin, and Corcoran re-entered the smoke-veiled room. He did not glance at the crumpled bodies which lay on the crimson-stained floor, staring glassily up at him. With a stride he reached the back room, groped in his bunk until he found what he wanted, and then strode again toward the outer door, the bottle in his hand.

The sound of a low moan brought him whirling about, a gun in his left hand. Startled, he stared at the figures on the floor. He knew none of them had moaned; all three were past moaning. Yet his ears had not deceived him.

His narrowed eyes swept the cabin suspiciously, and focused on a thin trickle of crimson that stole from under the upset table as it lay on its side near the wall. None of the corpses lay near it.

He pulled aside the table and halted as if shot through the heart, his breath catching in a convulsive gasp. An instant later he was kneeling beside Glory Bland, cradling her golden head in his arm. His hand, as he brought the whisky bottle to her lips, shook queerly.

Her magnificent eyes lifted toward him, glazed with pain. But by some miracle the delirium faded, and she knew him in her last few moments of life.

"Who did this?" he choked. Her white throat was laced by a tiny trickle of crimson from her lips.

"Middleton--" she whispered. "Steve, oh, Steve--I tried--" And with the whisper uncompleted she went limp in his arms. Her golden head lolled back; she seemed like a child, a child just fallen asleep. Dazedly he eased her to the floor.

Corcoran's brain was clear of liquor as he left the cabin, but he staggered like a drunken man. The monstrous, incredible thing that had happened left him stunned, hardly able to credit his own senses. It had never occurred to him that Middleton would kill a woman, that any white man would. Corcoran lived by his own code, and it was wild and rough and hard, violent and incongruous, but it included the conviction that womankind was sacred, immune from the violence that attended the lives of men. This code was as much a vital, living element of the life of the Southwestern frontier as was personal honor, and the resentment of insult. Without pompousness, without pretentiousness, without any of the tawdry glitter and sham of a false chivalry, the people of Corcoran's breed practiced this code in their daily lives. To Corcoran, as to his people, a woman's life and body were inviolate. It had never occurred to him that that code would, or could be violated, or that there could be any other kind.

Cold rage swept the daze from his mind and left him crammed to the brim with murder. His feelings toward Glory Bland had approached the normal love experienced by the average man as closely as was possible for one of his iron nature. But if she had been a stranger, or even a person he had disliked, he would have killed Middleton for outraging a code he had considered absolute.

He entered Middleton's cabin with the soft stride of a stalking panther. Middleton was bringing bulging buckskin sacks from the cave, heaping them on a table in the main room. He staggered with their weight. Already the table was almost covered.

"Get busy!" he exclaimed. Then he halted short, at the blaze in Corcoran's eyes. The fat sacks spilled from his arms, thudding on the floor.

"You killed Glory Bland!" It was almost a whisper from the Texan's livid lips.

"Yes." Middleton's voice was even. He did not ask how Corcoran knew, he did not seek to justify himself. He knew the time for argument was past. He did not think of his plans, or of the gold on the table, or that still back there in the cave. A man standing face to face with Eternity sees only the naked elements of life and death.

"Draw!" A catamount might have spat the challenge, eyes flaming, teeth flashing.

Middleton's hand was a streak to his gun butt. Even in that flash he knew he was beaten--heard Corcoran's gun roar just as he pulled trigger. He swayed back, falling, and in a blind gust of passion Corcoran emptied both guns into him as he crumpled.

For a long moment that seemed ticking into Eternity the killer stood over his victim, a somber, brooding figure that might have been carved from the iron night of the Fates. Off toward the other end of the camp other guns burst forth suddenly, in salvo after thundering salvo. The fight that was plotted to mask the flight of the Vulture chief had begun. But the figure which stood above the dead man in the lonely cabin did not seem to hear.

Corcoran looked down at his victim, vaguely finding it strange, after all, that all those bloody schemes and terrible ambitions should end like that, in a puddle of oozing blood on a cabin floor. He lifted his head to stare somberly at the bulging sacks on the table. Revulsion gagged him.

A sack had split, spilling a golden stream that glittered evilly in the candlelight. His eyes were no longer blinded by the yellow sheen. For the first time he saw the blood on that gold, it was black with blood; the blood of innocent men; the blood of a woman. The mere thought of touching it nauseated him, made him feel as if the slime that had covered John Middleton's soul would befoul him. Sickly he realized that some of Middleton's guilt was on his own head. He had not pulled the trigger that ripped a woman's life from her body; but he had worked hand-in-glove with the man destined to be her murderer--Corcoran shuddered and a clammy sweat broke out upon his flesh.

Down the gulch the firing had ceased, faint yells came to him, freighted with victory and triumph. Many men must be shouting at once, for the sound to carry so far. He knew what it portended; the Vultures had walked into the trap laid for them by the man they trusted as a leader. Since the firing had ceased, it meant the whole band were either dead or captives. Whapeton's reign of terror had ended.

But he must stir. There would be prisoners, eager to talk. Their speech would weave a noose about his neck.

He did not glance again at the gold, gleaming there where the honest people of Whapeton would find it. Striding from the cabin he swung on one of the horses that stood saddled and ready among the trees. The lights of the camp, the roar of the distant voices fell away behind him, and before him lay what wild destiny he could not guess. But the night was full of haunting shadows, and within him grew a strange pain, like a revelation; perhaps it was his soul, at last awakening.

Contents

WHILE SMOKE ROLLED

By Robert E. Howard

"The War of 1812 might have had a very different ending if Sir Wilmot Pembroke had succeeded in his efforts to organize the Western Indians into one vast confederacy to hurl against the American frontier; just why he did fail is as great a mystery as is the nature of the accident which forced his companions to carry him back to Canada on a stretcher."
--Wilkinson's "History of the Northwest."

Wolf Mountain, Texas.
March 10, 1879
Mister WN. Wilkinson.
Chicago, Illinoy.
Dear Sir:

The schoolmarm down to Coon Creek was reading the above passage to me out of yore history book which you writ. It ain't no mystery. It's all explained in this here letter which I'm sending you which has been sticking in the family Bible along with the birth records for years. It was writ by my grandpap. Please send it back when you've read it, and oblige.

Yores respeckfully.
Pike Bearfield, Esquire.

* * * *

Aboard the keelboat Pirut Queen.
On the Missoury.
September, 1814.
Mister Peter Bearfield.
Nashville, Tennessee.

Dear Sir:

Well, pap, I hope you air satisfied, perswading me to stay out here on the Missoury and skin bufflers and fight musketeers, whilst everybody else in the family is having big doings and enjoying theirselves. When I think about Bill and John and Joel marching around with Gen'ral Hickory Jackson, and wearing them gorgeous unerforms, and fighting in all them fine battles yore having back there I could dang near bawl. I ain't going to be put on no more jest because I'm the youngest. Soon's I git back to Saint Louis I'm going to throw up my job and head for Tennessee, and the Missoury Fur Company can go to hell. I ain't going to spend all my life working for a living whilst my wuthless brothers has all the fun, by golly, I ain't. And if you tries to oppress me any more, I'll go and enlist up North and git to be a Yankee; you can see from this how desprut I be, so you better consider.

Anyway, I jest been through a experience up beyond Owl River which has soured me on the whole dern fur trade. I reckon you'll say what the hell has he been doing up the river this time of year, there ain't no furs up there in the summer. Well, it was all on account of Big Nose, the Minnetaree chief, and I git sick at my stummick right now every time I see a Minnetaree.

You know the way the guvment takes Injun chiefs East and shows 'em the cities and forts and armies and things. The idea being that the chief will git so scairt when he sees how strong the white man is, that when he gits home he won't never go on the war-path no more. So he comes home and tells the tribe about what he seen, and they accuse him of being a liar and say he's been bought off by the white folks; so he gits mad and goes out and sculps the first white man he meets jest to demonstrate his independence. But it's a good theery, anyway.

So they taken Big Nose to Memphis and would of took him all the way to Washington, only they was scairt they'd run into a battle somewheres on the way and the cannon would scare Big Nose into a decline. So they brung him back to Saint Charles and left him for the company to git him back to his village on Knife River. So Joshua Humphrey, one of the clerks, he put a crew of twenty men and four hunters onto the Pirut Queen, and loaded Big Nose on, and we started. The other three hunters was all American too, and the boatmen was Frenchies from down the Mississippi.

I wisht you could of saw Big Nose. He had on a plug hat they give him, and a blue swaller-tailed coat with brass buttons, and a big red sash and broadcloth britches--only he'd cut the seat out of 'em like a Injun always does; and the boots they give him hurt his flat feet, so he wore 'em tied around his neck. He was the most pecooliar-looking critter I ever laid eyes onto, and I shuddered to think what'd happen when the Sioux first ketched sight of him. Big Nose shuddered too, and more'n I did, because the Sioux hated him anyhow, and the Tetons had swore to kiver a drum with his hide.

But all the way up the Lower River he was like a hawg in clover, because the Omahas and Osages and Iowas would come down to the bank and look at him, clap their hands over their open mouths to show how astonished and admireful they was. He strutted and swelled all over the boat. But the further away from the Platte we got the more his feathers drooped; and one day a Injun rode up on the bluffs and looked at us as we went past, and he was a Sioux. Big Nose had a chill and we had to revive him with about a quart of company rum, and it plumb broke my heart to see all that good licker going to waste down a Injun's gullet. When Big Nose come to, he shed his white man's duds and got into his regular outfit--which was mostly a big red blanket that looked like a prairie fire by sunset. I told Joshua he better throw the blanket overboard, because it was knowed all up and down the river, and any Sioux would recognize it at a glance. But Joshua said if we threw it overboard we'd have to throw Big Nose overboard too, because he thought it was big medicine. Anyway, he said, they warn't no use trying to keep the Sioux from knowing we was taking Big Nose home. They knowed it already and would take him away from us if they could. Joshua said he aimed to use diplomacy to save Big Nose's sculp. I didn't like the sound of that, because I notice when somebody I'm working for uses diplomacy it generally means I got to risk my neck and he gits the credit. Jest like you, pap, when you git to working and figgering, like you say, the way it always comes around you do the figgering and I do the working.

The further north we got, the closter Big Nose stayed in the cabin which ain't big enough to swing a cat in; but Big Nose didn't want to swing no cat, and every time he come on deck he seen swarms of Sioux all over the bluffs jest fixing for to descent on him. Joshua said it was hallucernations, but I said it would be delirium trimmings purty soon if that jug warn't took away from him.

We made purty good time, ten to twenty miles a day, except when we had winds agen us, or had to haul the boat along on the cordelle--which is a big line that the Frenchies gits out and pulls on, in case you don't know. Towing a twenty-ton keelboat in water up to yore neck ain't no joke.

Every day we expected trouble with the Sioux, but we got past the mouth of the Owl River all right, and Joshua said he guessed the Sioux knowed better'n to try any monkey business with him. And that very day a Yankton on a piebald hoss hailed us from the bluffs, and told us they was a hundred Tetons laying in ambush for us amongst the willers along the next p'int of land. We'd have to go around it on the cordelle; and whilst the boatmen was tugging and hauling in water up to their waists, the Sioux aimed to jump us. The Yankton said the Tetons didn't have nothing personal agen us white men, and warn't aiming to do us no harm--outside of maybe cutting our throats for a joke--but you oughta herd what he said they was going to do to Big Nose. It war plumb scandalous.

Big Nose ducked down into the cabin and started having another chill; and the Frenchies got scairt and would of turnt the boat around and headed for Saint Charles if we'd let 'em. Us hunters wanted Joshua to put us ashore and let us circle the p'int from inland and come onto the Sioux from behind. We could do a sight of damage to 'em before they knowed we was onto 'em. But Joshua said not even four American hunters could lick a hundred Sioux, and he furthermore said shet up and let him think. So he sot down on a kag and thunk for a spell, and then he says to me: "Ain't Fat Bear's village out acrost yonder about five mile?"

I said yes, and he said: "Well, look, you put on Big Nose's blanket and git on the Yankton's hoss and head for the village. The Sioux'll think we've throwed Big Nose out to root for hisself; and whilst they're chasin' you the boat can git away up the river with Big Nose."

"I don't suppose it matters what happens to me!" I says bitterly.

"Oh," says he, "Fat Bear is yore friend and wunst you git in his village he won't let the Sioux git you. You'll have a good start before they can see you, on account of the bluffs there, and you ought to be able to beat 'em into the village."

"I suppose it ain't occurred to you at all that they'll shott arrers at me all the way," I says.

"You know a Sioux cain't shoot as good from a runnin' hoss as a Comanche can," he reassured me. "You jest keep three or four hundred yards ahead of 'em, and I bet they won't hit you hardly any at all."

"Well, why don't you do it, then?" I demanded.

At this Joshua bust into tears. "To think that you should turn agen me after all I've did for you!" he wept--though what he ever done for me outside of trying to skin me out of my wages I dunno. "After I taken you off'n a Natchez raft and persuaded the company to give you a job at a princely salary, you does this to me! A body'd think you didn't give a dern about my personal safety! My pore old grandpap used to say: 'Bewar' of a Southerner like you would a hawk! He'll eat yore vittles and drink yore licker and then stick you with a butcher knife jest to see you kick!' When I thinks--"

"Aw, hesh up," I says in disgust. "I'll play Injun for you. I'll put on the blanket and stick feathers in my hair, but I'll be derned if I'll cut the seat out a my britches."

"It'd make it look realer," he argued, wiping his eyes on the fringe of my hunting shirt.

"Shet up!" I yelled with passion. "They is a limit to everything!"

"Oh, well, all right," says he, "if you got to be temperamental. You'll have the blanket on over yore pants, anyway."

So we went into the cabin to git the blanket, and would you believe me, that derned Injun didn't want to lemme have it, even when his fool life was at stake. He thought it was a medicine blanket, and the average Injun would ruther lose his life than his medicine. In fack, he give us a tussle for it, and they is no telling how long it would of went on if he hadn't accidentally banged his head agen a empty rum bottle I happened to have in my hand at the time. It war plumb disgusting. He also bit me severely in the hind laig, whilst I was setting on him and pulling the feathers out of his hair--which jest goes to show how much gratitude a Injun has got. But Joshua said the company had contracted to deliver him to Hidatsa, and we was going to do it if we had to kill him.

Joshua give the Yankton a hatchet and a blanket, and three shoots of powder for his hoss--which was a awful price--but the Yankton knowed we had to have it and gouged us for all it was wuth. So I put on the red blanket, and stuck the feathers in my hair, and got on the hoss, and started up a gully for the top of the bluffs. Joshua yelled: "If you git to the village, stay there till we come back down the river. We'll pick you up then. I'd be doin' this myself, but it wouldn't be right for me to leave the boat. T'wouldn't be fair to the company money to replace it, and--"

"Aw, go to hell!" I begged, and kicked the piebald in the ribs and headed for Fat Bear's village.

When I got up on the bluffs, I could see the p'int; and the Sioux seen me and was fooled jest like Joshua said, because they come b'iling out of the willers and piled onto their ponies and lit out after me. Their hosses was better'n mine, jest as I suspected, but I had a good start; and I was still ahead of 'em when we topped a low ridge and got within sight of Fat Bear's village--which was, so far as I know, the only Arikara village south of Grand River. I kept expectin' a arrer in my back because they was within range now, and their howls was enough to freeze a mortal's blood; but purty soon I realized that they aimed to take me alive. They thought I was Big Nose, and they detested him so thorough a arrer through the back was too good for him. So I believed I had a good chance of making it after all, because I seen the piebald was going to last longer'n the Tetons thought he would.

I warn't far from the village now, and I seen that the tops of the lodges was kivered with Injuns watching the race. Then a trade-musket cracked, and the ball whistled so clost it stang my ear, and all to wunst I remembered that Fat Bear didn't like Big Nose no better'n the Sioux did. I could see him up on his lodge taking aim at me again, and the Sioux was right behind me. I was in a hell of a pickle. If I taken the blanket off and let him see who I was, the Sioux would see I warn't Big Nose, too, and fill me full of arrers; and if I kept the blanket on he'd keep on shooting at me with his cussed gun.

Well, I'd ruther be shot at by one Arikara than a hundred Sioux, so all I could do was hope he'd miss. And he did, too; that is he missed me, but his slug taken a notch out of the piebald's ear, and the critter r'ared up and throwed me over his head; he didn't have no saddle nor bridle, jest a hackamore. The Sioux howled with glee and their chief, old Bitin' Hoss, he was ahead of the others; and he rode in and grabbed me by the neck as I riz.

I'd lost my rifle in the fall, but I hit Bitin' Hoss betwixt the eyes with my fist so hard I knocked him off'n his hoss and I bet he rolled fifteen foot before he stopped. I grabbed for his hoss, but the critter bolted, so I shucked that blanket and pulled for the village on foot. The Sioux was so surprized to see Big Nose turn into a white man they forgot to shoot at me till I had run more'n a hundred yards; and then when they did let drive, all the arrers missed but one. It hit me right where you kicked Old Man Montgomery last winter and I will have their heart's blood for it if it's the last thing I do. You jest wait; the Sioux nation will regret shooting a Bearfield behind his back. They come for me lickety-split but I had too good a start; they warn't a hoss in Dakota could of ketched me under a quarter of a mile.

The Arikaras was surprized too, and some of 'em fell off their tipis and nearly broke their necks. They was too stunned to open the gate to the stockade, so I opened it myself--hit it with my shoulder and knocked it clean off'n the rawhide hinges and fell inside on top of it. The Sioux was almost on top of me, with their arrers drawed back, but now they sot their hosses back onto their haunches and held their fire. If they'd come in after me it would of meant a fight with the Arikaras. I half expected 'em to come in anyway, because the Sioux ain't no ways scairt of the Arikaras, but in a minute I seen why they didn't.

Fat Bear had come down off of his lodge, and I riz up and says: "Hao!"

"Hao!" says he, but he didn't say it very enthusiastic. He's a fat-bellied Injun with a broad, good-natured face; and outside of being the biggest thief on the Missoury, he's a good friend of the white men--especially me, because I wunst taken him away from the Cheyennes when they was going to burn him alive.

Then I seen about a hundred strange braves in the crowd, and they was Crows. I recognized their chief, old Spotted Hawk, and I knowed why the Sioux didn't come in after me in spite of the Arikaras. That was why Fat Bear was a chief, too. A long time ago he made friends with Spotted Hawk, and when the Sioux or anybody crowded him too clost, the Crows would come in and help him. Them Crows air scrappers and no mistake.

"This is plumb gaudy!" I says. "Git yore braves together and us and the Crows will go out and run them fool Tetons clean into the Missoury, by golly."

"No, no, no!" says he. He's hung around the trading posts till he can talk English nigh as good as me. "There's a truce between us! Big powwow tonight!"

Well, the Sioux knowed by now how they'd been fooled; but they also knowed the Pirut Queen would be past the p'int and outa their reach before they could git back to the river; so they camped outside, and Bitin' Hoss hollered over the stockade: "There is bad flesh in my brother's village! Send it forth that we may cleanse it with fire!"

Fat Bear bust into a sweat and says: "That means they want to bum you! Why did you have to come here, jest at this time?"

"Well," I says in a huff, "air you goin' to hand me over to 'em?"

"Never!" says he, wiping his brow with a bandanner he stole from the guvment trading post below the Kansas. "But I'd rather a devil had come through that gate than a Big Knife!" That's what them critters calls a American. "We and the Crows and Sioux have a big council on tonight, and--"

Jest then a man in a gilded cock hat and a red coat come through the crowd, with a couple of French Canadian trappers, and a pack of Soc Injuns from the Upper Mississippi. He had a sword on him and he stepped as proud as a turkey gobbler in the fall.

"What is this bloody American doing here?" says he, and I says: "Who the hell air you?" And he says: "Sir Wilmot Pembroke, agent of Indian affairs in North America for his Royal Majesty King George, that's who!"

"Well, step out from the crowd, you lobster-backed varmint," says I, stropping my knife on my leggin', "and I'll decorate a sculp-pole with yore innards--and that goes for them two Hudson Bay skunks, too!"

"No!" says Fat Bear, grabbing my arm. "There is a truce! No blood must be spilled in my village! Come into my lodge."

"The truce doesn't extend beyond the stockade," says Sir Wilmot. "Would you care to step outside with me?"

"So yore Teton friends could fill me with arrers?" I sneered. "I ain't as big a fool as I looks."

"No, that wouldn't be possible," agreed he, and I was so overcame with rage all I could do was gasp. Another instant and I would of had my knife in his guts, truce or no truce, but Fat Bear grabbed me and got me into his tipi. He had me set on a pile of buffler hides and one of his squaws brung me a pot of meat; but I was too mad to be hungry, so I only et four or five pounds of buffler liver.

Fat Bear sot down his trade musket, which he had stole from a Hudson Bay Company trapper, and said: "The council tonight is to decide whether or not the Arikaras shall take the warpath against the Big Knives. This Red-Coat, Sir Wilmot, says the Big White Chief over the water is whipping the Big White Father of the Big Knives, in the village called Washington."

I was so stunned by this news I couldn't say nothing. We hadn't had no chance to git news about the war since we started up the river.

"Sir Wilmot wants the Sioux, Crows and Arikaras to join him in striking the American settlements down the river," says Fat Bear. "The Crows believe the Big Knives are losing the war, and they're wavering. If they go with the Sioux, I must go too; otherwise the Sioux will burn my village. I cannot exist without the aid of the Crows. The Red-Coat has a Soc medicine man, who will go into a medicine lodge tonight and talk with the Great Spirit. It is big medicine, such was never seen before on any village on the Missouri. The medicine man will tell the Crows and the Arikaras to go with the Sioux."

"You mean this Englishman aims to lead a war-party down the river?" I says, plumb horrified.

"Clear to Saint Louis!" says Fat Bear. "He will wipe out all the Americans on the river!"

"He won't neither," says I with great passion, rising and drawing my knife. "I'll go over to his lodge right now and cut his gizzard out!"

But Fat Bear grabbed me and hollered: "If you spill blood, no one will ever dare recognize a truce again! I cannot let you kill the Red-Coat!"

"But he's plannin' to kill everybody on the river, dern it!" I yelled. "What'm I goin' to do?"

"You must get up in council and persuade the warriors not to go on the war-path," says he.

"Good gosh," I says, "I can't make no speech."

"The Red-Coat has a serpent's tongue," says Fat Bear, shaking his head. "If he had presents to give the chiefs, his cause would be as good as won. But his boat upset as he came along the river, and all his goods were lost. If you had presents to give to Spotted Hawk and Biting Horse--"

"You know I ain't got no presents!" I roared, nigh out of my head. "What the hell am I goin' to do?"

"I dunno," says he, despairful. "Some white men pray when they're in a pickle."

"I'll do it!" I says. "Git outa my way!" So I kneeled down on a stack of buffler robes, and I'd got as far as: "Now I lay me down to sleep--" when my knee nudged something under the hides that felt familiar. I reched down and yanked it out--and sure enough, it was a keg!

"Where'd you git this?" I yelped.

"I stole it out of the company's storehouse the last time I was in Saint Louis," he confessed, "but--"

"But nothin'!" exulted I. "I dunno how come you ain't drunk it all up before now, but it's my wampum! I ain't goin' to try to out-talk that lobster-back tonight. Soon's the council's open, I'll git up kind of casual and say that the Red-Coat has got a empty bag of talk for 'em, with nothin' to go with it, but the Big White Father at Washington has sent 'em a present. Then I'll drag out the keg. T'aint much to divide up amongst so many, but the chiefs is what counts, and they's enough licker to git them too drunk to know what Sir Wilmot and the medicine man says."

"They know you didn't bring anything into the village with you," he says.

"So much the better," I says. "I'll tell 'em it's wakan and I can perjuice whiskey out of the air."

"They'll want you to perjuice some more," says he.

"I'll tell 'em a evil spirit, in the shape of a skunk with a red coat on, is interferin' with my magic powers," I says, gitting brainier every minute. "That'll make 'em mad at Sir Wilmot. Anyway, they won't care where the licker come from. A few snorts and the Sioux will probably remember all the gredges they got agen the Socs and run 'em outa camp."

"You'll get us all killed," says Fat Bear, mopping his brow. "But about that keg, I want to tell you--"

"You shet up about that keg," I says sternly. "It warn't yore keg in the first place. The fate of a nation is at stake, and you tries to quibble about a keg of licker! Git some stiffenin' into yore laigs; what we does tonight may decide who owns this continent. If we puts it over it'll be a big gain for the Americans."

"And what'll the Indians get out of it?" he ast.

"Don't change the subjeck," I says. "I see they've stacked buffler hides out at the council circle for the chiefs and guests to get on--and by the way, you be dern sure you gives me a higher stack to get on than Sir Wilmot gits. When nobody ain't lookin', you hide this keg clost to where I'm to set. If I had to send to yore lodge to git it, it'd take time and look fishy, too."

"Well," he begun reluctantly, but I flourished a fist under his nose and said with passion: "Dang it, do like I says! One more blat outa you and I busts the truce and yore snoot simultaneous!"

So he spread his hands kinda helpless, and said something about all white men being crazy, and anyway he reckoned he'd lived as long as the Great Spirit aimed for him to. But I give no heed, because I have not got no patience with them Injun superstitions. I started out of his lodge and dang near fell over one of them French trappers which they called Ondrey; t'other'n was named Franswaw.

"What the hell you doin' here?" I demanded, but he merely give me a nasty look and snuck off. I started for the lodge where the Crows was, and the next man I met was old Shingis. I dunno what his real name is, we always call him old Shingis; I think he's a Iowa or something. He's so old he's done forgot where he was born, and so ornery he jest lives around with first one tribe and then another till they git tired of him and kick him out.

He ast for some tobaccer and I give him a pipe-full, and then he squinted his eye at me and said: "The Red-Coat did not have to bring a man from the Mississippi to talk with Waukontonka. They say Shingis is heyoka. They say he is a friend of the Unktehi, the Evil Spirits."

Well, nobody never said that but him, but that's the way Injuns brag on theirselves; so I told him everybody knowed he was wakan, and went on to the lodge where the Crows was. Spotted Hawk ast me if it was the Red-Coats had burnt Washington and I told him not to believe everything a Red-Coat told him. Then I said: "Where's this Red-Coat's presents?"

Spotted Hawk made a wry face because that was a p'int which stuck in his mind, too, but he said: "The boat upset and the river took the gifts meant for the chiefs."

"Then that means that the Unktehi air mad at him," I says. "His medicine's weak. Will you foller a man which his medicine is weak?"

"We will listen to what he has to say in council," says Spotted Hawk, kind of uncertain, because a Injun is scairt of having anything to do with a man whose medicine is weak.

It was gitting dark by this time, and when I come out of the lodge I met Sir Wilmot, and he says: "Trying to traduce the Crows, eh? I'll have the pleasure of watching my Sioux friends roast you yet! Wait till Striped Thunder talks to them from the medicine lodge tonight."

"He who laughs last is a stitch in time," I replied with dignerty, so tickled inside about the way I was going to put it over him I was reconciled to not cutting his throat. I then went on, ignoring his loud, rude laughter. Jest wait! thunk I, jest wait! Brains always wins in the end.

I passed by the place where the buffler hides had been piled in a circle, in front of a small tipi made out of white buffler skins. Nobody come nigh that place till the powwow opened, because it was wakan, as the Sioux say, meaning magic. But all of a sudden I seen old Shingis scooting through the tipis clostest to the circle, making a arful face. He grabbed a water bucket made out of a buffler's stummick, and drunk about a gallon, then he shook his fists and talked to hisself energetic. I said: "Is my red brother's heart pained?"

"#%&*@!" says old Shingis. "There is a man of black heart in this village! Let him beware! Shingis is the friend of the Unktehi!"

Then he lit out like a man with a purpose, and I went on to Fat Bear's lodge. He was squatting on his robes looking at hisself in a mirrer he stole from the Northwest Fur Company three seasons ago.

"What you doin'?" I ast, reching into the meat pot.

"Trying to imagine how I'll look after I'm scalped," says he. "For the last time, that keg--"

"Air you tryin' to bring that subjeck up agen?" I says, rising in wrath; and jest then a brave come to the door to say that everybody was ready to go set in council.

"See?" whispers Fat Bear to me. "I'm not even boss in my own village when Spotted Hawk and Biting Horse are here! They give the orders!"

We went to the powwow circle, which they had to hold outside because they warn't a lodge big enough to hold all of 'em. The Arikaras sot on one side, the Crows on the other and the Sioux on the other. I sot beside Fat Bear, and Sir Wilmot and his Socs and Frenchmen sot opposite us. The medicine man sot cross-legged, with a heavy wolf-robe over his shoulders--though it was hot enough to fry a aig, even after the sun had went down. But that's the way a heyoka man does. If it'd been snowing, likely he'd of went naked. The women and chillern got up on top of the lodges to watch us, and I whispered and ast Fat Bear where the keg was. He said under the robes right behind me. He then started humming his death-song under his breath.

I begun feeling for it, but before I found it, Sir Wilmot riz and said: "I will not worry my red brothers with empty words! Let the Big Knives sing like mosquitos in the ears of the people! The Master of Life shall speak through the lips of Striped Thunder. As for me, I bring no words, but a present to make your hearts glad!"

And I'm a Choctaw if he didn't rech down under a pile of robes and drag out Fat Bear's keg! I like to keeled over and I hear Fat Bear grunt like he'd been kicked in the belly. I seen Ondrey leering at me, and I instantly knowed he'd overheard us talking and had stole it out from amongst the hides after Fat Bear put it there for me. The way the braves' eyes glistened I knowed the Red-Coats had won, and I was licked.

Well, I war so knocked all of a heap, all I could think of was to out with my knife and git as many as I could before they got me. I aimed to git Sir Wilmot, anyway; they warn't enough men in the world to keep me from gutting him before I died. A Bearfield on his last rampage is wuss'n a cornered painter. You remember great-uncle Esau Bearfield. When the Creeks finally downed him, they warn't enough of 'em left alive in that war party to sculp him, and he was eighty-seven.

I reched for my knife, but jest then Sir Wilmot says: "Presently the milk of the Red-Coats will make the hearts of the warriors sing. But now is the time for the manifestations of the Great Spirit, whom the Sioux call Waukontonka, and other tribes other names, but he is the Master of Life for all. Let him speak through the lips of Striped Thunder."

So I thought I'd wait till everybody was watching the medicine lodge before I made my break. Striped Thunder went into the lodge and closed the flap, and the Socs lit fires in front of it and started dancing back and forth in front of 'em singing:

"Oh, Master of Life, enter the white skin lodge!
Possess him who sits within!
Speak through his mouth!"

I ain't going to mention what they throwed on the fires, but they smoked something fierce so you couldn't even see the lodge, and the Socs dancing back and forth looked like black ghosts. Then all to wunst they sounded a yell inside the lodge and a commotion like men fighting. The Injuns looked like they was about ready to rise up and go yonder in a hurry, but Sir Wilmot said: "Do not fear! The messenger of the Master of Life contends with the Unktehi for possession of the medicine man's body! Soon the good spirit will prevail and we will open the lodge and hear the words of Waukontonka!"

Well, hell, I knowed Striped Thunder wouldn't say nothing but jest what Sir Wilmot had told him to say; but them fool Injuns would believe they was gitting the straight goods from the Great Spirit hisself.

Things got quiet in the lodge and the smoke died down, and Sir Wilmot says: "Thy children await, O Waukontonka." He opened the door, and I'm a Dutchman if they was anything in that lodge but a striped polecat!

He waltzed out with his tail h'isted over his back and them Injuns let out one arful yell and fell over backwards; and then they riz up and stampeded--Crows, Arikaras, Sioux, Socs and all, howling: "The Unktehi have prevailed! They have turned Striped Thunder into an evil beast!"

They didn't stop to open the gate. The Sioux clumb the stockade and the Crows busted right through it. I seen old Biting Hoss and Spotted Hawk leading the stampede, and I knowed the great Western Injun Confederation was busted all to hell. The women and chillern was right behind the braves, and in sight of fifteen seconds the only Injun in sight was Fat Bear.

Sir Wilmot jest stood there like he'd been putrified into rock, but Franswaw he run around behind the lodge and let out a squall. "Somebody's slit the back wall!" he howled. "Here's Striped Thunder lying behind the lodge with a knot on his head the size of a egg! Somebody crawled in and knocked him senseless and dragged him out while the smoke rolled!"

"The same man left the skunk!" frothed Sir Wilmot. "You Yankee dog, you're responsible for this!"

"Who you callin' a Yankee?" I roared, whipping out my knife.

"Remember the truce!" squalled Fat Bear, but Sir Wilmot was too crazy mad to remember anything. I parried his sword with my knife as he lunged, and grabbed his arm, and I reckon that was when he got his elber dislocated. Anyway he give a maddened yell and tried to draw a pistol with his good hand; so I hit him in the mouth with my fist, and that's when he lost them seven teeth he's so bitter about. Whilst he was still addled, I taken his pistol away from him and throwed him over the stockade. I got a idee his fractured skull was caused by him hitting his head on a stump outside. Meanwhile Ondrey and Franswaw was hacking at me with their knives, so I taken 'em by their necks and beat their fool heads together till they was limp, and then I throwed 'em over the stockade after Sir Wilmot.

"And I reckon that settles that!" I panted. "I dunno how this all come about, but you can call up yore women and chillern and tell 'em they're now citizens of the United States of America, by golly!"

I then picked up the keg, because I was hot and thirsty, but Fat Bear says: "Wait! Don't drink that! I--"

"Shet up!" I roared. "After all I've did for the nation tonight, I deserves a dram! Shame on you to begredge a old friend--"

I taken a big gulp--and then I give a maddened beller and throwed that keg as far as I could heave it, and run for water. I drunk about three gallons, and when I could breathe again I got a club and started after Fat Bear, who clumb up on top of a lodge.

"Come down!" I requested with passion. "Come down whilst I beats yore brains out! Whyn't you tell me what was in that keg?"

"I tried to," says he, "but you wouldn't listen. I thought it was whiskey when I stole it, or I wouldn't have taken it. I talked to Shingis while you were hunting the water bucket, jest now. It was him that put the skunk in the medicine lodge. He saw Ondrey hide the keg on Sir Wilmot's side of the council circle; he sneaked a drink out of it, and that's why he did what he did. It was for revenge. The onreasonable old buzzard thought Sir Wilmot was tryin' to pizen him."

So that's the way it was. Anyway, I'm quitting my job as soon as I git back to Saint Louis. It's bad enuff when folks gits too hifaluting to use candles, and has got to have oil lamps in a trading post. But I'll be derned if I'll work for a outfit which puts the whale-oil for their lamps in the same kind of kegs they puts their whiskey.

Your respeckful son.
Boone Bearfield.

Contents

BOOT-HILL PAYOFF

By Robert E. Howard and R.E. Allen

Chapter I: The Laramies Ride

Five men were riding down the winding road that led to San Leon, and one was singing, in a toneless monotone:

"Early in the mornin' in the month of May,
Brady came down on the mornin' train.
Brady came down on the Shinin' Star.
And he shot Mr. Duncan in behind the bar!

"Shut up! Shut up!" It was the youngest of the riders who ripped out like that. A lanky, tow-headed kid, with a touch of pallor under his tan, and a rebellious smolder in his hot eyes.

The biggest man of the five grinned.

"Bucky's nervous," he jeered genially. "You don't want to be no derned bandit, do you, Bucky?"

The youngest glowered at him.

"That welt on yore jaw ought to answer that, Jim," he growled.

"You fit like a catamount," agreed Big Jim placidly. "I thought we'd never git you on yore cayuse and started for San Leon, without knockin' you in the head. 'Bout the only way you show yo're a Laramie, Bucky, is in the handlin' of yore fists."

"T'ain't no honor to be a Laramie," flared Bucky. "You and Luke and Tom and Hank has dragged the name through slime. For the last three years you been worse'n a pack of starvin' lobos--stealin' cattle and horses; robbin' folks--why, the country's near ruint. And now yo're headin' to San Leon to put on the final touch--robbin' the Cattlemen's Bank, when you know dern well the help the ranchmen got from that bank's been all that kept 'em on their feet. Old man Brown's stretched hisself nigh to the bustin' p'int to help folks."

He gulped and fought back tears that betrayed his extreme youth. His brothers grinned tolerantly. "It's the last time," he informed them bitterly. "You won't git me into no raid again!"

"It's the last time for all of us," said Big Jim, biting off a cud of tobacco. "We're through after this job. We'll live like honest men in Mexico."

"Serve you right if a posse caught us and hanged us all," said Bucky viciously.

"Not a chance." Big Jim's placidity was unruffled. "Nobody but us knows the trail that follows the secret waterholes acrost the desert. No posse'd dare to foller us. Once out of town and headed south for the border, the devil hisself couldn't catch us."

"I wonder if anybody'll ever stumble onto our secret hide-out up in the Los Diablos Mountains," mused Hank.

"I doubt it. Too well hid. Like the desert trail, nobody but us knows them mountain trails. It shore served us well. Think of all the steers and horses we've hid there, and drove through the mountains to Mexico! And the times we've laid up there laughin' in our sleeves as the posse chased around a circle."

Bucky muttered something under his breath; he retained no fond memories of that hidden lair high up in the barren Diablos. Three years before, he had reluctantly followed his brothers into it from the little ranch in the foothills where Old Man Laramie and his wife had worn away their lives in futile work. The old life, when their parents lived and had held their wild sons in check, had been drab and hard, but had lacked the bitterness he had known when cooking and tending house for his brothers in that hidden den from which they had ravaged the countryside. Four good men gone bad--mighty bad.

San Leon lay as if slumbering in the desert heat as the five brothers rode up to the doors of the Cattlemen's Bank. None noted their coming; the Red Lode saloon, favorite rendezvous for the masculine element of San Leon, stood at the other end of the town, and out of sight around a slight bend in the street.

No words were passed; each man knew his part beforehand. The three elder Laramies slid lithely out of their saddles, throwing their reins to Bucky and Luke, the second youngest. They strode into the bank with a soft jingle of spurs and creak of leather, closing the door behind them.

Luke's face was impassive as an image's, as he dragged leisurely on a cigarette, though his eyes gleamed between slitted lids. But Bucky sweated and shivered, twisting nervously in his saddle. By some twist of destiny, one son had inherited all the honesty that was his parents' to transmit. He had kept his hands clean. Now, in spite of himself, he was scarred with their brand.

He started convulsively as a gun crashed inside the bank; like an echo came another reverberation.

Luke's Colt was in his hand, and he snatched one foot clear of the stirrup, then feet pounded toward the street and the door burst open to emit the three outlaws. They carried bulging canvas sacks, and Hank's sleeve was crimson.

"Ride like hell!" grunted Big Jim, forking his roan. "Old Brown throwed down on Hank. Old fool! I had to salivate him permanent."

And like hell it was they rode, straight down the street toward the desert, yelling and firing as they went. They thundered past houses from which startled individuals peered bewilderedly, past stores where leathery faced storekeepers were dragging forth blue-barreled scatter-guns. They swept through the futile rain of lead that poured from the excited and befuddled crowd in front of the Red Lode, and whirled on toward the desert that stretched south of San Leon.

But not quite to the desert. For as they rounded the last bend in the twisting street and came abreast of the last house in the village, they were confronted by the gray-bearded figure of old "Pop" Anders, sheriff of San Leon County. The old man's gnarled right hand rested on the ancient single-action Colt on his thigh, his left was lifted in a seemingly futile command to halt.

Big Jim cursed and sawed back on the reins, and the big roan slid to a halt.

"Git outa the way, Pop!" roared Big Jim. "We don't want to hurt you."

The old warrior's eyes blazed with righteous wrath.

"Robbed the bank this time, eh?" he said in cold fury, his eyes on the canvas sacks. "Likely spilt blood, too. Good thing Frank Laramie died before he could know what skunks his boys turned out to be. You ain't content to steal our stock till we're nigh bankrupt; you got to rob our bank and take what little money we got left for a new start. Why, you damned human sidewinders!" the old man shrieked, his control snapping suddenly. "Ain't there nothin' that's too low-down for you to do?"

Behind them sounded the pound of running feet and a scattering banging of guns. The crowd from the Red Lode was closing in.

"You've wasted our time long enough, old man!" roared Luke, jabbing in the spurs and sending his horse rearing and plunging toward the indomitable figure. "Git outa the way, or--"

The old single-action jumped free in the gnarled hand. Two shots roared together, and Luke's sombrero went skyrocketing from his head. But the old sheriff fell face forward in the dust with a bullet through his heart, and the Laramie gang swept on into the desert, feeding their dust to their hurriedly mounted and disheartened pursuers.

Only young Buck Laramie looked back, to see the door of the last house fly open, and a pig-tailed girl run out to the still figure in the street. It was the sheriff's daughter, Judy. She and Buck had gone to the same school in the old days before the Laramies hit the wolf-trail. Buck had always been her champion. Now she went down on her knees in the dust beside her father's body, seeking frantically for a spark of life where there was none.

A red film blazed before Buck Laramie's eyes as he turned his livid face toward his brothers.

"Hell," Luke was fretting, "I didn't aim to salivate him permanent. The old lobo woulda hung everyone of us if he could of--but just the same I didn't aim to kill him."

Something snapped in Bucky's brain.

"You didn't aim to kill him!" he shrieked. "No, but you did! Yo're all a pack of low-down sidewinders just like he said! They ain't nothin' too dirty for you!" He brandished his clenched fists in the extremity of his passion. "You filthy scum!" he sobbed. "When I'm growed up I'm comin' back here and make up for ever' dollar you've stole, ever' life you've took. I'll do it if they hang me for tryin', s'help me!"

His brothers did not reply. They did not look at him. Big Jim hummed flatly and absently:

"Some say he shot him with a thirty-eight,
Some say he shot him with a forty-one;
But I say he shot him with a forty-four.
For I saw him as he lay on the barroom floor."

Bucky subsided, slumped in his saddle and rode dismally on. San Leon and the old life lay behind them all. Somewhere south of the hazy horizon the desert stretched into Mexico where lay their future destiny. And his destiny was inextricably interwoven with that of his brothers. He was an outlaw, too, now, and he must stay with the clan to the end of their last ride.

Some guiding angel must have caused Buck Laramie to lean forward to pat the head of his tired sorrel, for at that instant a bullet ripped through his hat-brim, instead of his head.

It came as a startling surprise, but his reaction was instant. He leaped from his horse and dove for the protection of a sand bank, a second bullet spurting dust at his heels. Then he was under cover, peering warily out, Colt in hand.

The tip of a white sombrero showed above a rim of sand, two hundred yards in front of him. Laramie blazed away at it, though knowing as he pulled the trigger that the range was too long and the target too small for six-gun accuracy. Nevertheless, the hat-top vanished.

"Takin' no chances," muttered Laramie. "Now who in hell is he? Here I am a good hour's ride from San Leon, and folks pottin' at me already. Looks bad for what I'm aimin' to do. Reckon it's somebody that knows me, after all these years?"

He could not believe it possible that anyone would recognize the lanky, half-grown boy of six years ago in the bronzed, range-hardened man who was returning to San Leon to keep the vow he had made as his clan rode southward with two dead men and a looted bank behind them.

The sun was burning hot, and the sand felt like an oven beneath Laramie. His canteen was slung to his saddle, and his horse was out of his reach, drooping under a scrubby mesquite. The other fellow would eventually work around to a point where his rifle would out-range Laramie's six-gun--or he might shoot the horse and leave Buck afoot in the desert.

The instant his attacker's next shot sang past his refuge, he was up and away in a stooping, weaving run to the next sand hill, to the right and slightly forward of his original position. He wanted to get in close quarters with his unknown enemy.

He wriggled from cover to cover, and sprinted in short dashes over narrow strips of open ground, taking advantage of every rock, cactus-bed and sand-bank, with lead hissing and spitting at him all the way. The hidden gunman had guessed his purpose, and obviously had no desire for a close-range fight. He was slinging lead every time Laramie showed an inch of flesh, cloth or leather, and Buck counted the shots. He was within striking distance of the sand rim when he believed the fellow's rifle was empty.

Springing recklessly to his feet he charged straight at his hidden enemy, his six-gun blazing. He had miscalculated about the rifle, for a bullet tore through the slack of his shirt. But then the Winchester was silent, and Laramie was raking the rim with such a barrage of lead that the gunman evidently dared not lift himself high enough to line the sights of a six-gun.

But a pistol was something that must be reckoned with, and as he spent his last bullet, Laramie dove behind a rise of sand and began desperately to jam cartridges into his empty gun. He had failed to cross the sand rim in that rush, but another try would gain it--unless hot lead cut him down on the way. Drum of hoofs reached his ears suddenly and glaring over his shelter he saw a pinto pony beyond the sand rim heading in the direction of San Leon. Its rider wore a white sombrero.

"Damn!" Laramie slammed the cylinder in place and sent a slug winging after the rapidly receding horseman. But he did not repeat the shot. The fellow was already out of range.

"Reckon the work was gettin' too close for him," he ruminated as he trudged back to his horse. "Hell, maybe he didn't want me to get a good look at him. But why? Nobody in these parts would be shy about shootin' at a Laramie, if they knew him as such. But who'd know I was a Laramie?"

He swung up into the saddle, then absently slapped his saddle bags and the faint clinking that resulted soothed him. Those bags were loaded with fifty thousand dollars in gold eagles, and every penny was meant for the people of San Leon.

"It'll help pay the debt the Laramies owe for the money the boys stole," he confided to the uninterested sorrel. "How I'm goin' to pay back for the men they killed is more'n I can figure out. But I'll try."

The money represented all he had accumulated from the sale of the Laramie stock and holdings in Mexico--holdings bought with money stolen from San Leon. It was his by right of inheritance, for he was the last of the Laramies. Big Jim, Tom, Hank, Luke, all had found trail's end in that lawless country south of the Border. As they had lived, so had they died, facing their killers, with smoking guns in their hands. They had tried to live straight in Mexico, but the wild blood was still there. Fate had dealt their hands, and Buck looked upon it all as a slate wiped clean, a record closed--with the exception of Luke's fate.

That memory vaguely troubled him now, as he rode toward San Leon to pay the debts his brothers contracted.

"Folks said Luke drawed first," he muttered. "But it wasn't like him to pick a barroom fight. Funny the fellow that killed him cleared out so quick, if it was a fair fight."

He dismissed the old problem and reviewed the recent attack upon himself.

"If he knowed I was a Laramie, it might have been anybody. But how could he know? Joel Waters wouldn't talk."

No, Joel Waters wouldn't talk; and, Joel Waters, old time friend of Laramie's father, long ago, and owner of the Boxed W ranch, was the only man who knew Buck Laramie was returning to San Leon.

"San Leon at last, cayuse," he murmured as he topped the last desert sand hill that sloped down to the town. "Last time I seen it was under circumstances most--what the devil!"

He started and stiffened as a rattle of gunfire burst on his ears. Battle in San Leon? He urged his weary steed down the hill. Two minutes later history was repeating itself.

Chapter II: Owl-Hoot Ghosts

As Buck Laramie galloped into San Leon, a sight met his eyes which jerked him back to a day six years gone. For tearing down the street came six wild riders, yelling and shooting. In the lead rode one, who, with his huge frame and careless ease, might have been Big Jim Laramie come back to life again. Behind them the crowd at the Red Lode, roused to befuddled life, was shooting just as wildly and ineffectively as on that other day when hot lead raked San Leon. There was but one man to bar the bandits' path--one man who stood, legs braced wide, guns drawn, in the roadway before the last house in San Leon. So old Pop Anders had stood, that other day, and there was something about this man to remind Laramie of the old sheriff, though he was much younger. In a flash of recognition Laramie knew him--Bob Anders, son of Luke's victim. He, too, wore a silver star.

This time Laramie did not stand helplessly by to see a sheriff slaughtered. With the swiftness born of six hard years below the border, he made his decision and acted. Gravel spurted as the sorrel threw back his head against the sawing bit and came to a sliding stop, and all in one motion Laramie was out of the saddle and on his feet beside the sheriff--half crouching and his six-gun cocked and pointed. This time two would meet the charge, not one.

Laramie saw that masks hid the faces of the riders as they swept down, and contempt stabbed through him. No Laramie ever wore a mask. His Colt vibrated as he thumbed the hammer. Beside him the young sheriff's guns were spitting smoke and lead.

The clumped group split apart at that blast. One man, who wore a Mexican sash instead of a belt, slumped in his saddle clawing for the horn. Another with his right arm flopping broken at his side was fighting his pain-maddened beast which had stopped a slug intended for its rider.

The big man who had led the charge grabbed the fellow with the sash as he started to slide limply from his saddle, and dragged him across his own bow. He bolted across the roadside and plunged into a dry wash. The others followed him. The man with the broken arm abandoned his own crazed mount and grabbed the reins of the riderless horse. Beasts and men, they slid over the rim and out of sight in a cloud of dust.

Anders yelled and started across the road on the run, but Laramie jerked him back.

"They're covered," he grunted, sending his sorrel galloping to a safe place with a slap on the rump. "We got to get out of sight, pronto!"

The sheriff's good judgment overcame his excitement then, and he wheeled and darted for the house, yelping: "Follow me, stranger!"

Bullets whined after them from the gulch as the outlaws began their stand. The door opened inward before Anders' outstretched hand touched it, and he plunged through without checking his stride. Lead smacked the jambs and splinters flew as Laramie ducked after Anders. He collided with something soft and yielding that gasped and tumbled to the floor under the impact. Glaring wildly down Laramie found himself face to face with a vision of feminine loveliness that took his breath away, even in that instant. With a horrified gasp he plunged to his feet and lifted the girl after him. His all-embracing gaze took her in from tousled blond hair to whipcord breeches and high-heeled riding boots. She seemed too bewildered to speak.

"Sorry, miss," he stuttered. "I hope y'ain't hurt. I was--I was--" The smash of a window pane and the whine of a bullet cut short his floundering apologies. He snatched the girl out of line of the window and in an instant was crouching beside it himself, throwing lead across the road toward the smoke wisps.

Anders had barred the door and grabbed a Winchester from a rack on the wall.

"Duck into a back room, Judy," he ordered, kneeling at the window on the other side of the door. "Partner, I don't know you--" he punctuated his remarks with rapid shots, "--but I'm plenty grateful."

"Hilton's the name," mumbled Laramie, squinting along, his six-gun barrel. "Friends call me Buck--damn!"

His bullet had harmlessly knocked dust on the gulch rim, and his pistol was empty. As he groped for cartridges he felt a Winchester pushed into his hand, and, startled, turned his head to stare full into the disturbingly beautiful face of Judy Anders. She had not obeyed her brother's order, but had taken a loaded rifle from the rack and brought it to Laramie, crossing the room on hands and knees to keep below the line of fire. Laramie almost forgot the men across the road as he stared into her deep clear eyes, now glowing with excitement. In dizzy fascination he admired the peach-bloom of her cheeks, her red, parted lips.

"Th-thank you, miss!" he stammered. "I needed that smoke-wagon right smart. And excuse my language. I didn't know you was still in the room--"

He ducked convulsively as a bullet ripped across the sill, throwing splinters like a buzz-saw. Shoving the Winchester out of the window he set to work. But his mind was still addled. And he was remembering a pitifully still figure sprawled in the dust of that very road, and a pig-tailed child on her knees beside it. The child was no longer a child, but a beautiful woman; and he--he was still a Laramie, and the brother of the man who killed her father.

"Judy!" There was passion in Bob Anders' voice. "Will you get out of here? There! Somebody's callin' at the back door. Go let 'em in. And stay back there, will you?"

This time she obeyed, and a few seconds later half a dozen pairs of boots clomped into the room, as some men from the Red Lode who had slipped around through a back route to the besieged cabin, entered.

"They was after the bank, of course," announced one of them. "They didn't git nothin' though, dern 'em. Ely Harrison started slingin' lead the minute he seen them masks comin' in the door. He didn't hit nobody, and by good luck the lead they throwed at him didn't connect, but they pulled out in a hurry. Harrison shore s'prised me. I never thought much of him before now, but he showed he was ready to fight for his money, and our'n."

"Same outfit, of course," grunted the sheriff, peering warily through the jagged shards of the splintered window-pane.

"Sure. The damn' Laramies again. Big Jim leadin', as usual."

Buck Laramie jumped convulsively, doubting the evidence of his ears. He twisted his head to stare at the men.

"You think it's the Laramies out there?" Buck's brain felt a bit numb. These mental jolts were coming too fast for him.

"Sure," grunted Anders. "Couldn't be nobody else. They was gone for six year--where, nobody knowed. But a few weeks back they showed up again and started their old deviltry, worse than ever."

"Killed his old man right out there in front of his house," grunted one of the men, selecting a rifle from the rack. The others were firing carefully through the windows, and the men in the gulch were replying in kind. The room was full of drifting smoke.

"But I've heard of 'em," Laramie protested. "They was all killed down in Old Mexico."

"Couldn't be," declared the sheriff, lining his sights. "These are the old gang all right. They've put up warnin's signed with the Laramie name. Even been heard singin' that old song they used to always sing about King Brady. Got a hide-out up in the Los Diablos, too, just like they did before. Same one, of course. I ain't managed to find it yet, but--" His voice was drowned in the roar of his .45-70.

"Well, I'll be a hammer-headed jackass," muttered Laramie under his breath. "Of all the--"

His profane meditations were broken into suddenly as one of the men bawled: "Shootin's slowed down over there! What you reckon it means?"

"Means they're aimin' to sneak out of that wash at the other end and high-tail it into the desert," snapped Anders. "I ought to have thought about that before, but things has been happenin' so fast. You hombres stay here and keep smokin' the wash so they can't bolt out on this side. I'm goin' to circle around and block 'em from the desert."

"I'm with you," growled Laramie. "I want to see what's behind them masks."

They ducked out the back way and began to cut a wide circle which should bring them to the outer edge of the wash. It was difficult going and frequently they had to crawl on their hands and knees to take advantage of every clump of cactus and greasewood.

"Gettin' purty close," muttered Laramie, lifting his head. "What I'm wonderin' is, why ain't they already bolted for the desert? Nothin' to stop 'em."

"I figger they wanted to get me if they could, before they lit out," answered Anders. "I believe I been snoopin' around in the Diablos too close to suit 'em. Look out! They've seen us!"

Both men ducked as a steady line of flame spurts rimmed the edge of the wash. They flattened down behind their scanty cover and bullets cut up puffs of sand within inches of them.

"This is a pickle!" gritted Anders, vainly trying to locate a human head to shoot at. "If we back up, we back into sight, and if we go forward we'll get perforated."

"And if we stay here the result's the same," returned Laramie. "Greasewood don't stop lead. We got to summon reinforcements." And lifting his voice in a stentorian yell that carried far, he whooped: "Come on, boys! Rush 'em from that side! They can't shoot two ways at once!"

They could not see the cabin from where they lay, but a burst of shouts and shots told them his yell had been heard. Guns began to bang up the wash and Laramie and Anders recklessly leaped to their feet and rushed down the slight slope that led to the edge of the gulch, shooting as they went.

They might have been riddled before they had gone a dozen steps, but the outlaws had recognized the truth of Laramie's statement. They couldn't shoot two ways at once, and they feared to be trapped in the gulch with attackers on each side. A few hurried shots buzzed about the ears of the charging men, and then outlaws burst into view at the end of the wash farthest from town, mounted and spurring hard, the big leader still carrying a limp figure across his saddle.

Cursing fervently, the sheriff ran after them, blazing away with both six-shooters, and Laramie followed him. The fleeing men were shooting backward as they rode, and the roar of six-guns and Winchesters was deafening. One of the men reeled in his saddle and caught at his shoulder, dyed suddenly red.

Laramie's longer legs carried him past the sheriff, but he did not run far. As the outlaws pulled out of range, toward the desert and the Diablos, he slowed to a walk and began reloading his gun.

"Let's round up the men, Bob," he called. "We'll follow 'em. I know the water-holes--"

He stopped short with a gasp. Ten yards behind him Bob Anders, a crimson stream dyeing the side of his head, was sinking to the desert floor.

Laramie started back on a run just as the men from the cabin burst into view. In their lead rode a man on a pinto--and Buck Laramie knew that pinto.

"Git him!" howled the white-hatted rider. "He shot Bob Anders in the back! I seen him! He's a Laramie!"

Laramie stopped dead in his tracks. The accusation was like a bomb-shell exploding in his face. That was the man who had tried to drygulch him an hour or so before--same pinto, same white sombrero--but he was a total stranger to Laramie. How in the devil did he know of Buck's identity, and what was the reason for his enmity?

Laramie had no time to try to figure it out now. For the excited townsmen, too crazy with excitement to stop and think, seeing only their young sheriff stretched in his blood, and hearing the frantic accusation of one of their fellows, set up a roar and started blazing away at the man they believed was a murderer.

Out of the frying pan into the fire--the naked desert was behind him, and his horse was still standing behind the Anders' cabin--with that mob between him and that cabin.

But any attempt at explanation would be fatal. Nobody would listen. Laramie saw a break for him in the fact that only his accuser was mounted, and probably didn't know he had a horse behind the cabin, and would try to reach it. The others were too excited to think anything. They were simply slinging lead, so befuddled with the mob impulse they were not even aiming--which is all that saved Laramie in the few seconds in which he stood bewildered and uncertain.

He ducked for the dry wash, running almost at a right angle with his attackers. The only man capable of intercepting him was White-Hat, who was bearing down on him, shooting from the saddle with a Winchester.

Laramie wheeled, and as he wheeled a bullet ripped through his Stetson and stirred his hair in passing. White-Hat was determined to have his life, he thought, as his own six-gun spat flame. White-Hat flinched sidewise and dropped his rifle. Laramie took the last few yards in his stride and dived out of sight in the wash.

He saw White-Hat spurring out of range too energetically to be badly wounded, and he believed his bullet had merely knocked the gun out of the fellow's hands. The others had spread out and were coming down the slope at a run, burning powder as they came.

Laramie did not want to kill any of those men. They were law-abiding citizens acting under a misapprehension. So he emptied his gun over their heads and was gratified to see them precipitately take to cover. Then without pausing to reload, he ducked low and ran for the opposite end of the wash, which ran on an angle that would bring him near the cabin.

The men who had halted their charge broke cover and came on again, unaware of his flight, and hoping to get him while his gun was empty. They supposed he intended making a stand at their end of the wash.

By the time they had discovered their mistake and were pumping lead down the gully, Laramie was out at the other end and racing across the road toward the cabin. He ducked around the corner with lead nipping at his ears and vaulted into the saddle of the sorrel--and cursed his luck as Judy Anders ran out the rear door, her eyes wide with fright.

"What's happened?" she cried. "Where's Bob?"

"No time to pow-wow," panted Laramie. "Bob's been hurt. Don't know how bad. I got to ride, because--"

He was interrupted by shouts from the other side of the cabin.

"Look out, Judy!" one man yelled. "Stay under cover! He shot Bob in the back!"

Reacting to the shout without conscious thought, Judy sprang to seize his reins.

Laramie jerked the sorrel aside and evaded her grasp. "It's a lie!" he yelled with heat. "I ain't got time to explain. Hope Bob ain't hurt bad."

Then he was away, crouching low in his saddle with bullets pinging past him; it seemed he'd been hearing lead whistle all day; he was getting sick of that particular noise. He looked back once. Behind the cabin Judy Anders was bending over a limp form that the men had carried in from the desert. Now she was down on her knees in the dust beside that limp body, searching for a spark of life.

Laramie cursed sickly. History was indeed repeating itself that day in San Leon.

For a time Laramie rode eastward, skirting the desert, and glad of a breathing spell. The sorrel had profited by its rest behind the Anders' cabin, and was fairly fresh. Laramie had a good lead on the pursuers he knew would be hot on his trail as soon as they could get to their horses, but he headed east instead of north, the direction in which lay his real goal--the Boxed W ranch. He did not expect to be able to throw them off his scent entirely, but he did hope to confuse them and gain a little time.

It was imperative that he see his one friend in San Leon County--Joel Waters. Maybe Joel Waters could unriddle some of the tangle. Who were the men masquerading as Laramies?

He had been forging eastward for perhaps an hour when, looking backward from a steep rise, he saw a column of riders approaching some two miles away through a cloud of dust that meant haste. That would be the posse following his trail--and that meant that the sheriff was dead or still senseless.

Laramie wheeled down the slope on the other side and headed north, hunting hard ground that would not betray a pony's hoof-print.

Chapter III: Trigger Debt

Dusk was fast settling when he rode into the yard of the Boxed W. He was glad of the darkness, for he had feared that some of Waters' punchers might have been in San Leon that day, and seen him. But he rode up to the porch without having encountered anyone, and saw the man he was hunting sitting there, pulling at a corn-cob pipe.

Waters rose and came forward with his hand outstretched as Laramie swung from the saddle.

"You've growed," said the old man. "I'd never knowed you if I hadn't been expectin' you. You don't favor yore brothers none. Look a lot like yore dad did at yore age, though. You've pushed yore cayuse hard," he added, with a piercing glance at the sweat-plastered flanks of the sorrel.

"Yeah." There was bitter humor in Laramie's reply. "I just got through shootin' me a sheriff."

Waters jerked the pipe from his mouth. He looked stunned.

"What?"

"All you got to do is ask the upright citizens of San Leon that's trailin' me like a lobo wolf," returned Laramie with a mirthless grin. And tersely and concisely he told the old rancher what had happened in San Leon and on the desert.

Waters listened in silence, puffing smoke slowly.

"It's bad," he muttered, when Laramie had finished. "Damned bad--well, about all I can do right now is to feed you. Put yore cayuse in the corral."

"Rather hide him near the house, if I could," said Laramie. "That posse is liable to hit my sign and trail me here any time. I want to be ready to ride."

"Blacksmith shop behind the house," grunted Waters. "Come on."

Laramie followed the old man to the shop, leading the sorrel. While he was removing the bridle and loosening the cinch, Waters brought hay and filled an old log-trough. When Laramie followed him back to the house, the younger man carried the saddle bags over his arm. Their gentle clink no longer soothed him; too many obstacles to distributing them were rising in his path.

"I just finished eatin' before you come," grunted Waters. "Plenty left."

"Hop Sing still cookin' for you?"

"Yeah."

"Ain't you ever goin' to get married?" chaffed Laramie.

"Shore," grunted the old man, chewing his pipe stem. "I just got to have time to decide what type of woman'd make me the best wife."

Laramie grinned. Waters was well past sixty, and had been giving that reply to chaffing about his matrimonial prospects as far back as Buck could remember.

Hop Sing remembered Laramie and greeted him warmly. The old Chinaman had cooked for Waters for many years. Laramie could trust him as far as he could trust Waters himself.

The old man sat gripping his cold pipe between his teeth as Laramie disposed of a steak, eggs, beans and potatoes and tamped it down with a man-sized chunk of apple pie.

"Yo're follerin' blind trails," he said slowly. "Mebbe I can help you."

"Maybe. Do you have any idea who the gent on the showy pinto might be?"

"Not many such paints in these parts. What'd the man look like?"

"Well, I didn't get a close range look at him, of course. From what I saw he looked to be short, thick-set, and he wore a short beard and a mustache so big it plumb ambushed his pan."

"Why, hell!" snorted Waters. "That's bound to be Mart Rawley! He rides a flashy pinto, and he's got the biggest set of whiskers in San Leon."

"Who's he?"

"Owns the Red Lode. Come here about six months ago and bought it off of old Charlie Ross."

"Well, that don't help none," growled Laramie, finishing his coffee and reaching for the makings. He paused suddenly, lighted match lifted. "Say, did this hombre ride up from Mexico?"

"He come in from the east. Of course, he could have come from Mexico, at that; he'd have circled the desert. Nobody but you Laramies ever hit straight across it. He ain't said he come from Mexico original; and he ain't said he ain't."

Laramie meditated in silence, and then asked: "What about this new gang that calls theirselves Laramies?"

"Plain coyotes," snarled the old man. "Us San Leon folks was just gittin' on our feet again after the wreck yore brothers made out of us, when this outfit hit the country. They've robbed and stole and looted till most of us are right back where we was six years ago. They've done more damage in a few weeks than yore brothers did in three years.

"I ain't been so bad hit as some, because I've got the toughest, straightest-shootin' crew of punchers in the county; but most of the cowmen around San Leon are mortgaged to the hilt, and stand to lose their outfits if they git looted any more. Ely Harrison--he's president of the bank now, since yore brothers killed old man Brown--Ely's been good about takin' mortgages and handin' out money, but he cain't go on doin' it forever."

"Does everybody figure they're the Laramies?"

"Why not? They send letters to the cowmen sayin' they'll wipe out their whole outfit if they don't deliver 'em so many hundred head of beef stock, and they sign them letters with the Laramie name. They're hidin' out in the Diablos like you all did; they's always the same number in the gang; and they can make a get-away through the desert, which nobody but the Laramies ever did.

"Of course, they wear masks, which the Laramies never did, but that's a minor item; customs change, so to speak. I'd have believed they was the genuine Laramies myself, only for a couple of reasons--one bein' you'd wrote me in your letter that you was the only Laramie left. You didn't give no details." The old man's voice was questioning.

"Man's reputation always follows him," grunted Buck. "A barroom gladiator got Jim. Hank got that gunfighter the next week, but was shot up so hisself he died. Tom joined the revolutionaries and the rurales cornered him in a dry wash. Took 'em ten hours and three dead men to get him. Luke--" He hesitated and scowled slightly.

"Luke was killed in a barroom brawl in Sante Maria, by a two-gunfighter called Killer Rawlins. They said Luke reached first, but Rawlins beat him to it. I don't know. Rawlins skipped that night. I've always believed that Luke got a dirty deal, some way. He was the best one of the boys. If I ever meet Rawlins--" Involuntarily his hand moved toward the worn butt of his Colt. Then he shrugged his shoulders, and said: "You said there was two reasons why you knowed these coyotes wasn't Laramies; what's t'other'n?"

"They work different," growled the old man. "Yore brothers was bad, but white men, just the same. They killed prompt, but they killed clean. These rats ain't content with just stealin' our stock. They burn down ranch houses and pizen water holes like a tribe of cussed Apaches. Jim Bannerman of the Lazy B didn't leave 'em two hundred of steers in a draw like they demanded in one of them letters. A couple of days later we found nothin' but smokin' ruins at the Lazy B, with Jim's body burned up inside and all his punchers dead or shot up."

Buck's face was gray beneath its tan. His fist knotted on the gunbutt.

"The devil!" he choked, in a voice little above a whisper. "And the Laramies are gettin' the blame! I thought my brothers dragged the name low--but these devils are haulin' it right down into hell. Joel Waters, listen to me! I come back here to pay back money my brothers stole from San Leon; I'm stayin' to pay a bigger debt. The desert's big, but it ain't big enough for a Laramie and the rats that wears his name. If I don't wipe that gang of rattlers off the earth they can have my name, because I won't need it no more."

"The Laramies owe a debt to San Leon," agreed old Joel, filling his pipe. "Cleanin' out that snake-den is the best way I know of payin' it."

Some time later Laramie rose at last and ground his cigarette butt under his heel.

"We've about talked out our wampum. From all I can see, everything points to this Mart Rawley bein' connected with the gang, somehow. He must have been the one that shot Bob Anders. He was ahead of the other fellows; they couldn't see him for a rise in the ground. They wouldn't have seen him shoot Anders. He might have been aimin' at me; or he might have just wanted Anders out of the way.

"Anyway, I'm headin' for the Diablos tonight. I know yo're willin' to hide me here, but you can help me more if nobody suspects yo're helpin' me, yet.

"I'm leavin' these saddle-bags with you. If I don't come back out of the Diablos, you'll know what to do with the money. So long."

They shook hands, and old Joel said: "So long, Buck. I'll take care of the money. If they git crowdin' you too close, duck back here. And if you need help in the hills, try to git word back to me. I can still draw a bead with a Winchester, and I've got a gang of hard-ridin' waddies to back my play."

"I ain't forgettin', Joel."

Laramie turned toward the door. Absorbed in his thoughts, he forgot for an instant that he was a hunted man, and relaxed his vigilance. As he stepped out onto the veranda he did not stop to think that he was thrown into bold relief by the light behind him.

As his boot-heel hit the porch yellow flame lanced the darkness and he heard the whine of a bullet that fanned him as it passed. He leapt back, slamming the door, wheeled, and halted in dismay to see Joel Waters sinking to the door. The old man, standing directly behind Laramie, had stopped the slug meant for his guest.

With his heart in his mouth Laramie dropped beside his friend. "Where'd it get you, Joel?" he choked.

"Low down, through the leg," grunted Waters, already sitting up and whipping his bandanna around his leg for a tourniquet. "Nothin' to worry about. You better git goin'."

Laramie took the bandanna and began knotting it tightly, ignoring a hail from without.

"Come out with yore hands up, Laramie!" a rough voice shouted. "You can't fight a whole posse. We got you cornered!"

"Beat it, Buck!" snapped Waters, pulling away his friend's hands. "They must have left their horses and sneaked up on foot. Sneak out the back way before they surround the house, fork yore cayuse and burn the breeze. That's Mart Rawley talkin', and I reckon it was him that shot. He aims to git you before you have time to ask questions or answer any. Even if you went out there with yore hands up, he'd kill you. Git goin', dern you!"

"All right!" Laramie jumped up as Hop Sing came out of the kitchen, almond eyes wide and a cleaver in his hand. "Tell 'em I held a gun on you and made you feed me. T'ain't time for 'em to know we're friends, not yet."

The next instant he was gliding into the back part of the house and slipping through a window into the outer darkness. He heard somebody swearing at Rawley for firing before the rest had taken up their positions, and he heard other voices and noises that indicated the posse was scattering out to surround the house.

He ran for the blacksmith shop, and, groping in the dark, tightened the cinch on the sorrel and slipped on the bridle. He worked fast, but before Laramie could lead the horse outside he heard a jingle of spurs and the sound of footsteps.

Laramie swung into the saddle, ducked his head low to avoid the lintel of the door, and struck in the spurs. The sorrel hurtled through the door like a thunderbolt. A startled yell rang out, a man jumped frantically out of the way, tripped over his spurs and fell flat on his back, discharging his Winchester in the general direction of the Big Dipper. The sorrel and its rider went past him like a thundering shadow to be swallowed in the darkness. Wild yells answered the passionate blasphemy of the fallen man, and guns spurted red as their owners fired blindly after the receding hoof-beats. But before the possemen could untangle themselves from their bewilderment and find their mounts, the echoes of flying hoofs had died away and night hid the fugitive's trail. Buck Laramie was far away, riding to the Diablos.

Chapter IV: Sidewinder Ramrod

Midnight found Laramie deep in the Diabios. He halted, tethered the sorrel, and spread his blankets at the foot of a low cliff. Night was not the time to venture further along the rock-strewn paths and treacherous precipices of the Diablos. He slept fitfully, his slumber disturbed by dreams of a girl kneeling beside a wounded man.

With the first gray of dawn he was riding familiar trails that would lead him to the cabin in the hidden canyon that he knew so well, the old hideout of his gang, where he believed he would find the new band which was terrorizing the country. The hideout had but one entrance--a rock-walled tunnel. How the fake gang could have learned of the place Laramie could not know.

The hideout was in a great bowl, on all sides of which rose walls of jumbled rock, impassable to a horseman. It was possible to climb the cliffs near the entrance of the tunnel, which, if the fake gang were following the customs of the real Laramies, would be guarded.

Half an hour after sunrise found him making his way on foot toward the canyon entrance. His horse he had left concealed among the rocks at a safe distance, and lariat in hand he crept along behind rocks and scrub growth toward the old river bed that formed the canyon. Presently, gazing through the underbrush that masked his approach, he saw, half hidden by a rock, a man in a tattered brown shirt who sat at the mouth of the canyon entrance, his hat pulled low over his eyes, and a Winchester across his knees.

Evidently a belief in the security of the hide-out made the sentry careless. Laramie had the drop on him; but to use his advantage incurred the possibility of a shot that would warn those inside the canyon and spoil his plans. So he retreated to a point where he would not be directly in the line of the guard's vision, if the man roused, and began working his way to a spot a few hundred yards to the left, where, as he knew of old, he could climb to the rim of the canyon.

In a few moments he had clambered up to a point from which he could glimpse the booted feet of the guard sticking from behind the rock. Laramie's flesh crawled at the thought of being picked off with a rifle bullet like a fly off a wall, if the guard looked his way.

But the boots did not move, he dislodged no stones large enough to make an alarming noise, and presently, panting and sweating, he heaved himself over the crest of the rim and lay on his belly gazing down into the canyon below him.

As he looked down into the bowl which had once been like a prison to him, bitterness of memory was mingled with a brief, sick longing for his dead brothers; after all, they were his brothers, and had been kind to him in their rough way.

The cabin below him had in no wise changed in the passing of the years. Smoke was pouring out of the chimney, and in the corral at the back, horses were milling about in an attempt to escape the ropes of two men who were seeking saddle mounts for the day.

Shaking out his lariat, Laramie crept along the canyon rim until he reached a spot where a stunted tree clung to the very edge. To this tree he made fast the rope, knotted it at intervals for handholds, and threw the other end over the cliff. It hung fifteen feet short of the bottom, but that was near enough.

As he went down it, with a knee hooked about the thin strand to take some of the strain off his hands, he grinned thinly as he remembered how he had used this descent long ago when he wanted to dodge Big Jim who was waiting at the entrance to give him a licking. His face hardened.

"Wish he was here with me now. We'd mop up these rats by ourselves."

Dangling at the end of the rope at arm's length he dropped, narrowly missing a heap of jagged rocks, and lit in the sand on his feet, going to his all-fours from the impact.

Bending low, sometimes on hands and knees, he headed circuitously for the cabin, keeping it between himself and the men in the corral. To his own wonderment he reached the cabin without hearing any alarm sounded. Maybe the occupants, if there were any in the canyon beside the men he had seen, had gone out the back way to the corral. He hoped so.

Cautiously he raised his head over a window sill and peered inside. He could see no one in the big room that constituted the front part of the cabin. Behind this room, he knew, were a bunk room and kitchen, and the back door was in the kitchen. There might be men in those backrooms; but he was willing to take the chance. He wanted to get in there and find a place where he could hide and spy.

The door was not locked; he pushed it open gently and stepped inside with a cat-like tread, Colt poked ahead of him.

"Stick 'em up!" Before he could complete the convulsive movement prompted by these unexpected words, he felt the barrel of a six-gun jammed hard against his backbone. He froze--opened his fingers and let his gun crash to the floor. There was nothing else for it.

The door to the bunkroom swung open and two men came out with drawn guns and triumphant leers on their unshaven faces. A third emerged from the kitchen. All were strangers to Laramie. He ventured to twist his head to look at his captor, and saw a big-boned, powerful man with a scarred face, grinning exultantly.

"That was easy," rumbled one of the others, a tall, heavily built ruffian whose figure looked somehow familiar. Laramie eyed him closely.

"So yo're 'Big Jim'," he said.

The big man scowled, but Scarface laughed.

"Yeah! With a mask on nobody can tell the difference. You ain't so slick, for a Laramie. I seen you sneakin' through the bresh ten minutes ago, and we been watchin' you ever since. I seen you aimed to come and make yoreself to home, so I app'inted myself a welcome committee of one--behind the door. You couldn't see me from the winder. Hey, you Joe!" he raised his voice pompously. "Gimme a piece of rope. Mister Laramie's goin' to stay with us for a spell."

Scarface shoved the bound Laramie into an old Morris chair that stood near the kitchen door. Laramie remembered that chair well; the brothers had brought it with them when they left their ranch home in the foothills.

He was trying to catch a nebulous memory that had something to do with that chair, when steps sounded in the bunkroom and "Jim" entered, accompanied by two others. One was an ordinary sort of criminal, slouchy, brutal faced and unshaven. The other was of an entirely different type. He was elderly and pale-faced, but that face was bleak and flinty. He did not seem range-bred like the others. Save for his high-heeled riding boots, he was dressed in town clothes, though the well-worn butt of a .45 jutted from a holster at his thigh.

Scarface hooked thumbs in belt and rocked back on his heels with an air of huge satisfaction. His big voice boomed in the cabin.

"Mister Harrison, I takes pleasure in makin' you acquainted with Mister Buck Laramie, the last of a family of honest horse-thieves, what's rode all the way from Mexico just to horn in on our play. And Mister Laramie, since you ain't long for this weary world, I'm likewise honored to interjuice you to Mister Ely Harrison, high man of our outfit and president of the Cattlemen's Bank of San Leon!"

Scarface had an eye for dramatics in his crude way. He bowed grotesquely, sweeping the floor with his Stetson and grinning gleefully at the astounded glare with which his prisoner greeted his introduction.

Harrison was less pleased.

"That tongue of yours wags too loose, Braxton," he snarled.

Scarface lapsed into injured silence, and Laramie found his tongue.

"Ely Harrison!" he said slowly. "Head of the gang--the pieces of this puzzle's beginnin' to fit. So you generously helps out the ranchers yore coyotes ruins--not forgettin' to grab a healthy mortgage while doin' it. And you was a hero and shot it out with the terrible bandits when they come for yore bank; only nobody gets hurt on either side."

Unconsciously he leaned further back in the Morris chair--and a lightning jolt of memory hit him just behind the ear. He stifled an involuntary grunt, and his fingers, hidden by his body from the eyes of his captors, began fumbling between the cushions of the chair.

He had remembered his jackknife, a beautiful implement, and the pride of his boyhood, stolen from him and hidden by his brother Tom, for a joke, a few days before they started for Mexico. Tom had forgotten all about it, and Buck had been too proud to beg him for it. But Tom had remembered, months later, in Mexico; had bought Buck a duplicate of the first knife, and told him that he had hidden the original between the cushions of the old Morris chair.

Laramie's heart almost choked him. It seemed too good to be true, this ace in the hole. Yet there was no reason to suppose anybody had found and removed the knife. His doubts were set at rest as his fingers encountered a smooth, hard object. It was not until that moment that he realized that Ely Harrison was speaking to him. He gathered his wits and concentrated on the man's rasping voice, while his hidden fingers fumbled with the knife, trying to open it.

"--damned unhealthy for a man to try to block my game," Harrison was saying harshly. "Why didn't you mind your own business?"

"How do you know I come here just to spoil yore game?" murmured Laramie absently.

"Then why did you come here?" Harrison's gaze was clouded with a sort of ferocious uncertainty. "Just how much did you know about our outfit before today? Did you know I was the leader of the gang?"

"Guess," suggested Laramie. The knife was open at last. He jammed the handle deep between the cushions and the chair-back, wedging it securely. The tendons along his wrists ached. It had been hard work, manipulating the knife with his cramped fingers, able to move just so far. His steady voice did not change in tone as he worked. "I was kind of ashamed of my name till I seen how much lower a man could go than my brothers ever went. They was hard men, but they was white, at least. Usin' my name to torture and murder behind my back plumb upsets me. Maybe I didn't come to San Leon just to spoil yore game; but maybe I decided to spoil it after I seen some of the hands you dealt."

"You'll spoil our game!" Harrison sneered. "Fat chance you've got of spoiling anybody's game. But you've got only yourself to blame. In another month I'd have owned every ranch within thirty miles of San Leon."

"So that's the idea, huh?" murmured Laramie, leaning forward to expectorate, and dragging his wrists hard across the knife-edge. He felt one strand part, and as he leaned back and repeated the movement, another gave way and the edge bit into his flesh. If he could sever one more strand, he would make his break.

"Just how much did you know about our outfit before you came here?" demanded Harrison again, his persistence betraying his apprehension on that point. "How much did you tell Joel Waters?"

"None of yore derned business," Laramie snapped. His nerves getting on edge with the approach of the crisis.

"You'd better talk," snarled Harrison. "I've got men here who'd think nothing of shoving your feet in the fire to roast. Not that it matters. We're all set anyway. Got ready when we heard you'd ridden in. It just means we move tonight instead of a month later. But if you can prove to me that you haven't told anybody that I'm the real leader of the gang--well, we can carry out our original plans, and you'll save your life. We might even let you join the outfit."

"Join the--do you see any snake-scales on me?" flared Laramie, fiercely expanding his arm muscles. Another strand parted and the cords fell away from his wrists.

"Why you--" Murderous passion burst all bounds as Harrison lurched forward, his fist lifted. And Laramie shot from the chair like a steel spring released, catching them all flat-footed, paralyzed by the unexpectedness of the move.

One hand ripped Harrison's Colt from its scabbard. The other knotted into a fist that smashed hard in the banker's face and knocked him headlong into the midst of the men who stood behind him.

"Reach for the ceilin', you yellow-bellied polecats!" snarled Laramie, livid with fury and savage purpose; his cocked .45 menaced them all. "Reach! I'm dealin' this hand!"

Chapter V: First Blood

For an instant the scene held--then Scarface made a convulsive movement to duck behind the chair.

"Back up!" yelped Laramie, swinging his gun directly on him, and backing toward the door. But the tall outlaw who had impersonated Big Jim had recovered from the daze of his surprise. Even as Laramie's pistol muzzle moved in its short arc toward Braxton, the tall one's hand flashed like the stroke of a snake's head to his gun. It cleared leather just as Laramie's .45 banged.

Laramie felt hot wind fan his cheek, but the tall outlaw was sagging back and down, dying on his feet and grimly pulling trigger as he went. A hot welt burned across Laramie's left thigh, another slug ripped up splinters near his feet. Harrison had dived behind the Morris chair and Laramie's vengeful bullet smashed into the wall behind him.

It all happened so quickly that the others had barely unleathered their irons as he reached the threshold. He fired at Braxton, saw the scar-faced one drop his gun with a howl, saw "Big Jim" sprawl on the floor, done with impersonation and outlawry forever, and then he was slamming the door from the outside, wincing involuntarily as bullets smashed through the panels and whined about him.

His long legs flung him across the kitchen and he catapulted through the outer door. He collided head-on with the two men he had seen in the corral. All three went into the dust in a heap. One, even in falling, jammed his six-gun into Buck's belly and pulled trigger without stopping to see who it was. The hammer clicked on an empty chamber. Laramie, flesh crawling with the narrowness of his escape, crashed his gun barrel down on the other's head and sprang up, kicking free of the second man whom he recognized as Mart Rawley, he of the white sombrero and flashy pinto.

Rawley's gun had been knocked out of his hand in the collision. With a yelp the drygulcher scuttled around the corner of the cabin on hands and knees. Laramie did not stop for him. He had seen the one thing that might save him--a horse, saddled and bridled, tied to the corral fence.

He heard the furious stamp of boots behind him. Harrison's voice screamed commands as his enemies streamed out of the house and started pouring lead after him. Then a dozen long leaps carried him spraddle-legged to the startled mustang. With one movement he had ripped loose the tether and swung aboard. Over his shoulder he saw the men spreading out to head him off in the dash they expected him to make toward the head of the canyon. Then he wrenched the cayuse around and spurred through the corral gate which the outlaws had left half open.

In an instant Laramie was the center of a milling whirlpool of maddened horses as he yelled, fired in the air, and lashed them with the quirt hanging from the horn.

"Close the gate!" shrieked Harrison. One of the men ran to obey the command, but as he did, the snorting beasts came thundering through. Only a frantic leap backward saved him from being trampled to death under the maddened horses.

His companions yelped and ran for the protection of the cabin, firing blindly into the dust cloud that rose as the herd pounded past. Then Laramie was dashing through the scattering horde and drawing out of six-gun range, while his enemies howled like wolves behind him.

"Git along, cayuse!" yelled Laramie, drunk with the exhilaration of the hazard. "We done better'n I hoped. They got to round up their broncs before they hit my trail, and that's goin' to take time!"

Thought of the guard waiting at the canyon entrance did not sober him.

"Only way out is through the tunnel. Maybe he thinks the shootin' was just a family affair, and won't drill a gent ridin' from inside the canyon. Anyway, cayuse, we takes it on the run."

A Winchester banged from the mouth of the tunnel and the bullet cut the air past his ear.

"Pull up!" yelled a voice, but there was hesitancy in the tone. Doubtless the first shot had been a warning, and the sentry was puzzled. Laramie gave no heed; he ducked low and jammed in the spurs. He could see the rifle now, the blue muzzle resting on a boulder, and the ragged crown of a hat behind it. Even as he saw it, flame spurted from the blue ring. Laramie's horse stumbled in its headlong stride as lead ploughed through the fleshy part of its shoulder. That stumble saved Laramie's life for it lurched him out of the path of the next slug. His own six-gun roared.

The bullet smashed on the rock beside the rifle muzzle. Dazed and half-blinded by splinters of stone, the outlaw reeled back into the open, and fired without aim. The Winchester flamed almost in Laramie's face. Then his answering slug knocked the guard down as if he had been hit with a hammer. The Winchester flew out of his hands as he rolled on the ground. Laramie jerked the half-frantic mustang back on its haunches and dived out of the saddle to grab for the rifle.

"Damn!" It had struck the sharp edge of a rock as it fell. The lock was bent and the weapon useless. He cast it aside disgustedly, wheeled toward his horse, and then halted to stare down at the man he had shot. The fellow had hauled himself to a half-sitting position. His face was pallid, and blood oozed from a round hole in his shirt bosom. He was dying. Sudden revulsion shook Laramie as he saw his victim was hardly more than a boy. His berserk excitement faded.

"Laramie!" gasped the youth. "You must be Buck Laramie!"

"Yeah," admitted Laramie. "Anything--anything I can do?"

The boy grinned in spite of his pain.

"Thought so. Nobody but a Laramie could ride so reckless and shoot so straight. Seems funny--bein' plugged by a Laramie after worshippin' 'em most of my life."

"What?" ejaculated Laramie.

"I always wanted to be like 'em," gasped the youth. "Nobody could ride and shoot and fight like them. That's why I j'ined up with these polecats. They said they was startin' up a gang that was to be just like the Laramies. But they ain't; they're a passel of dirty coyotes. Once I started in with 'em, though, I had to stick."

Laramie said nothing. It was appalling to think that a young life had been so warped, and at last destroyed, by the evil example of his brothers.

"You better go and raise a posse if yo're aimin' to git them rats," the boy said. "They's goin' to be hell to pay tonight."

"How's that?" questioned Laramie, remembering Harrison's remarks about something planned for the night.

"You got 'em scared," murmured the boy. "Harrison's scared you might have told Joel Waters he was boss-man of the gang. That's why he come here last night. They'd aimed to keep stealin' for another month. Old Harrison woulda had most all the ranches around here by then, foreclosin' mortgages.

"When Mart Rawley failed to git you, old Harrison sent out word for the boys to git together here today. They figgered on huntin' you down, if the posse from San Leon hadn't already got you. If they found out you didn't know nothin' and hadn't told nobody nothin', they just aimed to kill you and go on like they'd planned from the first. But if they didn't git you, or found you'd talked, they aimed to make their big cleanup tonight, and then ride."

"What's that?" asked Laramie.

"They're goin' down tonight and burn Joel Waters' ranch buildings, and the sheriff's, and some of the other big ones. They'll drive all the cattle off to Mexico over the old Laramie trail. Then old Harrison'll divide the loot and the gang will scatter. If he finds you ain't spilled the works about him bein' the top man, he'll stay on in San Leon. That was his idee from the start--ruin the ranchers, buy up their outfits cheap and be king of San Leon."

"How many men's he got?"

"'Tween twenty-five and thirty," panted the youth. He was going fast. He choked, and a trickle of blood began at the corner of his mouth. "I ought not to be squealin', maybe; t'ain't the Laramie way. But I wouldn't to nobody but a Laramie. You didn't see near all of 'em. Two died on the way back from San Leon, yesterday. They left 'em out in the desert. The rest ain't got back from drivin' cattle to Mexico, but they'll be on hand by noon today."

Laramie was silent, reckoning on the force he could put in the field. Waters' punchers were all he could be sure of--six or seven men at the most, not counting the wounded Waters. The odds were stacking up.

"Got a smoke?" the youth asked weakly. Laramie rolled a cigarette, placed it between the blue lips and held a match. Looking back down the canyon, Laramie saw men saddling mounts. Precious time was passing, but he was loath to leave the dying lad.

"Get goin'," muttered the boy uneasily. "You got a tough job ahead of you--honest men and thieves both agen you--but I'm bettin' on the Laramies--the real ones--" He seemed wandering in his mind. He began to sing in a ghastly whisper the song that Laramie could never hear without a shudder.

"When Brady died they planted him deep,
Put a bottle of whisky at his head and feet.
Folded his arms across his breast.
And said: 'King Brady's gone to his rest!'"

The crimson trickle became a sudden spurt; the youth's voice trailed into silence. The cigarette slipped from his lips. He went limp and lay still, through forever with the wolf-trail.

Laramie rose heavily and groped for his horse, trembling in the shade of the rock. He tore the blanket rolled behind the saddle and covered the still figure. Another debt to be marked up against the Laramies.

He swung aboard and galloped through the tunnel to where his own horse was waiting--a faster mount than the cayuse he was riding. As he shifted mounts he heard shouts behind him, knew that his pursuers had halted at the body, knew the halt would be brief.

Without looking back, he hit the straightest trail he knew that led toward the ranch of Joel Waters.

Chapter VI: "String Him Up"

It was nearly noon when Laramie pulled up his sweating bronc at the porch of the Boxed W ranch house. There were no punchers in sight. Hop Sing opened the door.

"Where's Waters?" rapped out Laramie.

"Solly!" Hop Sing beamed on the younger man. "He gone to town to see doctluh and get leg fixed. Slim Jones dlive him in in buckbload. He be back tonight."

"Damn!" groaned Laramie. He saw his plan being knocked into a cocked hat. That plan had been to lead a band of men straight to the outlaws' hide-out and bottle them up in their stronghold before they could scatter out over the range in their planned raid. The Boxed W punchers would not follow a stranger without their boss's orders, and only Waters could convince the bellicose citizens of San Leon that Laramie was on the level. Time was flying, and every minute counted.

There was only one risky course left open. He swung on his tiring horse and reined away on the road for San Leon.

He met no one on the road, for which he was thankful. When he drew up on the outskirts of the town his horse was drawing laboring breaths. He knew the animal would be useless in case he had to dust out of town with a posse on his heels.

Laramie knew of a back alley that led to the doctor's office, and by which he hoped to make it unseen. He dismounted and headed down the alley, leading the gelding by the reins.

He sighted the little adobe shack where the town's one physician lived and worked, when a jingle of spurs behind him caused him to jerk his head in time to see a man passing the end of the alley. It was Mart Rawley, and Laramie ducked behind his horse, cursing his luck. Rawley must have been prowling around the town, expecting him, and watching for him. His yell instantly split the lazy silence.

"Laramie!" howled Rawley. "Laramie's back! Hey, Bill! Lon! Joe! Everybody! Laramie's in town again! This way!"

Laramie forked his mustang and spurred it into a lumbering run for the main street. Lead was singing down the alley as Laramie burst into Main Street, and saw Joel Waters sitting in a chair on the porch of the doctor's shack.

"Get all the men you can rustle and head for the Diablos!" he yelled at the astonished ranchman. "I'll leave a trail for you to follow. I found the gang at the old hide-out--and they're comin' out tonight for a big cleanup!"

Then he was off again, his clattering hoofs drowning Waters' voice as he shouted after the rider. Men were yelling and .45s banging. Ahorse and afoot they came at him, shooting as they ran. The dull, terrifying mob-roar rose, pierced with yells of: "String him up!" "He shot Bob Anders in the back!"

His way to open country was blocked, and his horse was exhausted. With a snarl Laramie wheeled and rode to the right for a narrow alley that did not seem to be blocked. It led between two buildings to a side-street, and was not wide enough for a horse to pass through. Maybe that was the reason it had been left unguarded. Laramie reached it, threw himself from his saddle and dived into the narrow mouth.

For an instant his mount, standing with drooping head in the opening, masked his master from bullets, though Laramie had not intended sacrificing his horse for his own hide. Laramie had run half the length of the alley before someone reached out gingerly, grasped the reins and jerked the horse away. Laramie half turned, without pausing in his run, and fired high and harmlessly back down the alley. The whistle of lead kept the alley clear until he bolted out the other end.

There, blocking his way in the side, street, stood a figure beside a black racing horse. Laramie's gun came up--then he stopped short, mouth open in amazement. It was Judy Anders who stood beside the black horse.

Before he could speak she sprang forward and thrust the reins in his hand.

"Take him and go! He's fast!"

"Why--what?" Laramie sputtered, his thinking processes in a muddle. The mere sight of Judy Anders had that effect upon him. Hope flamed in him. Did her helping him mean--then reason returned and he took the gift the gods had given him without stopping for question. As he grabbed the horn and swung up he managed: "I sure thank you kindly, miss--"

"Don't thank me," Judy Anders retorted curtly; her color was high, but her red lips were sulky. "You're a Laramie and ought to be hung, but you fought beside Bob yesterday when he needed help. The Anderses pay their debts. Will you go?"

A nervous stamp of her little foot emphasized the request. The advice was good. Three of the townsmen appeared with lifted guns around a corner of a nearby building. They hesitated as they saw the girl near him, but began maneuvering for a clear shot at him without endangering her.

"See Joel Waters, at the doctor's office!" he yelled to her, and was off for the open country, riding like an Apache, and not at all sure that she understood him. Men howled and guns crashed behind him, and maddened citizens ran cursing for their mounts, too crazy-mad to notice the girl who shrieked vainly at them, unheeding her waving arms.

"Stop! Stop! Wait! Listen to me!" Deaf to her cries they streamed past her, ahorse and afoot, and burst out into the open. The mounted men spurred their horses savagely after the figure that was swiftly dwindling in the distance.

Judy dashed aside an angry tear and declaimed her opinion of men in general, and the citizens of San Leon in particular, in terms more expressive than lady-like.

"What's the matter?" It was Joel Waters, limping out of the alley, supported by the doctor. The old man seemed stunned by the rapidity of events. "What in the devil's all this mean? Where's Buck?"

She pointed. "There he goes, with all the idiots in San Leon after him."

"Not all the idiots," Waters corrected. "I'm still here. Dern it, the boy must be crazy, comin' here. I yelled myself deef at them fools, but they wouldn't listen--"

"They wouldn't listen to me, either!" cried Judy despairingly. "But they won't catch him--ever, on that black of mine. And maybe when they come limping back, they'll be cooled down enough to hear the truth. If they won't listen to me, they will to Bob!"

"To Bob?" exclaimed the doctor. "Has he come out of his daze? I was just getting ready to come over and see him again, when Joel came in for his leg to be dressed."

"Bob came out of it just a little while ago. He told me it wasn't Laramie who shot him. He's still groggy and uncertain as to just what happened. He doesn't know who it was who shot him, but he knows it wasn't Buck Laramie. The last thing he remembers was Laramie running some little distance ahead of him. The bullet came from behind. He thinks a stray slug from the men behind them hit him."

"I don't believe it was a stray," grunted Waters, his eyes beginning to glitter. "I got a dern good idee who shot Bob. I'm goin' to talk--"

"Better not bother Bob too much right now," interrupted the doctor "I'll go over there--"

"Better go in a hurry if you want to catch Bob at home," the girl said grimly. "He was pulling on his boots and yelling for our cook to bring him his gun-belt when I left!"

"What? Why, he musn't get up yet!" The doctor transferred Waters' arm from his shoulder to that of the girl, and hurried away toward the house where Bob Anders was supposed to be convalescing.

"Why did Buck come back here?" Judy wailed to Waters.

"From what he hollered at me as he lighted past, I reckon he's found somethin' up in the Diablos. He come for help. Probably went to my ranch first, and findin' me not there, risked his neck comin' on here. Said send men after him, to foller signs he'd leave. I relayed that there information on to Slim Jones, my foreman. Doc lent Slim a horse, and Slim's high-tailin' it for the Boxed W right now to round up my waddies and hit the trail. As soon as these San Leon snake-hunters has ruint their cayuses chasin' that black streak of light you give Buck, they'll be pullin' back into town. This time, I bet they'll listen."

"I'm glad he didn't shoot Bob," she murmured. "But why--why did he come back here in the first place?"

"He come to pay a debt he figgered he owed on behalf of his no-account brothers. His saddle bags is full of gold he aims to give back to the citizens of this here ongrateful town. What's the matter?"

For his fair companion had uttered a startled exclamation.

"N-nothing, only--only I didn't know it was that way! Then Buck never robbed or stole, like his brothers?"

"Course he didn't!" snapped the old man irascibly. "Think I'd kept on bein' his friend all his life, if he had? Buck ain't to blame for what his brothers did. He's straight and he's always been straight."

"But he was with them, when--when--"

"I know." Waters' voice was gentler. "But he didn't shoot yore dad. That was Luke. And Buck was with 'em only because they made him. He wasn't nothin' but a kid."

She did not reply and old Waters, noting the soft, new light glowing in her eyes, the faint, wistful smile that curved her lips, wisely said nothing.

In the meantime the subject of their discussion was proving the worth of the sleek piece of horseflesh under him. He grinned as he saw the distance between him and his pursuers widen, thrilled to the marvel of the horse between his knees as any good horseman would. In half an hour he could no longer see the men who hunted him.

He pulled the black to an easier, swinging gait that would eat up the miles for long hours on end, and headed for the Diablos. But the desperate move he was making was not dominating his thoughts. He was mulling over a new puzzle; the problem of why Judy Anders had come to his aid. Considering her parting words, she didn't have much use for him. If Bob had survived his wound, and asserted Laramie's innocence, why were the citizens so hot for his blood? If not--would Judy Anders willingly aid a man she thought shot her brother? He thrilled at the memory of her, standing there with the horse that saved his life. If only he weren't a Laramie--How beautiful she was.

Chapter VII: Bottled up

A good three hours before sundown Laramie was in the foothills of the Diablos. In another hour, by dint of reckless riding over trails that were inches in width, which even he ordinarily would have shunned, he came in sight of the entrance to the hide-out. He had left signs farther down the trail to indicate, not the way he had come, but the best way for Waters' punchers to follow him.

Once more he dismounted some distance from the tunnel and stole cautiously forward. There would be a new sentry at the entrance, and Laramie's first job must be to dispose of him silently.

He was halfway to the tunnel when he glimpsed the guard, sitting several yards from the mouth, near a clump of bushes. It was the scar-faced fellow Harrison had called Braxton, and he seemed wide-awake.

Falling back on Indian tactics, acquired from the Yaquis in Mexico, Laramie began a stealthy, and necessarily slow, advance on the guard, swinging in a circle that would bring him behind the man. He crept up to within a dozen feet.

Braxton was getting restless. He shifted his position, craning his neck as he stared suspiciously about him. Laramie believed he had heard, but not yet located, faint sounds made in Laramie's progress. In another instant he would turn his head and stare full at the bushes which afforded the attacker scanty cover.

Gathering a handful of pebbles, Laramie rose stealthily to his knees and threw them over the guard's head. They hit with a loud clatter some yards beyond the man. Braxton started to his feet with an oath. He glared in the direction of the sound with his Winchester half lifted, neck craned. At the same instant Laramie leaped for him with his six-gun raised like a club.

Scarface wheeled, and his eyes flared in amazement. He jerked the rifle around, but Laramie struck it aside with his left hand, and brought down his pistol barrel crushingly on the man's head. Braxton went to his knees like a felled ox; slumped full-length and lay still.

Laramie ripped off belts and neckerchief from the senseless figure; bound and gagged his captive securely. He appropriated his pistol, rifle and spare cartridges, then dragged him away from the tunnel mouth and shoved him in among a cluster of rocks and bushes, effectually concealing him from the casual glance.

"Won the first trick, by thunder!" grunted Laramie. "And now for the next deal."

The success of that deal depended on whether or not all the outlaws of Harrison's band were in the hide-out. Mart Rawley was probably outside, yet; maybe still back in San Leon. But Laramie knew he must take the chance that all the other outlaws were inside.

He glanced up to a ledge overhanging the tunnel mouth, where stood precariously balanced the huge boulder which had given him his idea for bottling up the canyon.

"Cork for my bottle!" muttered Laramie. "All I need now's a lever."

A broken tree limb sufficed for that, and a few moments later he had climbed to the ledge and was at work on the boulder. A moment's panic assailed him as he feared its base was too deeply imbedded for him to move it. But under his fierce efforts he felt the great mass give at last. A few minutes more of back-breaking effort, another heave that made the veins bulge on his temples--and the boulder started toppling, crashed over the ledge and thundered down into the tunnel entrance. It jammed there, almost filling the space.

He swarmed down the wall and began wedging smaller rocks and brush in the apertures between the boulder and the tunnel sides. The only way his enemies could get out now was by climbing the canyon walls, a feat he considered practically impossible, or by laboriously picking out the stones he had jammed in place, and squeezing a way through a hole between the boulder and the tunnel wall. And neither method would be a cinch, with a resolute cowpuncher slinging lead at everything that moved.

Laramie estimated that his whole task had taken about half an hour. Slinging Braxton's rifle over his shoulder he clambered up the cliffs. At the spot on the canyon rim where he had spied upon the hide-out that morning, he forted himself by the simple procedure of crouching behind a fair-sized rock, with the Winchester and pistols handy at his elbows. He had scarcely taken his position when he saw a mob of riders breaking away from the corral behind the cabin. As he had figured, the gang was getting away to an early start for its activities of the night.

He counted twenty-five of them; and the very sun that glinted on polished gun hammers and silver conchas seemed to reflect violence and evil deeds.

"Four hundred yards," muttered Laramie, squinting along the blue rifle barrel. "Three fifty--three hundred--now I opens the ball!"

At the ping of the shot dust spurted in front of the horses' hoofs, and the riders scattered like quail, with startled yells.

"Drop them shootin' irons and hi'st yore hands!" roared Laramie. "Tunnel's corked up and you can't get out!"

His answer came in a vengeful hail of bullets, spattering along the canyon rim for yards in either direction. He had not expected any other reply. His shout had been more for rhetorical effect than anything else. But there was nothing theatrical about his second shot, which knocked a man out of his saddle. The fellow never moved after he hit the ground.

The outlaws converged toward the tunnel entrance, firing as they rode, aiming at Laramie's aerie, which they had finally located. Laramie replied in kind. A mustang smitten by a slug meant for his rider rolled to the ground and broke his rider's leg under him. A squat raider howled profanely as a slug ploughed through his breast muscles.

Then half a dozen men in the lead jammed into the tunnel and found that Laramie had informed them truthfully. Their yells reached a crescendo of fury. The others slid from their horses and took cover behind the rocks that littered the edges of the canyon, dragging the wounded men with them.

From a rush and a dash the fight settled to a slow, deadly grind, with nobody taking any rash chances. Having located his tiny fort, they concentrated their fire on the spot of the rim he occupied. A storm of bullets drove him to cover behind the breastworks, and became exceedingly irksome.

He had not seen either Rawley or Harrison. Rawley, he hoped, was still in San Leon, but the absence of Harrison worried him. Had he, too, gone to San Leon? If so, there was every chance that he might get clean away, even if his band was wiped out. There was another chance, that he or Rawley, or both of them, might return to the hide-out and attack him from the rear. He cursed himself for not having divulged the true identity of the gang's leader to Judy Anders; but he always seemed addled when talking to her.

The ammunition supply of the outlaws seemed inexhaustible. He knew at least six men were in the tunnel, and he heard them cursing and shouting, their voices muffled. He found himself confronted by a quandary that seemed to admit of no solution. If he did not discourage them, they would be breaking through the blocked tunnel and potting him from the rear. But to affect this discouragement meant leaving his point of vantage, and giving the men below a chance to climb the canyon wall. He did not believe this could be done, but he did not know what additions to the fortress had been made by the new occupants. They might have chiseled out handholds at some point on the wall. Well, he'd have to look at the tunnel.

"Six-guns against rifles, if this keeps up much longer," he muttered, working his way over the ledges. "Cartridges most gone. Why the devil don't Joel's men show up? I can't keep these hombres hemmed up forever--damn!"

His arm thrust his six-gun out as he yelped. Stones and brush had been worked out at one place in the tunnel-mouth, and the head and shoulders of a man appeared. At the crash of Laramie's Colt the fellow howled and vanished. Laramie crouched, glaring; they would try it again, soon. If he was not there to give them lead-argument, the whole gang would be squeezing out of the tunnel in no time.

He could not get back to the rim, and leave the tunnel unguarded; yet there was always the possibility of somebody climbing the canyon wall.

Had he but known it, his fears were justified. For while he crouched on the ledge, glaring down at the tunnel-mouth, down in the canyon a man was wriggling toward a certain point of the cliff, where his keen eyes had discerned something dangling. He had discovered Laramie's rope, hanging from the stunted tree on the rim. Cautiously he lifted himself out of the tall grass, ready to duck back in an instant, then as no shot came from the canyon rim, he scuttled like a rabbit toward the wall.

Kicking off his boots and slinging his rifle on his back, he began swarming, ape-like, up the almost sheer wall. His outstretched arm grasped the lower end of the rope, just as the others in the canyon saw what he was doing, and opened a furious fire on the rim to cover his activities. The outlaw on the rope swore luridly, and went up with amazing agility, his flesh crawling with the momentary expectation of a bullet in his back.

The renewed firing had just the effect on Laramie that the climber had feared it would have--it drew him back to his breastwork. It was not until he was crouching behind his breastwork that it occurred to him that the volleys might have been intended to draw him away from the tunnel. So he spared only a limited glance over the rocks, for the bullets were winging so close that he dared not lift his head high. He did not see the man on the rope cover the last few feet in a scrambling rush, and haul himself over the rim, unslinging his rifle as he did so.

Laramie turned and headed back for the ledge whence he could see the opening. And as he did so, he brought himself into full view of the outlaw who was standing upright on the rim, by the stunted tree.

The whip-like crack of his Winchester reached Laramie an instant after he felt a numbing impact in his left shoulder. The shock of the blow knocked him off his feet, and his head hit hard against a rock. Even as he fell he heard the crashing of brush down the trail, and his last, hopeless thought was that Rawley and Harrison were returning. Then the impact of his head against the rock knocked all thought into a stunned blank.

Chapter VIII: Boot Hill Talk

An outlaw came scrambling out of the tunnel with desperate haste, followed by another and another. One crouched, rifle in hand, glaring up at the wall, while the others tore away the smaller stones, and aided by those inside, rolled the boulder out of the entrance. Three men ran out of the tunnel and joined them.

Their firing roused Buck Laramie. He blinked and glared, then oriented himself. He saw five riders sweeping toward the tunnel, and six outlaws who had rushed out while he was unconscious, falling back into it for shelter; and he recognized the leader of the newcomers as Slim Jones, Joel Waters' foreman. The old man had not failed him.

"Take cover, you fools!" Laramie yelled wildly, unheard in the din.

But the reckless punchers came straight on and ran into a blast of lead poured from the tunnel mouth into which the outlaws had disappeared. One of the waddies saved his life by a leap from the saddle as his horse fell with a bullet through its brain, and another man threw wide his arms and pitched on his head, dead before he hit the pebbles.

Then only did Slim and his wild crew swerve their horses out of line and fall back to cover. Laramie remembered the slug that had felled him, and turned to scan the canyon rim. He saw the man by the stunted tree then; the fellow was helping one of his companions up the same route he had taken, and evidently thought that his shot had settled Laramie, as he was making no effort at concealment. Laramie lifted his rifle and pulled the trigger--and the hammer fell with an empty click. He had no more rifle cartridges. Below him the punchers were futilely firing at the tunnel entrance, and the outlaws within were wisely holding their fire until they could see something to shoot at.

Laramie crawled along a few feet to put himself out of range of the rifleman on the rim, then shouted: "Slim! Swing wide of that trail and come up here with yore men!"

He was understood, for presently Slim and the three surviving punchers came crawling over the tangle of rocks, having necessarily abandoned their horses.

"'Bout time you was gettin' here," grunted Laramie. "Gimme some .30-30s."

A handful of cartridges were shoved into his eager fingers.

"We come as soon as we could," said Slim. "Had to ride to the ranch to round up these snake-hunters."

"Where's Waters?"

"I left him in San Leon, cussin' a blue streak because he couldn't get nobody to listen to him. Folks got no more sense'n cattle; just as easy to stampede and as hard to git millin' once they bust loose."

"What about Bob Anders?"

"Doctor said he was just creased; was just fixin' to go over there when me and Joel come into town and he had to wait and dress Joel's leg. Hadn't come to hisself, last time the doc was there."

Laramie breathed a sigh of relief. At least Bob Anders was going to live, even if he hadn't been able to name the man who shot him. Soon Judy would know the truth. Laramie snapped into action.

"Unless Waters sends us more men, we're licked. Tunnel's cleared and men climbin' the cliff."

"You're shot!" Jones pointed to Laramie's shirt shoulder, soaked with blood.

"Forget it!" snapped Laramie. "Well, gimme that bandanna--" and while he knotted it into a crude bandage, he talked rapidly. "Three of you hombres stay here and watch that tunnel. Don't let nobody out, d'you hear? Me and Slim are goin' to circle around and argy with the gents climbin' the cliffs. Come on, Slim."

It was rough climbing, and Laramie's shoulder burned like fire, with a dull throbbing that told him the lead was pressing near a bone. But he set his teeth and crawled over the rough rocks, keeping out of sight of the men in the canyon below, until they had reached a point beyond his tiny fort on the rim, and that much closer to the stunted tree.

They had kept below the crest and had not been sighted by the outlaws on the rim, who had been engrossed in knotting a second rope, brought up by the second man, to the end of the lariat tied to the tree. This had been dropped down the wall again, and now another outlaw was hanging to the rope and being drawn straight up the cliff like a water bucket by his two friends above.

Slim and Laramie fired almost simultaneously. Slim's bullet burned the fingers of the man clinging to the lariat. He howled and let go the rope and fell fifteen feet to the canyon floor. Laramie winged one of the men on the cliff, but it did not affect his speed as he raced after his companion in a flight for cover. Bullets whizzed up from the canyon as the men below spotted Laramie and his companion. They ducked back, but relentlessly piled lead after the men fleeing along the rim of the cliff.

These worthies made no attempt to make a stand. They knew the lone defender had received reinforcements and they were not stopping to learn in what force. Laramie and Slim caught fleeting glimpses of the fugitives as they headed out through the hills.

"Let 'em go," grunted Laramie. "Be no more trouble from that quarter, and I bet them rannies won't try to climb that rope no more. Come on; I hear guns talkin' back at the tunnel."

Laramie and his companion reached the punchers on the ledge in time to see three horsemen streaking it down the trail, with lead humming after them. Three more figures lay sprawled about the mouth of the tunnel.

"They busted out on horseback," grunted one of the men, kneeling and aiming after the fleeing men. "Come so fast we couldn't stop 'em all--uh."

His shot punctuated his remarks, and one of the fleeing horsemen swayed in his saddle. One of the others seemed to be wounded, as the three ducked into the trees and out of sight.

"Three more hit the trail," grunted Slim.

"Not them," predicted Laramie. "They was bound to see us--know they ain't but five of us. They won't go far; they'll be sneakin' back to pot us in the back when their pards start bustin' out again."

"No racket in the tunnel now."

"They're layin' low for a spell. Too damn risky now. They didn't have but six horses in the tunnel. They got to catch more and bring 'em to the tunnel before they can make the rush.

"They'll wait till dark, and then we can't stop 'em from gettin' their cayuses into the tunnel. We can't stop 'em from tearin' out at this end, neither, unless we got more men. Slim, climb back up on the rim and lay down behind them rocks I stacked up. Watch that rope so nobody climbs it; we got to cut that, soon's it gets dark. And don't let no horses be brought into the tunnel, if you can help it."

Slim crawled away, and a few moments later his rifle began banging, and he yelled wrathfully: "They're already at it!"

"Listen!" ejaculated Laramie suddenly.

Down the trail, out of sight among the trees sounded a thundering of hoofs, yells and shots.

The shots ceased, then after a pause, the hoofs swept on, and a crowd of men burst into view.

"Yippee!" whooped one of the punchers bounding into the air and swinging his hat. "Reinforcements, b'golly! It's a regular army!"

"Looks like all San Leon was there!" bellowed another. "Hey, boys, don't git in line with that tunnel mouth! Spread out along the trail--who's them three fellers they got tied to their saddles?"

"The three snakes that broke loose from the tunnel!" yelped the third cowboy. "They scooped 'em in as they come! Looks like everybody's there. There's Charlie Ross, and Jim Watkins, the mayor, and Lon Evans, Mart Rawley's bartender--reckon he didn't know his boss was a crook--and by golly, look who's leadin' 'em!"

"Bob Anders!" ejaculated Laramie, staring at the pale-faced, but erect figure who, with bandaged head, rode ahead of the thirty or forty men who came clattering up the trail and swung wide through the brush to avoid the grim tunnel mouth. Anders saw him and waved his hand, and a deep yell of approbation rose from the men behind the sheriff. Laramie sighed deeply. A few hours ago these same men wanted to hang him.

Rifles were spitting from the tunnel, and the riders swung from their horses and began to take up positions on each side of the trail, as Anders took in the situation at a glance and snapped his orders. Rifles began to speak in answer to the shots of the outlaws. Laramie came clambering down the cliff to grasp Anders' outstretched hand.

"I came to just about the time you hit town today, Laramie," he said. "Was just tellin' Judy it couldn't been you that shot me, when all that hell busted loose and Judy run to help you out if she could. Time I could get my clothes on, and out-argy the doctor, and get on the streets, you was gone with these addle-heads chasin' you. We had to wait till they give up the chase and come back, and then me and Judy and Joel Waters lit into 'em. Time we got through talkin' they was plumb whipped down and achin' to take a hand in yore game."

"I owe you all a lot, especially your sister. Where's Rawley?" Laramie asked.

"We thought he was with us when we lit out after you," the sheriff answered. "But when we started back we missed him."

"Look out!" yelled Slim on the rim above them, pumping lead frantically. "They're rushin' for the tunnel on horses! Blame it, why ain't somebody up here with me? I can't stop 'em all--"

Evidently the gang inside the canyon had been whipped to desperation by the arrival of the reinforcements, for they came thundering through the tunnel laying down a barrage of lead as they came. It was sheer madness. They ran full into a blast of lead that piled screaming horses and writhing men in a red shambles. The survivors staggered back into the tunnel.

Struck by a sudden thought, Laramie groped among the bushes and hauled out the guard, Braxton, still bound and gagged. The fellow was conscious and glared balefully at his captor. Laramie tore the gag off, and demanded: "Where's Harrison and Rawley?"

"Rawley rode for San Leon after you got away from us this mornin'," growled Braxton sullenly. "Harrison's gone, got scared and pulled out. I dunno where he went."

"Yo're lyin'," accused Laramie.

"What'd you ast me for, if you know so much?" sneered Braxton, and lapsed in stubborn, hill-country silence, which Laramie knew nothing would break, so long as the man chose to hold his tongue.

"You mean Harrison's in on this, Buck?" the sheriff exclaimed. "Joel told me about Rawley."

"In on it?" Laramie laughed grimly. "Harrison is the kingpin, and Rawley is his chief sidewinder, I ain't seen neither Harrison nor Rawley since I got here. Be just like them rats to double-cross their own men, and run off with the loot they've already got.

"But we still got this nest to clean out, and here's my idea. Them that's still alive in the canyon are denned up in or near the tunnel. Nobody nigh the cabin. If four or five of us can hole up in there, we'll have 'em from both sides. We'll tie some lariats together, and some of us will go down the walls and get in the cabin. We'll scatter men along the rim to see none of 'em climb out, and we'll leave plenty men here to hold the tunnel if they try that again--which they will, as soon as it begins to get dark, if we don't scuttle 'em first."

"You ought a been a general, cowboy. Me and Slim and a couple of my Bar X boys'll go for the cabin. You better stay here; yore shoulder ain't fit for tight-rope work and such."

"She's my hand," growled Laramie. "I started dealin' her and I aim to set in till the last pot's raked in."

"Yo're the dealer," acquiesced Anders. "Let's go."

Ten minutes later found the party of five clustered on the canyon rim. The sun had not yet set beyond the peaks, but the canyon below was in shadow. The spot Laramie had chosen for descent was some distance beyond the stunted tree. The rim there was higher, the wall even more precipitous. It had the advantage, however, of an outjut of rock that would partially serve to mask the descent of a man on a lariat from the view of the men lurking about the head of the canyon.

If anyone saw the descent of the five invaders, there was no sign to show they had been discovered. Man after man they slid down the dangling rope and crouched at the foot, Winchesters ready. Laramie came last, clinging with one hand and gritting his teeth against the pain of his wounded shoulder. Then began the advance on the cabin.

That slow, tortuous crawl across the canyon floor seemed endless. Laramie counted the seconds, fearful that they would be seen, fearful that night would shut down before they were forted. The western rim of the canyon seemed crested with golden fire, contrasting with the blue shadows floating beneath it. He sighed gustily as they reached their goal, with still

enough light for their purpose.

The cabin doors were shut, the windows closely shuttered.

"Let's go!" Anders had one hand on the door, drawn Colt in the other.

"Wait," grunted Laramie. "I stuck my head into a loop here once already today. You all stay here while I take a pasear around to the back and look things over from that side. Don't go in till you hear me holler."

Then Laramie was sneaking around the cabin, Indian-fashion, gun in hand. He was little more than half the distance to the back when he was paralyzed to hear a voice inside the cabin call out: "All clear!"

Before he could move or shout a warning, he heard Anders answer: "Comin', Buck!" Then the front door slammed, and there was the sound of a sliding bolt, a yell of dismay from the Bar X men. With sick fury Laramie realized that somebody lurking inside the cabin had heard him giving his instructions and imitated his voice to trick the sheriff into entering. Confirmation came instantly, in a familiar voice--the voice of Ely Harrison!

"Now we can make terms, gentlemen!" shouted the banker, his voice rasping with ferocious exultation. "We've got your sheriff in a wolf-trap with hot lead teeth! You can give us road-belts to Mexico, or he'll be deader than hell in three minutes!"

Chapter XI: Killer Unmasked

Laramie was charging for the rear of the house before the triumphant shout ended. Anders would never agree to buying freedom for that gang to save his own life; and Laramie knew that whatever truce might be agreed upon, Harrison would never let the sheriff live.

The same thought motivated the savage attack of Slim Jones and the Bar X men on the front door; but that door happened to be of unusual strength. Nothing short of a log battering ram could smash it. The rear door was of ordinary thin paneling.

Bracing his good right shoulder to the shock, Laramie rammed his full charging weight against the rear door. It crashed inward and he catapulted into the room gun-first.

He had a fleeting glimpse of a swarthy Mexican wheeling from the doorway that led into the main room, and then he ducked and jerked the trigger as a knife sang past his head. The roar of the .45 shook the narrow room and the knife thrower hit the planks and lay twitching.

With a lunging stride Laramie was through the door, into the main room. He caught a glimpse of men standing momentarily frozen, glaring up from their work of tying Bob Anders to a chair--Ely Harrison, another Mexican, and Mart Rawley.

For an infinitesimal tick of time the scene held--then blurred with gun-smoke as the .45s roared death across the narrow confines. Hot lead was a coal of hell burning its way through the flesh of Laramie's already wounded shoulder. Bob Anders lurched out of the chair, rolling clumsily toward the wall. The room was a mad welter of sound and smoke in the last light of gathering dusk.

Laramie half rolled behind the partial cover of a cast iron stove, drawing his second gun. The Mexican fled to the bunk-room, howling, his broken left arm flopping. Mart Rawley backed after him at a stumbling run, shooting as he went; crouched inside the door he glared, awaiting his chance. But Harrison, already badly wounded, had gone berserk. Disdaining cover, or touched with madness, he came storming across the room, shooting as he came, spattering blood at every step. His eyes flamed through the drifting fog of smoke like those of a rabid wolf.

Laramie raised himself to his full height and faced him. Searing lead whined past his ear, jerked at his shirt, stung his thigh; but his own gun was burning red and Harrison was swaying in his stride like a bull which feels the matador's steel. His last shot flamed almost in Laramie's face, and then at close range a bullet split the cold heart of the devil of San Leon, and the greed and ambitions of Ely Harrison were over.

Laramie, with one loaded cartridge left in his last gun, leaned back against the wall, out of range of the bunk room.

"Come on out, Rawley," he called. "Harrison's dead. Yore game's played out."

The hidden gunman spat like an infuriated cat.

"No, my game ain't played out!" he yelled in a voice edged with blood-madness. "Not till I've wiped you out, you mangy stray. But before I kill you, I want you to know that you ain't the first Laramie I've sent to hell! I'd of thought you'd knowed me, in spite of these whiskers. I'm Rawlins, you fool! Killer Rawlins, that plugged yore horse-thief brother Luke in Santa Maria!"

"Rawlins!" snarled Laramie, suddenly white. "No wonder you knowed me!"

"Yes, Rawlins!" howled the gunman. "I'm the one that made friends with Luke Laramie and got him drunk till he told me all about this hide-out and the trails across the desert. Then I picked a fight with Luke when he was too drunk to stand, and killed him to keep his mouth shut! And what you goin' to do about it?"

"I'm going to kill you, you hell-buzzard!" gritted Laramie, lurching away from the wall as Rawlins came frothing through the door, with both guns blazing. Laramie fired once from the hip. His last bullet ripped through Killer Rawlins' warped brain. Laramie looked down on him as he died, with his spurred heels drumming a death-march on the floor.

Frantic feet behind him brought him around to see a livid, swarthy face convulsed with fear and hate, a brown arm lifting a razor-edged knife. He had forgotten the Mexican. He threw up his empty pistol to guard the downward sweep of the sharp blade, then once more the blast of a six-gun shook the room. Jose Martinez of Chihuahua lifted one scream of invocation and blasphemy at some forgotten Aztec god, as his soul went speeding its way to hell.

Laramie turned and stared stupidly through the smoke-blurred dusk at a tall, slim figure holding a smoking gun. Others were pouring in through the kitchen. So brief had been the desperate fight that the men who had raced around the house at the first bellow of the guns, had just reached the scene. Laramie shook his head dazedly.

"Slim!" he muttered. "See if Bob's hurt!"

"Not me!" The sheriff answered for himself, struggling up to a sitting posture by the wall. "I fell outa the chair and rolled outa line when the lead started singin'. Cut me loose, somebody."

"Cut him loose, Slim," mumbled Laramie. "I'm kinda dizzy."

Stark silence followed the roar of the six-guns, silence that hurt Buck Laramie's ear-drums. Like a man in a daze he staggered to a chair and sank down heavily upon it. Scarcely knowing what he did he found himself muttering the words of a song he hated:

"When the folks heard that Brady was dead,
They all turned out, all dressed in red;
Marched down the street a-singin' a song:
'Brady's gone to hell with his Stetson on!'"

He was hardly aware when Bob Anders came and cut his blood-soaked shirt away and washed his wounds, dressing them as best he could with strips torn from his own shirt, and whisky from a jug found on the table. The bite of the alcohol roused Laramie from the daze that enveloped him, and a deep swig of the same medicine cleared his dizzy head.

Laramie rose stiffly; he glanced about at the dead men staring glassily in the lamplight, shuddered, and retched suddenly at the reek of the blood that blackened the planks.

"Let's get out in the open!"

As they emerged into the cool dusk, they were aware that the shooting had ceased. A voice was bawling loudly at the head of the canyon, though the distance made the words unintelligible.

Slim came running back through the dusk.

"They're makin' a parley, Bob!" he reported. "They want to know if they'll be give a fair trial if they surrender."

"I'll talk to 'em. Rest of you keep under cover."

The sheriff worked toward the head of the canyon until he was within earshot of the men in and about the tunnel, and shouted: "Are you hombres ready to give in?"

"What's yore terms?" bawled back the spokesman, recognizing the sheriff's voice.

"I ain't makin' terms. You'll all get a fair trial in an honest court. You better make up yore minds. I know they ain't a lot of you left. Harrison's dead and so is Rawley. I got forty men outside this canyon and enough inside, behind you, to wipe you out. Throw yore guns out here where I can see 'em, and come out with yore hands high. I'll give you till I count ten."

And as he began to count, rifles and pistols began clattering on the bare earth, and haggard, blood-stained, powder-blackened men rose from behind rocks with their hands in the air, and came out of the tunnel in the same manner.

"We quits," announced the spokesman. "Four of the boys are laying back amongst the rocks too shot up to move under their own power. One's got a broke laig where his horse fell on him. Some of the rest of us need to have wounds dressed."

Laramie and Slim and the punchers came out of cover, with guns trained on the weary outlaws, and at a shout from Anders, the men outside came streaming through the tunnel, whooping vengefully.

"No mob-stuff," warned Anders, as the men grabbed the prisoners and bound their hands, none too gently. "Get those four wounded men out of the rocks, and we'll see what we can do for them."

Presently, a curious parade came filing through the tunnel into the outer valley where twilight still lingered. And as Laramie emerged from that dark tunnel, he felt as if his dark and sinister past had fallen from him like a worn-out coat.

One of the four wounded men who had been brought through the tunnel on crude stretchers rigged out of rifles and coats was in a talkative mood. Fear and the pain of his wound had broken his nerve entirely and he was overflowing with information.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know! Put in a good word for me at my trial, and I'll spill the works!" he declaimed, ignoring the sullen glares of his hardier companions.

"How did Harrison get mixed up in this deal?" demanded the sheriff.

"Mixed, hell! He planned the whole thing. He was cashier in the bank when the Laramies robbed it; the real ones, I mean. If it hadn't been for that robbery, old Brown would soon found out that Harrison was stealin' from him. But the Laramies killed Brown and give Harrison a chance to cover his tracks. They got blamed for the dough he'd stole, as well as the money they'd actually taken.

"That give Harrison an idee how to be king of San Leon. The Laramies had acted as scapegoats for him once, and he aimed to use 'em again. But he had to wait till he could get to be president of the bank, and had taken time to round up a gang."

"So he'd ruin the ranchers, give mortgages and finally get their outfits, and then send his coyotes outa the country and be king of San Leon," broke in Laramie. "We know that part of it. Where'd Rawlins come in?"

"Harrison knowed him years ago, on the Rio Grande. When Harrison aimed to raise his gang, he went to Mexico and found Rawlins. Harrison knowed the real Laramies had a secret hide-out, so Rawlins made friends with Luke Laramie, and--"

"We know all about that," interrupted Anders with a quick glance at Buck.

"Yeah? Well, everything was bueno till word come from Mexico that Buck Laramie was ridin' up from there. Harrison got skittish. He thought Laramie was comin' to take toll for his brother. So he sent Rawlins to waylay Laramie. Rawlins missed, but later went on to San Leon to try again. He shot you instead, Anders. Word was out to get you, anyway. You'd been prowlin' too close to our hide-out to suit Harrison.

"Harrison seemed to kinda go locoed when first he heard Laramie was headin' this way. He made us pull that fool stunt of a fake bank hold-up to pull wool over folks's eyes more'n ever. Hell, nobody suspected him anyway. Then he risked comin' out here. But he was panicky and wanted us to git ready to make a clean sweep tonight and pull out. When Laramie got away from us this mornin', Harrison decided he'd ride to Mexico with us.

"Well, when the fightin' had started, Harrison and Rawley stayed out a sight. Nothin' they could do, and they hoped we'd be able to break out of the canyon. They didn't want to be seen and recognized. If it should turn out Laramie hadn't told anybody he was head of the gang, Harrison would be able to stay on, then."

Preparations were being made to start back to San Leon with the prisoners, when a sheepish looking delegation headed by Mayor Jim Watkins approached Laramie. Watkins hummed and hawed with embarrassment, and finally blurted out, with typical Western bluntness:

"Look here, Laramie, we owe you somethin' now, and we're just as hot too pay our debts as you are to pay yours. Harrison had a small ranch out a ways from town, which he ain't needin' no more, and he ain't got no heirs, so we can get it easy enough. We thought if you was aimin', maybe, to stay around San Leon, we'd like powerful well to make you a present of that ranch, and kinda help you get a start in the cow business. And we don't want the fifty thousand Waters said you aimed to give us. You've wiped out that debt."

A curious moroseness had settled over Laramie, a futile feeling of anti-climax, and a bitter yearning he did not understand. He felt old and weary, a desire to be alone, and an urge to ride away over the rim of the world and forget--he did not even realize what it was he wanted to forget.

"Thanks." he muttered. "I'm paying that fifty thousand back to the men it belonged to. And I'll be movin' on tomorrow."

"Where to?"

He made a helpless, uncertain gesture.

"You think it over," urged Watkins, turning away. Men were already mounting, moving down the trail. Anders touched Laramie's sleeve.

"Let's go. Buck. You need some attention on them wounds."

"Go ahead. Bob. I'll be along. I wanta kind set here and rest."

Anders glanced sharply at him and then made a hidden gesture to Slim Jones, and turned away. The cavalcade moved down the trail in the growing darkness, armed men riding toward a new era of peace and prosperity; gaunt, haggard bound men riding toward the penitentiary and the gallows.

Laramie sat motionless, his empty hands hanging limp on his knees. A vital chapter in his life had closed, leaving him without a goal. He had kept his vow. Now he had no plan or purpose to take its place.

Slim Jones, standing nearby, not understanding Laramie's mood, but not intruding on it, started to speak. Then both men lifted their heads at the unexpected rumble of wheels.

"A buckboard!" ejaculated Slim.

"No buckboard ever come up that trail," snorted Laramie.

"One's comin' now; and who d'you think? Old Joel, by golly. And look who's drivin'!"

Laramie's heart gave a convulsive leap and then started pounding as he saw the slim supple figure beside the old rancher. She pulled up near them and handed the lines to Slim, who sprang to help her down.

"Biggest fight ever fit in San Leon County!" roared Waters, "and I didn't git to fire a shot. Cuss a busted laig, anyway!"

"You done a man's part, anyway, Joel," assured Laramie; and then he forgot Joel Waters entirely, in the miracle of seeing Judy Anders standing before him, smiling gently, her hand outstretched and the rising moon melting her soft hair to golden witch-fire.

"I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you today," she said softly. "I've been bitter about things that were none of your fault."

"D-don't apologize, please," he stuttered, inwardly cursing himself because of his confusion. The touch of her slim, firm hand sent shivers through his frame and he knew all at once what that empty, gnawing yearning was; the more poignant now, because so unattainable.

"You saved my neck. Nobody that does that needs to apologize. You was probably right, anyhow. Er--uh--Bob went down the trail with the others. You must have missed him."

"I saw him and talked to him," she said softly. "He said you were behind them. I came on, expecting to meet you."

He was momentarily startled. "You came on to meet me? Oh, of course. Joel would want to see how bad shot up I was." He achieved a ghastly excuse for a laugh.

"Mr. Waters wanted to see you, of course. But I--Buck, I wanted to see you, too."

She was leaning close to him, looking up at him, and he was dizzy with the fragrance and beauty of her; and in his dizziness said the most inane and idiotic thing he could possibly have said.

"To see me?" he gurgled wildly. "What--what you want to see me for?"

She seemed to draw away from him and her voice was a bit too precise.

"I wanted to apologize for my rudeness this morning," she said, a little distantly.

"I said don't apologize to me," he gasped. "You saved my life--and I--I--Judy, dang it, I love you!"

It was out--the amazing statement, blurted out involuntarily. He was frozen by his own audacity, stunned and paralyzed. But she did not seem to mind. Somehow he found she was in his arms, and numbly he heard her saying: "I love you too, Buck. I've loved you ever since I was a little girl, and we went to school together. Only I've tried to force myself not to think of you for the past six years. But I've loved the memory of you--that's why it hurt me so to think that you'd gone bad--as I thought you had. That horse I brought you--it wasn't altogether because you'd helped Bob that I brought it to you. It--it was partly because of my own feeling. Oh, Buck, to learn you're straight and honorable is like having a black shadow lifted from between us. You'll never leave me, Buck?"

"Leave you?" Laramie gasped. "Just long enough to find Watkins and tell him I'm takin' him up on a proposition he made me, and then I'm aimin' on spendin' the rest of my life makin' you happy." The rest was lost in a perfectly natural sound.

"Kissin'!" beamed Joel Waters, sitting in his buckboard and gently manipulating his wounded leg. "Reckon they'll be a marryin' in these parts purty soon, Slim."

"Don't tell me yo're figgerin' on gittin' hitched?" inquired Slim, pretending to misunderstand, but grinning behind his hand.

"You go light on that sarcastic tone. I'm liable to git married any day now. It's just a matter of time till I decide what type of woman would make me the best wife."

Contents

"GOLDEN HOPE" CHRISTMAS

by Robert E. Howard

Chapter 1

Red Ghallinan was a gunman. Not a trade to be proud of, perhaps, but Red was proud of it. Proud of his skill with a gun, proud of the notches on the long blue barrel of his heavy .45s. Red was a wiry, medium-sized man with a cruel, thin lipped mouth and close-set, shifty eyes. He was bow-legged from much riding, and, with his slouching walk and hard face he was, indeed, an unprepossessing figure. Red's mind and soul were as warped as his exterior. His insister reputation caused men to strive to avoid offending him but at the same tome to cut him off from the fellowship of people. No man, good or bad, cares to chum with a killer. Even the outlaws hated him and feared him too much to admit him to their gang, so he was a lone wolf. But a lone wolf may sometimes be more feared than the whole pack.

Let us not blame Red too much. He was born and reared in an environment of evil. His father and his father's father had been rustlers and gun-fighters. Until he was a grown man, Red knew nothing but crime as a legitimate way of making a living and by the time he learned that a man may earn a sufficient livelihood and still remain within the law he was too set in his ways to change. So it was not altogether his fault that he was a gunfighter. Rather, it was the fault of those unscrupulous politicians and mine-owners who hired him to kill their enemies. For that was the way Red lived. He was a born gun-fighter. The killer instinct burned strongly in him—the heritage of Cain. He had never seen the man who surpassed him or even equalled him in the speed of the draw or in swift, straight shooting. These qualities together with the cold nerve and reckless bravery that goes with red hair, made him much in demand with rich men who had enemies. So he did a large business.

But the fore-van of the law began to come into Idaho and Red saw with hate the first sign of that organization which had driven him out of Texas a few years before—the vigilantes. Red's jobs became fewer and fewer for he feared to kill unless he could make it appear self-defense.

At last it reached a point where Red was faced with the alternative of moving on or going to work. So he rode over to miner's cabin and announced his intention of buying the miner's claim. The miner, after one skittish glance at Red's guns, sold his claim for fifty dollars, signed the deed and left the country precipitately.

Red worked the claim for a few days and then quit in disgust. He had not gotten one ounce of gold dust. This was due, partly to his distaste for work, partly to his ignorance of placer mining and mostly to the poorness of the claim.

He was standing in the front door of the saloon of the mining town, when the stage-coach drove in and a passenger alit.

He was a well built, frank-appearing young fellow and Red hated him instinctively. Hated him for his cleanliness, for his open, honest, pleasant face, because he was everything that Red was not.

The newcomer was very friendly and very soon the whole town knew his antecedents. His name was Hal Sharon, a tenderfoot from the east, who had come to Idaho with the hopes of striking a bonanza and going home wealthy. Of course there was a girl in the case, though Hal said little on that point. He had a few hundred dollars and wanted to buy a good claim. At this Red took a new interest in the young man.

Red bought drinks and lauded his claim. Sharon proved singularly trustful. He did not ask to see the claim but took Red's word for it. A trustfulness that would have touched a less hardened man than Red.

One or two men, angered at the deliberate swindle, tried to warn Hal but a cold glance from Red caused them to change their minds. Hal bought Red's claim for five hundred dollars.

He toiled unceasingly all fall and early winter, barely making enugh to keep him in food and clothes, while Red lived in the little town and sneered at his uncomplaining efforts.

Christmas in the air. Everywhere the miners stopped work and came to town to live until the snow should have melted and the ground thawed out in the spring. Only Hal Sharon stayed at his claim, working on in the cold and snow, spurred on by the thought of riches—and a girl.

It was a little over three weeks until Christmas when, one cold night Red Ghallinan sat by the stove in the saloon and listened to the blizzard outside. He though to Sharon, doubtless shivering in his cabin up on the slopes, and he sneered. He listened idly to the talk of the miners and cow-punchers who were discussing the coming festivals, a dance and so on.

Christmas meant nothing to Red. Though the one bright spot I his life had been one Christmas years ago when Red was a ragged waif, shivering on the snow covered streets of Kansas City.

He had passed a great church and, attracted by the warmth, had entered timidly. The people had sung, "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing!" and when the congregation passed out, an old, white haired woman had seen the boy and had taken him home and fed him and clothed him. Red had lived in her home as one of the family until spring, but when the wild geese began to fly north and the trees began to bud, the wanderlust got into the boy's blood and he ran away and came back to his native Texas prairies. But that was years ago and Red never thought of it now.

The door flew open and a furred and muffled figure strode in. It was Sharon—his hands shoved deep in his coat pockets.

Instantly Red was on his feet, hand twisting just above a gun. But Hal took no notice of him. He pushed his way to the bar.

"Boys," he said: "I named my claim the Golden Hope, and it was a true name! Boys, I've struck it rich!"

And he threw a double handful of nuggets and gold-dust on the bar.

Christmas Eve Red stood in the door of an eating house and watched Sharon coming down the slope, whistling merrily. He had a right to be merry. He was already worth twelve thousand dollars and had not exhausted his claim by half. Red watched with hate in his eyes. Ever since the night that Sharon had thrown his first gold on the bar, his hatred of the man had grown. Hal's fortune seemed a personal injury to Red. Had he not worked like a slave on that claim without getting a pound of gold? And here this stranger had come and gotten rich off the same claim! Thousands to him, a measly five hundred to Red. To Red's warped mind this assumed monstrous proportions—an outrage. He hated Sharon as he had never hated a man before. And since with him to hate was to kill, he determined to kill Hal Sharon. With a curse he reached for a gun when a thought stayed his hand. The Vigilantes! They would get him sure if he killed Sharon openly. A cunning light came to his eyes and he turned and strode away toward the unpretentious boarding house where he stayed.

Hal Sharon walked into a saloon.

"Seen Ghallinan lately?" he asked.

The bartender shook his head.

Hal tossed a bulging buck-sack on the bar.

"Give that to him when you see him. It's got about a thousand dollars worth of gold-dust in it."

The bartender gasped. "What! You giving Red a thousand bucks after he tried to swindle you? Yes, it is safe here. Ain't a galoot in camp touch anything belonging to a gun-fighter. But say—"

"Well," answered Hal, "I don't think he got enough for his claim; he practically gave it to me. And anyway, " he laughed over his shoulder, "It's Christmas!"

Chapter 2

Morning in the mountains. The highest peaks touched with a delicate pink. The stars paling as the darkness grew grey. Light on the peaks, shadow still in the valleys, as if the paint brush of the Master had but passed lightly over the land, coloring openly the highest places, the places nearest to Him. Now the light-legions began to invade the valleys, driving before them the darkness; the light on the peaks grew stronger, the snow beginning to cast back the light. But as yet no sun. The king had sent his courtiers before him but he himself had not appeared.

In a certain valley, smoke curled from the chimney of a rude log cabin. High on the hillside, a man gave a grunt of satisfaction. The man lay in a hollow, from which he had scraped the drifted snow. Ever since the first hint of dawn, he had lain there, watching the cabin. A heavy rifle lay beneath his arm.

Down in the valley, the cabin door swung wide and a man stepped out. The watcher on the hill saw that it was the man he had come to kill.

Hal Sharon threw his arms wide and laughed aloud in the sheer joy of living. Up on the hill, Red Ghallinan watched the man over the sights of a Sharpe .50 rifle. For the first time he noticed what a magnificent figure the young man was. Tall, strong, handsome, with the glow of health on his cheek.

For some reason Red was not getting the enjoyment he thought he would. He shook his shoulders impatiently. His finger tightened on the trigger—suddenly Hal broke into song; the words floated clearly to Red.

"Hark, the Herald Angels Sing!"

Where had he heard that song before? Suddenly a mist floated across Red Ghallinan's eyes; the rifle slipped unnoticed from his hands, He drew his hand across his eyes and looked toward the eat. There, alone hung one great star and as he looked, over the shoulder of a great mountain came the great sun.

"Gawd!" gulped Red, why—it is Christmas!"

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MOUNTAIN MAN

By Robert E. Howard

I was robbing a bee tree, when I heard my old man calling: "Breckinridge! Oh, Breckinridge! Where air you? I see you now. You don't need to climb that tree. I ain't goin' to larrup you."

He come up, and said: "Breckinridge, ain't that a bee settin' on yore ear?"

I reached up, and sure enough, it was. Come to think about it, I had felt kind of like something was stinging me somewhere.

"I swar, Breckinridge," said pap, "I never seen a hide like your'n. Listen to me: old Buffalo Rogers is back from Tomahawk, and the postmaster there said they was a letter for me, from Mississippi. He wouldn't give it to nobody but me or some of my folks. I dunno who'd be writin' me from Mississippi; last time I was there, was when I was fightin' the Yankees. But anyway, that letter is got to be got. Me and yore maw has decided you're to go git it. Yuh hear me, Breckinridge?"

"Clean to Tomahawk?" I said. "Gee whiz, pap!"

"Well," he said, combing his beard with his fingers, "yo're growed in size, if not in years. It's time you seen somethin' of the world. You ain't never been more'n thirty miles away from the cabin you was born in. Yore brother John ain't able to go on account of that ba'r he tangled with, and Bill is busy skinnin' the ba'r. You been to whar the trail passes, goin' to Tomahawk. All you got to do is foller it and turn to the right where it forks. The left goes on to Perdition."

Well, I was all eager to see the world, and the next morning I was off, dressed in new buckskins and riding my mule Alexander. Pap rode with me a few miles and give me advice.

"Be keerful how you spend that dollar I give you," he said. "Don't gamble. Drink in reason; half a gallon of corn juice is enough for any man. Don't be techy--but don't forgit that yore pap was once the rough-and-tumble champeen of Gonzales County, Texas. And whilst yo're feelin' for the other feller's eye, don't be keerless and let him chaw yore ear off. And don't resist no officer."

"What's them, pap?" I inquired.

"Down in the settlements," he explained, "they has men which their job is to keep the peace. I don't take no stock in law myself, but them city folks is different from us. You do what they says, and if they says give up yore gun, why, you up and do it!"

I was shocked, and meditated awhile, and then says: "How can I tell which is them?"

"They'll have a silver star on their shirt," he says, so I said I'd do like he told me. He reined around and went back up the mountains, and I rode on down the path.

WELL, I CAMPED THAT NIGHT where the path come out on to the main trail, and the next morning I rode on down the trail, feeling like I was a long way from home. I hadn't went far till I passed a stream, and decided I'd take a bath. So I tied Alexander to a tree, and hung my buckskins near by, but I took my gun belt with my old cap-and-ball .44 and hung it on a limb reaching out over the water. There was thick bushes all around the hole.

Well, I div deep, and as I come up, I had a feeling like somebody had hit me over the head with a club. I looked up, and there was a feller holding on to a limb with one hand and leaning out over the water with a club in the other hand.

He yelled and swung at me again, but I div, and he missed, and I come up right under the limb where my gun hung. I reached up and grabbed it and let bam at him just as he dived into the bushes, and he let out a squall and grabbed the seat of his pants. Next minute I heard a horse running, and glimpsed him tearing away through the brush on a pinto mustang, setting his horse like it was a red-hot stove, and dern him, he had my clothes in one hand! I was so upsot by this that I missed him clean, and jumping out, I charged through the bushes and saplings, but he was already out of sight. I knowed it was one of them derned renegades which hid up in the hills and snuck down to steal, and I wasn't afraid none. But what a fix I was in! He'd even stole my moccasins.

I couldn't go home, in that shape, without the letter, and admit I missed a robber twice. Pap would larrup the tar out of me. And if I went on, what if I met some women, in the valley settlements? I don't reckon they was ever a youngster half as bashful as what I was in them days. Cold sweat bust out all over me. At last, in desperation, I buckled my belt on and started down the trail toward Tomahawk. I was desperate enough to commit murder to get me some pants.

I was glad the Indian didn't steal Alexander, but the going was so rough I had to walk and lead him, because I kept to the brush alongside the trail. He had a tough time getting through the bushes, and the thorns scratched him so he hollered, and ever' now and then I had to lift him over jagged rocks. It was tough on Alexander, but I was too bashful to travel in the open trail without no clothes on.

AFTER I'D GONE MAYBE a mile I heard somebody in the trail ahead of me, and peeking through the bushes, I seen a most peculiar sight. It was a man on foot, going the same direction as me, and he had on what I instinctively guessed was city clothes. They wasn't buckskin, and was very beautiful, with big checks and stripes all over them. He had on a round hat with a narrow brim, and shoes like I hadn't never seen before, being neither boots nor moccasins. He was dusty, and he cussed as he limped along. Ahead of him I seen the trail made a horseshoe bend, so I cut straight across and got ahead of him, and as he come along, I stepped out of the brush and threw down on him with my cap-and-ball.

He throwed up his hands and hollered: "Don't shoot!"

"I don't want to, mister," I said, "but I got to have clothes!"

He shook his head like he couldn't believe I was so, and he said: "You ain't the color of a Injun, but--what kind of people live in these hills, anyway?"

"Most of 'em's Democrats," I said, "but I got no time to talk politics. You climb out of them clothes."

"My God!" he wailed. "My horse threw me off and ran away, and I've been walkin' for hours, expecting to get scalped by Injuns any minute, and now a naked lunatic on a mule demands my clothes! It's too much!"

"I can't argy, mister," I said; "somebody may come up the trail any minute. Hustle!" So saying I shot his hat off to encourage him.

He give a howl and shucked his duds in a hurry.

"My underclothes, too?" he demanded, shivering though it was very hot.

"Is that what them things is?" I demanded, shocked. "I never heard of a man wearin' such womanish things. The country is goin' to the dogs, just like pap says. You better get goin'. Take my mule. When I get to where I can get some regular clothes, we'll swap back."

He clumb on to Alexander kind of dubious, and says to me, despairful: "Will you tell me one thing--how do I get to Tomahawk?"

"Take the next turn to the right," I said, "and--"

Just then Alexander turned his head and seen them underclothes on his back, and he give a loud and ringing bray and sot sail down the trail at full speed, with the stranger hanging on with both hands. Before they was out of sight they come to where the trail forked, and Alexander took the left instead of the right, and vanished amongst the ridges.

I put on the clothes, and they scratched my hide something fierce. I hadn't never wore nothing but buckskin. The coat split down the back, and the pants was too short, but the shoes was the worst; they pinched all over. I throwed away the socks, having never wore none, but put on what was left of the hat.

I went on down the trail, and took the right-hand fork, and in a mile or so I come out on a flat, and heard horses running. The next thing a mob of horsemen bust into view. One of 'em yelled: "There he is!" and they all come for me, full tilt. Instantly I decided that the stranger had got to Tomahawk, after all, and set a posse on to me for stealing his clothes.

SO I LEFT THE TRAIL AND took out across the sage grass and they all charged after me, yelling for me to stop. Well, them dern shoes pinched my feet so bad I couldn't hardly run, so after I had run five or six hundred yards, I perceived that the horses were beginning to gain on me. So I wheeled with my cap-and-ball in my hand, but I was going so fast, when I turned, them dern shoes slipped and I went over backwards into some cactus just as I pulled the trigger. So I only knocked the hat off of the first horseman. He yelled and pulled up his horse, right over me nearly, and as I drawed another bead on him, I seen he had a bright shiny star on his shirt. I dropped my gun and stuck up my hands.

They swarmed around me--cowboys, from their looks. The man with the star dismounted and picked up my gun and cussed.

"What did you lead us this chase through this heat and shoot at me for?" he demanded.

"I didn't know you was a officer," I said.

"Hell, McVey," said one of 'em, "you know how jumpy tenderfeet is. Likely he thought we was Santry's outlaws. Where's yore horse?"

"I ain't got none," I said.

"Got away from you, hey?" said McVey. "Well, climb up behind Kirby here, and let's get goin'."

To my astonishment, the sheriff stuck my gun back in the scabbard, and I clumb up behind Kirby, and away we went. Kirby kept telling me not to fall off, and it made me mad, but I said nothing. After a hour or so we come to a bunch of houses they said was Tomahawk. I got panicky when I seen all them houses, and would have jumped down and run for the mountains, only I knowed they'd catch me, with them dern pinchy shoes on.

I hadn't never seen such houses before. They was made out of boards, mostly, and some was two stories high. To the northwest and west the hills riz up a few hundred yards from the backs of the houses, and on the other sides there was plains, with brush and timber on them.

"You boys ride into town and tell the folks that the shebangs starts soon," said McVey. "Me and Kirby and Richards will take him to the ring."

I COULD SEE PEOPLE milling around in the streets, and I never had no idee there was that many folks in the world. The sheriff and the other two fellows rode around the north end of the town and stopped at a old barn and told me to get off. So I did, and we went in and they had a kind of room fixed up in there with benches and a lot of towels and water buckets, and the sheriff said: "This ain't much of a dressin'-room, but it'll have to do. Us boys don't know much about this game, but we'll second as good as we can. One thing--the other fellow ain't got no manager or seconds neither. How do you feel?"

"Fine," I said, "but I'm kind of hungry."

"Go get him somethin', Richards," said the sheriff.

"I didn't think they ate just before a bout," said Richards.

"Aw, I reckon he knows what he's doin'," said McVey. "Gwan."

So Richards left, and the sheriff and Kirby walked around me like I was a prize bull, and felt my muscles, and the sheriff said: "By golly, if size means anything, our dough is as good as in our britches right now!"

My dollar was in my belt. I said I would pay for my keep, and they haw-hawed and slapped me on the back and said I was a great joker. Then Richards come back with a platter of grub, with a lot of men wearing boots and guns, and they stomped in and gawped at me, and McVey said, "Look him over, boys! Tomahawk stands or falls with him today!"

They started walking around me like him and Kirby done, and I was embarrassed and et three or four pounds of beef and a quart of mashed potaters, and a big hunk of white bread, and drunk about a gallon of water, because I was pretty thirsty. Then they all gaped like they was surprised about something, and one of 'em said: "How come he didn't arrive on the stagecoach yesterday?"

"Well," the sheriff said, "the driver told me he was so drunk they left him at Bisney, and come on with his luggage, which is over there in the corner. They got a horse and left it there with instructions for him to ride to Tomahawk as soon as he sobered up. Me and the boys got nervous today when he didn't show up, so we went out lookin' for him, and met him hoofin' it down the trail."

"I bet them Perdition hombres starts somethin'," said Kirby. "Ain't a one of 'em showed up yet. They're settin' over at Perdition soakin' up bad licker and broodin' on their wrongs. They shore wanted this show staged over there. They claimed that since Tomahawk was furnishin' one-half of the attraction, and Gunstock the other half, the razee ought to be throwed at Perdition."

"Nothin' to it," said McVey. "It laid between Tomahawk and Gunstock, and we throwed a coin and won it. If Perdition wants trouble, she can get it. Is the boys r'arin' to go?"

"Is they!" said Richards, "Every bar in Tomahawk is crowded with hombres full of licker and civic pride. They're bettin' their shirts, and they has been nine fights already. Everybody in Gunstock's here."

"Well, let's get goin'," said McVey, getting nervous. "The quicker it's over, the less blood there's likely to be spilt."

The first thing I knowed, they had laid hold of me and was pulling my clothes off, so it dawned on me that I must be under arrest for stealing the stranger's clothes. Kirby dug into the baggage which was in one corner of the stall, and dragged out a funny looking pair of pants; I know now they was white silk. I put 'em on because I hadn't nothing else to put on, and they fit me like my skin. Richards tied a American flag around my waist, and they put some spiked shoes on my feet.

I LET 'EM DO LIKE THEY wanted to, remembering what pap said about not resisting an officer. Whilst so employed, I began to hear a noise outside, like a lot of people whooping and cheering. Pretty soon in come a skinny old gink with whiskers and two guns on, and he hollered: "Listen, Mac, dern it, a big shipment of gold is down there waitin' to be took off by the evenin' stage, and the whole blame town is deserted on account of this foolishness. Suppose Comanche Santry and his gang gets wind of it?"

"Well," said McVey, "I'll send Kirby here to help you guard it."

"You will like hell," said Kirby; "I'll resign as deputy first. I got every cent of my dough on this scrap, and I aim to see it."

"Well, send somebody!" said the old codger. "I got enough to do runnin' my store, and the stage stand, and the post office, without--"

He left, mumbling in his whiskers, and I said: "Who's that?"

"Aw," said Kirby, "that's old man Braxton that runs that store down at the other end of town, on the east side of the street. The post office is in there, too."

"I got to see him," I said, "there's a letter--"

Just then another man come surging in and hollered: "Hey, is your man ready? Everybody's gettin' impatient."

"All right," said McVey, throwing over me a thing he called a bathrobe. Him and Kirby and Richards picked up towels and buckets and we went out the opposite door from what we come in, and there was a big crowd of people there, and they whooped and shot off their pistols. I would have bolted back into the barn, only they grabbed me and said it was all right. We went through the crowd and I never seen so many boots and pistols in my life, and we come to a square pen made out of four posts set in the ground, and ropes stretched between. They called this a ring, and told me to get in it. I done so, and they had turf packed down so the ground was level as a floor and hard and solid. They told me to set down on a stool in one corner, and I did, and wrapped my robe around me like a Injun.

Then everybody yelled, and some men, from Gunstock, they said, clumb through the ropes on the other side. One of them was dressed like I was, and I never seen such a human. His ears looked like cabbages, his nose was flat, and his head was shaved. He set down in a opposite corner.

Then a fellow got up and waved his arms, and hollered: "Gents, you all know the occasion of this here suspicious event. Mr. Bat O'Tool, happenin' to pass through Gunstock, consented to fight anybody which would meet him. Tomahawk 'lowed to furnish that opposition, by sendin' all the way to Denver to procure the services of Mr. Bruiser McGoorty, formerly of San Francisco."

He pointed at me. Everybody cheered and shot off their pistols and I was embarrassed and bust out in a cold sweat.

"This fight," said the fellow, "will be fit accordin' to London Prize Ring Rules, same as in a champeenship go. Bare fists, round ends when one of 'em's knocked down or throwed down. Fight lasts till one or t'other ain't able to come up to the scratch at the call of time. I, Yucca Blaine, have been selected referee because, bein' from Chawed Ear, I got no prejudices either way. Are you all ready? Time!"

MCVEY HAULED ME OFF my stool and pulled off my bathrobe and pushed me out into the ring. I nearly died with embarrassment, but I seen the fellow they called O'Tool didn't have on more clothes than me. He approached and held out his hand, so I held out mine. We shook hands and then without no warning, he hit me an awful lick on the jaw with his left. It was like being kicked by a mule. The first part of me which hit the turf was the back of my head. O'Tool stalked back to his corner, and the Gunstock boys was dancing and hugging each other, and the Tomahawk fellows was growling in their whiskers and fumbling for guns and bowie knives.

McVey and his men rushed into the ring before I could get up and dragged me to my corner and began pouring water on me.

"Are you hurt much?" yelled McVey.

"How can a man's fist hurt anybody?" I asked. "I wouldn't have fell down, only it was so unexpected. I didn't know he was goin' to hit me. I never played no game like this before."

McVey dropped the towel he was beating me in the face with, and turned pale. "Ain't you Bruiser McGoorty of San Francisco?" he hollered.

"Naw," I said; "I'm Breckinridge Elkins, from up in the Humbolt mountains. I come here to get a letter for pap."

"But the stage driver described them clothes--" he begun wildly.

"A feller stole my clothes," I explained, "so I took some off'n a stranger. Maybe he was Mr. McGoorty."

"What's the matter?" asked Kirby, coming up with another bucket of water. "Time's about ready to be called."

"We're sunk!" bawled McVey. "This ain't McGoorty! This is a derned hill-billy which murdered McGoorty and stole his clothes."

"We're rooint!" exclaimed Richards, aghast. "Everybody's bet their dough without even seein' our man, they was that full of trust and civic pride. We can't call it off now. Tomahawk is rooint! What'll we do?"

"He's goin' to get in there and fight his derndest," said McVey, pulling his gun and jamming it into my back. "We'll hang him after the fight."

"But he can't box!" wailed Richards.

"No matter," said McVey; "the fair name of our town is at stake; Tomahawk promised to furnish a fighter to fight this fellow O'Tool, and--"

"Oh," I said, suddenly seeing light. "This here is a fight, ain't it?"

McVey give a low moan, and Kirby reached for his gun, but just then the referee hollered time, and I jumped up and run at O'Tool. If a fight was all they wanted, I was satisfied. All that talk about rules, and the yelling of the crowd had had me so confused I hadn't knowed what it was all about. I hit at O'Tool and he ducked and hit me in the belly and on the nose and in the eye and on the ear. The blood spurted, and the crowd yelled, and he looked dumbfounded and gritted between his teeth: "Are you human? Why don't you fall?"

I spit out a mouthful of blood and got my hands on him and started chewing his ear, and he squalled like a catamount. Yucca run in and tried to pull me loose, and I give him a slap under the ear and he turned a somersault into the ropes.

"Your man's fightin' foul!" he squalled, and Kirby said: "You're crazy! Do you see this gun? You holler 'foul' once more, and it'll go off!"

MEANWHILE O'TOOL HAD broke loose from me, and caved in his knuckles on my jaw, and I come for him again, because I was mad by this time. He gasped: "If you want to make an alley-fight out of it, all right! I wasn't raised in Five Points for nothing!" He then rammed his knee into my groin, and groped for my eye, but I got his thumb in my teeth and begun masticating it, and the way he howled was a caution.

By this time the crowd was crazy, and I throwed O'Tool and begun to stomp him, when somebody let bang at me from the crowd and the bullet cut my silk belt and my pants started to fall down.

I grabbed 'em with both hands, and O'Tool riz and rushed at me, bloody and bellering, and I didn't dare let go my pants to defend myself. So I whirled and bent over and lashed out backwards with my right heel like a mule, and I caught him under the chin. He done a cartwheel in the air, his head hit the turf, and he bounced on over and landed on his back with his knees hooked over the lower rope. There wasn't no question about him being out. The only question was, was he dead?

A great roar of "Foul" went up from the Gunstock men, and guns bristled all around the ring.

The Tomahawk men was cheering and yelling that I had won fair and square, and the Gunstock men was cussing and threatening me, when somebody hollered: "Leave it to the referee!"

"Sure," said Kirby, "He knows our man won fair, and if he don't say so, I'll blow his head off!"

"That's a lie!" bellered a man from Gunstock. "He knows it was a foul, and if he says it wasn't, I'll carve his liver with this here bowie knife!"

At these words Yucca keeled over in a dead faint, and then a clatter of hoofs sounded above the din, and out of the timber that hid the trail from the east, a gang of horsemen rode at a run. Everybody whirled and yelled: "Look out, here comes them Perdition illegitimates!"

Instantly a hundred guns covered them, and McVey demanded: "Come ye in peace or in war?"

"We come to unmask a fraud!" roared a big man with a red bandanner around his neck. "McGoorty, come forth!"

A familiar figger, now dressed in cowboy togs, pushed forward on my mule. "There he is!" this figger yelled, pointing at me. "That's the desperado which robbed me! Them's my tights he's got on!"

"What's this?" roared the crowd.

"A dern fake!" bellered the man with the red bandanner. "This here is Bruiser McGoorty!"

"Then who's he?" somebody bawled, pointing at me.

"My name's Breckinridge Elkins and I can lick any man here!" I roared, getting mad. I brandished my fists in defiance, but my britches started sliding down again, so I had to shut up and grab 'em.

"Aha!" the man with the red bandanner howled like a hyener. "He admits it! I dunno what the idee is, but these Tomahawk polecats has double-crossed somebody! I trusts that you jackasses from Gunstock realizes the blackness and hellishness of their hearts! This man McGoorty rode into Perdition a few hours ago in his unmentionables, astraddle of that there mule, and told us how he'd been held up and robbed and put on the wrong road. You skunks was too proud to stage this fight in Perdition, but we ain't the men to see justice scorned with impunity! We brought McGoorty here to show you you was bein' gypped by Tomahawk! That man ain't no prize fighter; he's a highway robber!"

"These Tomahawk coyotes has framed us!" squalled a Gunstock man, going for his gun.

"You're a liar!" roared Richards, bending a .45 barrel over his head.

THE NEXT INSTANT GUNS was crashing, knives was gleaming, and men was yelling blue murder. The Gunstock braves turned frothing on the Tomahawk warriors, and the men from Perdition, yelping with glee, pulled their guns and begun fanning the crowd indiscriminately, which give back their fire. McGoorty give a howl and fell down on Alexander's neck, gripping around it with both arms, and Alexander departed in a cloud of dust and smoke.

I grabbed my gunbelt, which McVey had hung over the post in my corner, and I headed for cover, holding on to my britches whilst the bullets hummed around me as thick as bees. I wanted to take to the brush, but I remembered that blamed letter, so I headed for town. Behind me there rose a roar of banging guns and yelling men. Just as I got to the backs of the row of buildings which lined the street, I run into something soft head on. It was McGoorty, trying to escape on Alexander. He had hold of only one rein, and Alexander, evidently having circled one end of the town, was traveling in a circle and heading back where he started from.

I was going so fast I couldn't stop, and I run right over Alexander and all three of us went down in a heap. I jumped up, afraid Alexander was killed, but he scrambled up snorting and trembling, and then McGoorty weaved up, making funny noises. I poked my cap-and-ball into his belly.

"Off with them pants!" I yelped.

"My God!" he screamed. "Again? This is getting to be a habit!"

"Hustle!" I bellered. "You can have these scandals I got on now."

He shucked his britches, grabbed them tights and run like he was afeard I'd want his underwear too. I jerked on the pants, forked Alexander and headed for the south end of town. I kept behind the buildings, though the town seemed to be deserted, and purty soon I come to the store where Kirby had told me old man Braxton kept the post office. Guns was barking there, and across the street I seen men ducking in and out behind a old shack, and shooting.

I tied Alexander to a corner of the store and went in the back door. Up in the front part I seen old man Braxton kneeling behind some barrels with a .45-90, and he was shooting at the fellows in the shack across the street. Every now and then a slug would hum through the door and comb his whiskers, and he would cuss worse'n pap did that time he sot down in a bear trap.

I went up to him and tapped him on the shoulder and he give a squall and flopped over and let go bam! right in my face and singed off my eyebrows. And the fellows across the street hollered and started shooting at both of us.

I'd grabbed the barrel of his Winchester, and he was cussing and jerking at it with one hand and feeling in his boot for a knife with the other'n, and I said: "Mr. Braxton, if you ain't too busy, I wish you'd gimme that there letter which come for pap."

"Don't never come up behind me that way again!" he squalled. "I thought you was one of them dern outlaws! Look out! Duck, you fool!"

I let go his gun, and he took a shot at a head which was aiming around the shack, and the head let out a squall and disappeared.

"Who are them fellows?" I asked.

"Comanche Santry and his bunch, from up in the hills," snarled old man Braxton, jerking the lever of his Winchester. "They come after that gold. A hell of a sheriff McVey is; never sent me nobody. And them fools over at the ring are makin' so much noise, they'll never hear the shootin' over here. Look out, here they come!"

SIX OR SEVEN MEN RUSHED out from behind the shack and ran across the street, shooting as they come. I seen I'd never get my letter as long as all this fighting was going on, so I unslung my old cap-and-ball and let bam! at them three times, and three of them outlaws fell across each other in the street, and the rest turned around and run back behind the shack.

"Good work, boy!" yelled old man Braxton. "If I ever--oh, Judas Iscariot, we're blowed up now!"

Something was pushed around the corner of the shack and come rolling down toward us, the shack being on higher ground than the store was. It was a keg, with a burning fuse which whirled as the keg revolved and looked like a wheel of fire.

"What's in that keg?" I asked.

"Blastin' powder!" screamed old man Braxton, scrambling up. "Run, you dern fool! It's comin' right into the door!"

He was so scared he forgot all about the fellows across the street, and one of 'em caught him in the thigh with a buffalo rifle, and he plunked down again, howling blue murder. I stepped over him to the door--that's when I got that slug in my hip--and the keg hit my legs and stopped, so I picked it up and heaved it back across the street. It hadn't no more'n hit the shack when bam! it exploded and the shack went up in smoke. When it stopped raining pieces of wood and metal, they wasn't any sign to show any outlaws had ever hid behind where that shack had been.

"I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't saw it," old man Braxton moaned faintly.

"Are you hurt bad, Mr. Braxton?" I asked.

"I'm dyin'," he groaned. "Plumb dyin'!"

"Well, before you die, Mr. Braxton," I said, "would you mind givin' me that there letter for pap?"

"What's yore pap's name?" he asked.

"Roarin' Bill Elkins," I said.

He wasn't hurt as bad as he thought. He reached up and got hold of a leather bag and fumbled in it and pulled out a envelope. "I remember tellin' old Buffalo Rogers I had a letter for Bill Elkins," he said, fingering it over. Then he said: "Hey, wait! This ain't for yore pap. My sight is gettin' bad. I read it wrong the first time. This is for Bill Elston that lives between

here and Perdition."

I want to spike a rumor which says I tried to murder old man Braxton and tore his store down for spite. I've done told how he got his leg broke, and the rest was accidental. When I realized that I had went through all that embarrassment for nothing, I was so mad and disgusted I turned and run out of the back door, and I forgot to open the door and that's how it got tore off the hinges.

I then jumped on to Alexander and forgot to untie him from the store. I kicked him in the ribs, and he bolted and tore loose that corner of the building, and that's how come the roof to fall in. Old man Braxton inside was scared and started yelling bloody murder, and about that time a lot of men come up to investigate the explosion which had stopped the three-cornered battle between Perdition, Tomahawk and Gunstock, and they thought I was the cause of everything, and they all started shooting at me as I rode off.

Then was when I got that charge of buckshot in my back.

I went out of Tomahawk and up the hill trail so fast I bet me and Alexander looked like a streak. And I says to myself the next time pap gets a letter in the post office, he can come after it hisself, because it's evident that civilization ain't no place for a boy which ain't reached his full growth and strength.

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